

# Critical Pedagogy and English Language Teaching in India

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## ABSTRACT

Critical pedagogy can be described as an approach to education which acknowledges that the teaching/learning process is political, and carries within it the structures of domination and power play. It is built around the belief that there should be an attempt to acknowledge this and accordingly provide correctives in all ways possible—through classroom transactions, curriculum and syllabus making, and assessment. In this paper, I will attempt to provide a comprehensive survey of the theoretical framework and work done in the area of critical pedagogy with a focus on the Indian context. I will look at the debates on critical pedagogy, and the various attempts to look at it within the context of our teaching/learning situation. Finally, I will also look at how it has been adopted in education policies, curriculum making and syllabus development in India.

**Keywords:** Critical pedagogy, linguistic imperialism, classroom transaction, gender, class, sensitization, English language teaching

Critical pedagogy has been understood and interpreted in various ways. However, the unifying thought running through all the interpretations is that it is an attempt to critique the impressions, received wisdom and conventional assumptions in the teaching/learning process. Critical pedagogy starts with the belief that education is not neutral, and schools and other educational systems are a means of reinforcing and assisting hegemonic systems. In a way, the purpose of critical pedagogy is to uncover the hegemony, reveal the hidden agendas and look at means and ways of ensuring that there is equal participation and dissemination of knowledge systems. To quote Giroux, “Critical thinking attempts to understand how power works through the production, distribution and consumption of knowledge within particular institutional contexts and seeks to constitute students as informed

subjects and social agents” (2010, p. 717).

The origin of critical pedagogy can be traced back to Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator and philosopher, whose theories have had a profound effect on the way education is perceived. Freire perceived systems of education as a means used by the dominant culture to propagate and establish their worldviews on subordinate groups. Through his concepts of the “pedagogy of oppression” and the “pedagogy of liberation”, he sought a way to liberate the farmers of Brazil, and give them the weapons to fight and defeat domination. In his book *Reading the Word and the World* he says, “One has to respect the levels of understanding that those becoming educated have of their own reality. To impose on them one’s own understanding in the name of their liberation is to accept authoritarian solutions as ways of freedom” (Freire, 2005, p. 27).

In his widely acclaimed *The Pedagogy of Oppression*, Freire critiques the existing system of education as a “banking system” where it is presumed that:

students come to the learning experience with empty heads into which the teacher must make deposits ... if the students come with any other prior knowledge, it is necessary under the banking system to replace this, as one might replace false currency, so that legitimate knowledge can be deposited. (Ward, 2013, n.p.)

Closely related to the ideology of Paulo Freire are the ideas of Henry Giroux and Bell Hooks. Widely known as the father of critical pedagogy in America, Giroux is primarily concerned with the prevalence of hegemony in the socio-cultural sphere, especially schooling. In his book *On Critical Pedagogy*, Giroux (2011) examines the socio-political and cultural forces that dominate curriculum and the process that has reduced “schooling to training” and “students to customers”. Giroux politicizes the notion of culture, locates it within the ambit of hegemony and power, and calls upon education to counter the “pervasive technocratic rationality”. Positivist technocratic education, for him, is a means of distancing valid knowledge from the socio-cultural and political economic cluster it emerges from. He therefore stresses on the importance of historicizing knowledge systems and active intervention in the process of production and consumption of meaning. He says, “The dominant culture leaves its imprint on a whole range of school practices, i.e., the official language, school rules, classroom social relations and presentation of school knowledge, the exclusion of specific cultural capital, etc.” (Giroux, 1983, p. 64-65). Like Freire, he emphasizes on the development of a pedagogy designed to help students generate their own meaning and reflect on the process of thinking.

The other important person in the field of critical pedagogy is Bell Hooks, a feminist and educationist who extensively writes about education as “the practice of freedom”. Her seminal work, *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), comprises of a series of essays on gender, class and race in the classrooms. She critiques the system for creating education that divides and controls, and emphasizes the need for classrooms and teaching based on trust and hope, which she calls “engaged pedagogy”. According to her:

To educate as a practice of freedom is a way of teaching that everyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach and also believe that ... our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the soul of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin. (Hooks, 1994, p. 13)

Some of the areas where critical pedagogy has been active are classroom transactional analysis and curriculum studies, especially materials development and language policies. In the rest of my paper, I will focus on the work done in these areas in India by various scholars, and discuss the directions adopted.

