

ELT Journal KEY CONCEPT

Criticality

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In English language education the word *critical* can be used in different ways, qualifying different phenomena. Thus, the development of *critical thinking* is a goal in some ELT classrooms or teacher education programmes. There is also *critical pedagogy*, which seeks empowerment and social transformation. *Critical perspectives* can also be adopted regarding the enterprise of ELT itself. Here we will try to show how these apparently different forms of criticality are linked together.

Cotrell (2005: 2) defines critical thinking as ‘a complex process of deliberation which involves a wide range of skills and attitudes’ for deciding what to believe or do. Barnet and Bedau (2011: 4) observe that ‘critical thinking means questioning not only assumptions of others, but also questioning your own assumptions.’ In this regard, criticality refers to the practice of socially situated reflection and evaluation. It means considering an issue from multiple perspectives even when these involve self-critique. Thus, being critical does not mean being negative about other people’s or one’s own assumptions; it means being able to identify assumptions and evaluate evidence and issues logically.

In the ELT classroom, critical thinking may be developed through debates which promote winning an argument (Toulmin argumentation), where there are speakers with opposing views on, for example, a controversial issue, or via discussions which seek understanding of everyone’s opinions to reach common ground (Rogerian argumentation) (see Wood and Miller 2014). Critical thinking can also be exercised by asking learners to analyse news, advertisements or photographs to identify claims, values, assumptions, proofs and fallacies. It can also be engaged by having students write essays and reaction papers, and by developing learners’ language awareness through the analysis of ambiguity, vagueness, connotation, or reification in discourse.

Beyond this, critical pedagogy can be defined as ‘an attitude to language teaching which relates the classroom context to the wider social context and aims at social transformation through education’ (Akbari 2008: 276). Freire (1970) believed that critical thinking is linked to critical pedagogy as it is a necessary first step towards understanding the complex social matrix we inhabit and becoming aware of inequalities within it. For him, though, critical pedagogy goes beyond this, as its aim is to work towards the creation of possibilities for action, not just thought. From this perspective, if the main goal of education is transformation, then language teaching needs to foster criticality for active and reflective social involvement and for countering practices which reproduce unequal distribution of power (Rahimi and Sajed 2014).

In practice, critical pedagogy can be enacted through negotiation of procedures, topics and assessment tools and criteria in the ELT classroom as well as through the design of curricula which

address issues such as multiculturalism, interculturality, gender, identities, and so on (see Norton and Toohey 2004). In critical pedagogy, teachers attempt to place local needs and opportunities at the centre of classroom life in a context-responsive manner. By engaging in democratic processes for learning at the same time as developing a critical stance towards powerful interests, learners and teachers themselves become empowered to have a say in curriculum development and enactment (Auerbach 1992) and, potentially, to bring about wider social change.

Critical thinking and critical pedagogy have increasingly taken in the enterprise of ELT itself, in a reflexive turn towards acknowledging the socio-historical reality of English and ELT, that is, their colonial past (Pennycook 1998, 2001) but also their neo-colonial present, realized in relatively sophisticated forms of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 2009). Adopting critical views of ELT, different authors have focused on the contents and use of published teaching materials (Gray 2013), the development of post-method pedagogies (Kumaravadivelu 2006), teacher identity in official educational discourse (Guerrero 2010), inclusivity (e.g. McClure 2010), ELT and neoliberalism (Block, Gray and Holborow 2012), and critical teacher education (*ibid.*). Discussions of such critical issues *within* ELT have encouraged teachers to produce their own materials, challenge the NS-NNS dichotomy, and develop appropriate approaches to English teaching in their own contexts which leave behind restrictive methods originated elsewhere. Through action research, teachers may feel encouraged to examine and develop their own practices to gain control of what happens in their own settings and find contextualized solutions. Thus, by becoming more critically aware of language planning and policies, and of the educational, market and sociolinguistic forces which shape and are shaped by the field of ELT itself, teachers can pursue decentralisation and their own as well as their students' empowerment.

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