

The Language Classroom and Opportunities to Develop Critical Thought

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Abstract

Teachers, more than anybody else can touch young lives and bring about changes not only in their lives but also the society in general. This paper takes the premise that language teachers have greater opportunities to effect changes and make an impact. S/he has a bigger platform to connect with the outside world and help them relate other people's point of view, and widen their horizons. Moreover, a language classroom fulfils the dire need to bring values into the consciousness of our students. Teachers of English have more reach compared to other teachers as English is a Compulsory language in schools and colleges.

The flexibility of materials used in language teaching offer a chance to bring relevant issues to the classroom as the content of language teaching. Teachers as change agents, can make learning more engaging and relevant and students have the opportunity to understand new material in terms of their own lives and realities. The main focus of this paper is to explore the possibilities of language teachers using the language class to develop critical thought and thereby bring about social changes.

1. Introduction

In this age of information explosion where students are inundated with different and conflicting view points, it is imperative for them to be equipped with intellectual tools to have an informed perspective. The decisive role of teachers in preparing students to face the future with purpose and responsibility cannot be overlooked. New demands are often placed on the students in addition to academics, to be equipped with the skills to bring in positive changes in the society around them.

Teachers as Change Agents or 'Transformative Intellectuals'

There is no dearth of examples that show how a great teacher can change students' lives. A good educator is responsible for enriching many aspects of a student's life, not just academics. The term 'Transformative Intellectuals' is used for teachers who strive not just for educational advancement but also personal transformation of the students. For the purpose of this study, teachers who encourage a critical approach and share power with the students is considered as change agents.

2. Literature Review

The writings on the foundation of education in the twentieth and twenty first centuries have been mostly influenced by two literatures: Critical Pedagogy and Critical Thinking.

Critical Pedagogy

Kincheloe (2005) as cited in Aliakbari and Faraji (2011:1), states that Critical Pedagogy is "concerned with transforming relations of power which are oppressive, and which lead to the oppression of people." It tries to humanize and empower learners. Freire considers critical consciousness as fundamental to critical pedagogy. He grades consciousness into three levels namely

intransitive, semi-transitive and critical consciousness. It is at the third level of critical consciousness that individuals are able to make a connection between their problems and the social context in which it is rooted.

The main purpose of critical pedagogy is to emancipate and educate all people irrespective of region, religion or caste. Freire (1970) refers to the traditional view of education as a 'banking model' where students are passive and teachers bring and 'deposit' knowledge in the students' minds. They don't ask the students to question that knowledge. Freire proposed a 'problem posing' model. Students are helped to uncover reality by questioning, understanding and finding solutions to issues that concern them.

Teachers, according to Degener (2001), have a central role in Critical Pedagogy because they spend the most time with students and have the greatest impact on students, the program and on how learning occurs in the classroom. Pennycook (2004) also does not advocate for a particular framework in writing about a critical pedagogy approach to the teaching practicum, but rather looks for what he calls the —seeking out of critical moments‖ in teaching (p. 342). Giroux (2011) is of the opinion that educators have an obligation to work towards a more socially just world.

Critical Thinking

The core idea of critical thinking is that “individuals should question and strengthen the underlying reasoning of knowledge. The Critical Thinking tradition, according to Burbules and Berk (1999:1),” concerns itself with being more “critical” meaning “more discerning in recognizing faulty arguments, hasty generalizations, assertions lacking evidence, truth claims based on unreliable authority, ambiguous or obscure concepts, and so forth.”

A qualitative study was conducted to understand the views of English language teachers at the tertiary level regarding critical pedagogy and their experience of using the language classroom as a source of initiating change. Eleven tertiary level teachers agreed to take part in the research.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the possibilities of using the language class to bring about change.
2. To understand teachers' views on critical pedagogy.
3. To find out if teachers use a critical approach in their classes.

4. Method

The main focus of this research is to explore the possibilities of language teachers using the language class to bring about social changes. The aim of this qualitative research is to examine the critical approaches, opinions and practices of tertiary level teachers with regard to critical pedagogy praxis and also to explore the possibilities of language teachers becoming agents of change.

The study sought answers to the following research questions:

- Are language teachers aware of critical pedagogy praxis?
- What are the teachers' views on the purpose of education?
- Do language teachers follow a critical approach in their classes?
- How can critical pedagogy be practised in a language classroom?

The answers to the research questions were collected through interviews conducted with ten tertiary level English language teachers of undergraduate college teachers from colleges affiliated to RTM Nagpur University, Nagpur.

The tool used for data collection was an interview schedule. The purpose was to find out if language teachers use a critical approach and promotes critical consciousness in their classes.

5. Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study are based on the interviews conducted with the teacher participants of the study and also the observations of the researcher. The themes from critical pedagogy focussed on in the interview schedule are based on the research questions. The findings and discussion are grouped into four, based on the research questions.

5.1. Language Teachers' Views on Critical Pedagogy and Critical Thinking Skills

Most of the teacher participants, except one, were not familiar with the term 'critical pedagogy' or the works of critical pedagogues. However, all of them were interested in knowing what it meant. All the same, they were aware of the importance of critical thinking skills in the language classroom and emphatically supported the need to develop these skills in the students.