Classroom interaction has often been studied from various perspectives. These include patterns of participation (Allwright, 1984), ethnography of communication, patterns of socio-cultural relations as reflected in the classrooms (Kumaravadivelu, 1999), and patterns of ethnographic resistance found in the classroom context (Canagarajah, 1999). Works in the area of critical classroom analysis or the ethnography of classroom transactions look at the classroom as a reflection of society, with its patterns of domination, biases, agency and resistance. Classroom here is considered as a mini society, a collection of individual, subjective and collective experience. Kumaravadivelu emphasizes on the classroom being essentially “politically motivated and historically determined”. Classroom discourse, according to him, contains the social, political and historical conditions of the learners and teachers, making it a “racialised”, “stratified”, “gendered” experience. He sees it as a reflection of the “discursive practices” and “discursive formulations” of the dominant discourse. Critical classroom discourse analysis, according to him, “seeks to play a reflective role enabling practicing teachers to reflect on and cope with sociocultural structures that directly or indirectly shape the character and content of classroom discourse” (Kumaravadivelu, 1999, p. 473).

Working along similar lines, A. Suresh Canagarajah looks at the patterns of

resistance and agency that students in an ESL classroom adopt to cope with a curriculum that has an alienating discourse but yet cannot be ignored for its social value. In his *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism*, Canagarajah (1999) looks at the patterns and strategies that students and teachers at the periphery adopt in the Tamil community of Sri Lanka. His book focuses on the pedagogical challenges an English teacher faces in the teaching/learning context. He conceptualizes the English language classroom context as “a cultural space where various agendas are negotiated and contested” (p. 81). Canagarajah adopts a critical ethnographic approach and goes on to explore the contradictions, struggle and resistance as part of the teachers’ and students’ discourse in the ESL classrooms of the periphery.

Ira Shor (1980), has done a Critical Classroom Discourse Analysis to understand how the role of the student can be changed from being an object to an active critical subject and Kincheloe (2008) analyses the role of the teacher as a facilitator to help students move towards critiquing existing frameworks and producing their own knowledge. In all the work in this field, the aim has been to bring in an understanding of the classroom space as complex, socio-politically significant, and a reflection of society at large. Also, the aim has been to make space for the recognition and acceptance of multiple voices, and make learning more an act of negotiation than imposition.

Curriculum development is another area where critical pedagogy has made considerable impact. Most visible in this area is the work of Michael Apple, who looks at the complicated connections between knowledge, teaching and power in education. He also explores the “economic, political and cultural power in society on the one hand, and the way in which education is thought about, organized and evaluated on the other” (Apple, 1990, p. vii). In his opinion, whether we like it or not, differential power intrudes into the heart of curriculum and teaching. Through his work, he investigates how “class, race and gender inequalities work through schools in the control of teachers and students and in the content and organization of the curriculum” (Apple, 1990, p. xx). In addition to this, there has been extensive work in the area of hidden curriculum in relation to moral and social education by Martin (1983), Giroux and Anthony (1983), Greene (1983), and Anyon (1983). Essays by these researchers have been brought together in an edition titled *The Hidden Curriculum and Moral Education* (1983), edited by Henry Giroux and David Purpel.

Gender and curriculum is another area that has been extensively studied by many researchers. Curriculum documents and textbooks have been analysed to show that despite attempts to change things at the level of policy making, the curriculum and textbooks continue to emphasize the “stereotyped traditional roles [of women]

as good mothers, wives and daughters within the family and the nation” (Bhog, 2002, p. 1638). The Southern Natal Gender Committee looks at the history of resistance in South Africa to show how the very important role of women in the movement has hardly been reflected in the prescribed classroom texts. The study reveals that often, girls internalize the gender roles they see at home and the workplace. However, their perceptions may be altered if curriculum and classroom practices could be such that they help to raise the teachers and learners’ understanding and sensitivity on the matter. Other studies have experimented on the impact of curricular changes on understanding gender (Crump, 1990; Miller, 1980), and also the possibility of introducing feminist thinking into the ESL curriculum.

Gender concerns have played an important role in the curriculum making process in India. Gouri Srivastava, in her report titled *Gender Concerns in Education* (2014), details the initiatives that have been taken in this direction. A major initiative was taken in 1986 with the enactment of the National Policy on Education. This was further revised in 1992. The National Policy on Empowerment of Women, 2001 also focuses on promoting a gender sensitive curriculum, and addresses gender discrimination at all levels of education. The same report mentions the CUBE 2005 (Committee on Universalization of Secondary Education), which states that high quality secondary education will be provided to adolescent girls and boys. It also chalks out strategies for enhancing girl participation at the secondary level, and provides evaluation tools to assess the representation of gender in the texts prescribed and the activities developed in the texts for language development. Another important intervention in this regard is the reader produced by the Telugu Academy in 2015 titled, *Towards a World of Equals: A Bilingual Text Book on Gender*. This book, which is a part of the curriculum for the B. Tech and B. Pharm courses in several colleges in Telangana, is an outcome of the UGC directive to step up gender sensitization. Emphasizing the need for sensitization, the “Preface” of the book states:

Women have struggled to reclaim their sense of being and dignity... As Dalit and minority women assert their identities and demand their rights to education... The state and society must learn to address them in an inclusive way. Sensitizing ourselves to these issues of gender will go a long way in paving the way to a more democratic and humane society. (2015, n.p.)

If gender is an important concern in critical pedagogy, another equally important concern is that posed by the dominant language of teaching and learning. Language is the principal means by which speakers formulate their identities. The preferred language for teaching and schooling in any community, plays an

important role in structuring the self-image of the learners and determining their involvement in the teaching-learning process. The predominant role of English education, especially in schooling, has been often critiqued for this reason by educationists. According to Phillipson (1992), Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) and Arnove (1982), this predominance is an outcome of the spread of the Empire and the neo-colonial forces in the 20th and the 21st century. Kangas uses the word “linguicism” to describe the implications of this phenomenon and defines it as “ideologies, structures, and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, regulate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups defined on the basis of language” (Kangas, 1988, p. 13). Among scholars working in this area, the predominant opinion is that most societies are hierarchically divided on the basis of class, caste and race, and language forms an important part of these divisive forces. Together, these forces determine the unequal distribution of resources and access in society.

In the context of English in India, these factors have been often studied in relation to the expansion and domination of the language, the eco-linguistic diversity, language maintenance and of course, the impact of dominance of English on other languages. A factor that further strengthens this argument is that only a “certain” kind of English gains prominence as the dominant and legitimate variety from among the vast array of varieties used by various groups. Talking about the impact of English education on the Navajo children, Robert Phillipson (1992), in his book titled *Linguistic Imperialism* quotes Pfeiffer (1975), who says:

Navajo children are taught in a foreign language; they are taught concepts that are foreign, they are taught values that are foreign, they are taught lifestyles that are foreign and they are taught by human models which are foreign... The children grow up in these schools with a sense of: (1) confusion regarding the values, attributes and behavior taught at home, (2) loss of self identity and pride concerning their selfhood—their Navajoness, (3) failure in classroom learning activities, (4) loss of their Navajo language development... (p. 22)

In the Indian context, this problem manifests in a slightly different fashion. Teaching and learning in English definitely causes a rift in the self-image of a majority of students, and even results in their inability to effectively cope with the curriculum and the classroom activities in the manner desired and expected. However, at the same time, the English language skill is also “desired” by a huge majority, especially within the marginalized population. David Faust and Richa Nagar (2001), in their article “Politics of Development in Post-colonial India: English Medium Education and Social Fracturing”, talk about this divide where

English is a marker of imperialism and class privilege, and also the creator of a deep social chasm that runs along class and caste lines. They interviewed middle class rural people who have been educated in the English medium. One of these interviews in particular captures the sense of alienation that English education brings, while at the same time it points at the privileges this kind of education entails.

For me (that school) was a prison. Nothing could provide a more shocking contrast to my home and the familial relationships, my neighbourhood, the kids I played with and the people who I was attached to. As soon as I started going there, I lost my voice ... yet, ironically, when I grew up, it gave me choices that I could have never dreamed of had I not been educated in that school. (p. 2800-2801)

There is definitely a strong desire to learn English, especially among the weaker socio-economic and marginalized sections of society. However, this desire is coupled with difficulty in learning and the inability to cope with the curriculum demands. The reasons for this are multiple and complex and vary from lack of exposure to the target language, to the socio-culturally alien contexts through which English is taught. Part of the problem also lies in the teaching/learning strategies and the manner in which English skills are mediated for the learners. In India, this problem has been addressed in two major ways—by mediating English language learning through the mother tongue and by preparing learning material that learners can access in terms of concepts, ideas and experiences.