5.2. Language Teachers as Change Agents

The participants were unanimous in their view that language teachers can be change agents. Teachers are seen as leaders who can influence students and parents and through them, the rest of society. Language teachers have greater opportunities to effect changes and make an impact. S/he has a bigger platform to connect with the outside world and help them relate to other people's point of view, and widen their horizons. Teachers can show how language is used, how it can be agenda ridden and how it can be used to falsify data. A language class can easily bring in issues and initiate discussions on issues like child labour, gender discrimination, human rights, etc.

However, some also held the view that teachers should not become activists and that language teachers should be more focused on teaching the course content. S/he should help students to develop intellectual tools to have an informed perspective.

5.3. Critical Classroom Practices

Critical consciousness can be promoted in a language class wherein students can be assisted to analyze information objectively and accurately. Allan Luke as cited in Norton & Toohey (2004) sees critical pedagogies as necessary to engage with the experiences of the marginalized learners. The participant language teachers practice the following critical consciousness raising activities in their classes.

5.3.1. Discussion on Social Issues

The teachers are all in agreement with the fact that language classes should be used to engage in issues that interest or concern them. Half of the teachers discuss these issues in the class and are not uncomfortable doing so. Social issues came up for discussion mostly when it was in some way related to the course content. Issues of gender, religion, language or region are a part of teaching literature especially at the post graduate level. All the same, two teachers stated that they steer clear of issues related to religion and politics, if it was controversial. Students debate issues, carry out surveys and discuss findings, make posters, write about them or join NGOs who work for social causes.

Eventhough most teachers do not give much thought to the political dimension of education, they were concerned about who determined the purpose of education. But this concern does not extend to teachers thinking about ‘how politics shapes what is taught in the classroom and how they produce a set of beliefs in their classrooms’ (Katz 2014).

5.3.2 Developing Critical Thinking Skills

The need to develop critical thinking skills is underscored by all the teachers. They argue that students need to develop analytical skills and shouldn’t accept things as they are. Asking questions on what is taught is actively encouraged. Students are encouraged to form opinions for themselves. Critical thinking skills are considered a mandatory part of education. It would help them to learn not to accept everything handed down to them in a hierarchical way. Most importantly, it would help them to lead a better life by not being fooled by anyone.

5.3.3. Student-Teacher Hierarchy

Teachers stress on the importance of relating the course content to students’ experiences. Students’ personal experiences add insights into the text. One of the teachers mentioned that students are expressly encouraged to talk about their experiences in the class. They are also urged to express how they would react in a particular text related situation. Another teacher invited former students to the class to share their success stories so that others are benefitted and encouraged. Students are encouraged to ask questions in the class. This indicates power sharing in the class.

5.4. Classroom Techniques and Strategies That Encourage Critical Thought

The study explores the different language teaching strategies that can bring about changes by shaping the thoughts and actions of students. The language class can be exploited to develop critical thought and initiate change efforts.

A) *Discussions and Debates*

Language classrooms can help students to reflect on local issues and problems. The issue could be social, economic or health related. The students then make posters, discuss possible solutions and make a presentation.

B) *WHY Sessions*

Any topic can be used for a why session. The selected topic is discussed and explained threadbare by asking why at every step. This Socratic questioning opens up different facets of an issue thereby helping students to understand it fully. Questioning assumptions helps to reveal information gaps and then examining the assumptions through the eyes of different people and different viewpoints.

C) *Unmasking Harmful Traditions and Customs*

There is a need to create awareness of destructive social tendencies. Students share such instances from their own families or areas they live in. Commercials, movies, videos that are exemplar of those traditions and culture can be used for students to examine and reflect upon.

D) *Grammar Through Community Issues*

Teachers and researchers have been considering how to make language learning more relevant to the students. Teaching grammar through community issues serves a double purpose that of teaching language and also raising consciousness of community issues.

E) Authentic Materials as Reading Resource

Real life stories of suffering, struggle, perseverance and eventual success make for inspirational reading. The authentic materials help students link their knowledge to existing problems in society and take necessary actions to alleviate them. Works like actress and playwright Rani Moorthy's play "Whose Sari Now" can be used for critical reading. Rani's play leaves one with questions about society-about patriarchy, class, conventions and caste.

Conclusion

Teachers are change agents and true education should help in the transformation to a better state. Education is seen as a means to bring about a more socially just world. This can be achieved through critical consciousness. The central purpose of critical pedagogy is to raise critical consciousness.

The participants' responses and practices indicate that the language classes are used to raise critical consciousness. Language classes show a shift from the banking system of education to a problem posing one. Students are encouraged to question which indicates that they are given the power to direct discussions in the class. Classroom techniques and practices can be adjusted, altered, advanced or discarded to assist learners to develop critical thought. A language teacher can sow the seeds of change by fostering the skills of communication, collaboration and critical thinking.

Although few teachers were in favour of encouraging students to be actively involved in transforming status quo, they preferred teaching critical thinking skills to help students make meaningful and unbiased decisions. There is an implicit hope that improved critical thinking skills could have a benevolent effect across all groups of people without any discrimination. Discussions and debates on social issues may not cause a revolution but they increase awareness, throw open different possibilities, spark off thinking and inspire action.

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