MTBML or Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Learning has been one of the major pedagogic moves in developing critical literacy. Research confirms that learning the mother tongue and also learning through the mother tongue fosters a strong bonding between the school and the learner. Also, it eventually produces better and more confident learners of other languages (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Cummins, 2007). In the Indian context, teaching English through the props of the mother tongue where required, can probably enable learners and teachers to mediate the learning of an alien language through semiotic systems that are known and familiar. Further, India is one of the most diverse countries in the world in terms of language and ethnicity and since learning English is important for most, it is important to develop pedagogic tools and teacher awareness to make English learning possible through the mother tongue. Interestingly, many of the English language textbooks in colonial India were bilingual. Today, the textbook *Towards a World of Equals: A Bilingual Textbook on Gender* (2015) is one of the first books in recent days to have a bilingual approach.

Vaidehi Ramanathan, one of the leading researchers in the area, talks of this as the process of “vernacularisation”, which is an ongoing process in India, especially in rural India where exposure to English is limited. She talks of English as:

A splintered, hybrid English that exists on the postcolonial Indian ground ... entrenched at the base of a class based divide (with ancillary ones of gender and caste as well), with issues of inequality, subordination, and unequal values seeming to revolve directly around its general positioning with vernacular languages. (Ramanathan, 2006, p. 133)

To illustrate her point, she discusses the textbooks used in Gujarati medium classrooms, and looks at the vernacular medium pedagogic practices as choral recitations and two-way translation methods that are used quite effectively. These, according to her, allow students to participate without the fear of being judged. She feels that these can be used to bridge the gap between the “west-based TESOL and traditional Indian learning strategies”.

At this point it is important to mention the NCF (National Curriculum Framework) 2005, its visionary objective and the impact it has had on the English curriculum at the school level in many states. Professor Yash Pal, the Chair of the steering committee of this board talks of this document as one which recognizes that,

The social, economic and ethnic backgrounds are important for enabling children to construct their own knowledge ... (the document) signifies that we have learnt to appreciate the capacity for learning and the futility of filling up children’s memory banks with information that is best kept as ink marks on paper or bits on a computer disc. (NCF 2005, p. iii)

Further, the document recognizes the three-language formula and reiterates that at the primary level, the child’s mother tongue is the best medium of education. It states, “The multilingual character of Indian society should be seen as a resource to promote multilingual proficiency in every child, which includes proficiency in English” (p. ix).

Interestingly, this document has a section titled “Critical Pedagogy”, which stresses on “participatory learning and teaching”. It talks of the need to critically reflect on issues related to human rights, caste, religion and gender, and developing teacher sensitivity to cultural and socio-economic diversity that children bring with them. Two other factors that the document stresses on as part of critical pedagogy are: the need to include “conflict” as part of children’s learning and personal experience, and the need to accept “received knowledge critically”.

The NCF 2005 brought about significant changes in the teaching and evaluation

system, especially the CBCS system. To make learning inclusive and less stressful, school examinations were done away with till class VIII, and the class X board exam too was made optional. The three-language formula was strictly implemented and teaching through the mother tongue was encouraged. On the whole, there was an attempt to reduce the curriculum load and link classroom teaching to life outside the school. This movement brought about welcome changes in the English language curriculum of many State Boards. Apart from changing the kind of tasks and learning methodology, there was a critical rethinking of the syllabus content. Themes hitherto neglected were brought into the classroom, conventional concepts of gender and class roles were challenged and there was a conscious attempt to impact ways of critical learning and thinking.

To conclude, I would like to add that critical pedagogy can be seen as an approach that recognizes the teaching/learning process as being political, and directly concerned with power equations and hegemony-making. The major goals of critical pedagogy include developing sensitivity and rejection of violation and discrimination against people on the basis of colour, caste and sex. Kessing Styles (2003) sums it up as “an educational response to inequalities and oppressive power relations which exist in educational institutions” (Styles, 2003, n.p.). English language teaching in India presents an extremely complex context in this regard. The history of colonial education shows that the British established a unified, textbook-centred system, while India remains a land widely diverse in terms of its ethnicity, knowledge systems and learning/teaching strategies. However, English language skills are a major requirement for getting access to opportunities and privileges, even though the kind of skills required differ widely from context to context. Drawing upon a uniform policy to implement critical pedagogy in India, therefore, might be as problematic as adopting a policy based on any other approach. This is primarily because the critical pedagogy required for one section of the population (the private school educated upper class urban, for example) will be very different from another section (for example, the marginalized rural population, where English is necessary to access to opportunities and privileges). A possible solution could lie in implementing a strong teacher education system, which would sensitize teachers towards the needs of the learners, and train and empower them to develop materials and adopt teaching/learning strategies as per their requirements.

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