

Making “Daffodils” Bloom for Everyone: The Flowering of Critical Pedagogy in the ESL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

It has been a long and eventful journey since Freire (1970), introduced the notion of critical pedagogy to equip the marginalised to take control of their learning and to process what they learn. Pedagogy needs to be emancipatory, not manipulative; this was the philosophy behind Freire’s revolutionary ideas. The world has come a long way since then, but the need for this type of pedagogy has never been felt as keenly as now. This paper was the outcome of a personal experience of teaching a class of undergraduate Science students, 50 per cent of which comprised first generation learners, who were eager to learn English but were grappling with a textbook that did little to answer their needs. A small but significant alteration to the officially endorsed teaching plan went a long way towards positively impacting the reaction of the learners to learning a second language on terms comfortable to them. The takeaway from this small but very meaningful exercise was that the current system of education indeed needs replacing with a more equitable system, that treats students as equals partners in the learning process, while respecting their reliance on the resources they come equipped with.

Keywords: Critical pedagogy, ESL classroom, syllabus design, multilingualism, cultural identity, inclusive education

INTRODUCTION

This modest piece is not so much a revolutionary contribution to any field of study in ELT as a reflection on what was actually a novel experiment during my initial years of teaching to see if the ESL classroom could be made more interesting and imaginative both for the teacher and the taught.

As a teacher of multilingual, multicultural and heterogeneous groups of learners, I got an opportunity to teach the much celebrated and anthologized poem by Wordsworth, “Daffodils”, to a class of undergraduate students from a local college, many of whom were first generation learners and needed a lot of scaffolding. I toggled between Telugu, the language spoken by most students in the State I am based in, and English, the language I was expected to conduct the classes in, regardless of the proficiency of learners, because official policy made it clear that English needed to be taught through English for best results. I chose to dispense with this principle and began to explain the poem in Telugu to the extent that I was able to manage. Telugu is not my mother tongue and my acquaintance with Telugu is restricted to the variety spoken in the street and in the office, not the chaste literary kind. Despite that, I did manage rather well to speak to the learners in their patois and make sense to them. More importantly, I was able to establish a rapport with them by speaking to them in a language that they spoke and felt at home in.

As the learners were at ease with my use of Telugu with the occasional spattering of Hindi, I continued to teach them the poem in Telugu. I tried my best to translate the poem as faithfully as I could, and come as close to affirming the poet’s intentions behind composing this wonderful poem. I was able to see in my mind’s eye hundreds of flowers dotting the Lake District in England, waiting for tourists to marvel at their beauty.

I had access to the internet and so I did a virtual tour of The Lake District. I was therefore able to explain the nuances of the poem and also the necessity of worshipping and preserving the glories of Mother Nature encapsulated in such poems as “Daffodils”, composed aeons ago by the finest of nature poets.

I was immersed in this reverie when a question from a curious student broke into my thoughts. He asked me with curiosity and wonder in equal parts, “ Sir, daffodils *ante enti* ?” (what are daffodils?)

I told him that I had already explained that daffodils are a type of flower that grows in a country called England. Then I proceeded to tell him the story of colonialism and how the English language came to us from the British and why we were studying the poem.

He continued: “*Ledhu* sir. Daffodils *elaga untayi* ? (What do daffodils look like?)

“No, sir. What do they look like? What shape are they ?”

“ *Em rangu* ?” (What colour are they ?)

The query stumped me. I had seen daffodils on google images and knew what

colour they were and what they looked like, but I had not bothered to go into these details when elucidating the poem to these students. I had simply told the students that it was a flower (*puvvu*) that dotted the English countryside in spring. This student wanted the finer details. He persisted.

“*Kanakambaram lekka untaya?*” (Are they like kanakambara flower?; a flower that is strung into garlands for temples)

“*Malla puvvu lekka untaya ?*” (Are they like Jasmine in shape ?)

“*Jaji puvvu laaga untaya ?* (Are they like Chrysanthemum ?)

Dheniki upyoga padhuttayi ? (What are they used for ?)

Vasana untunndha ee puvvu ki, rosu, malla puvvu laaga ? (Does the flower have a pleasant smell like Roses and Jasmine?)

I was unable to answer the questions satisfactorily and could only manage a lame answer: “I will show you the picture of this flower the next time we meet. You can judge for yourself what shape and size it is; and I don’t think it is used for worship.” But the barrage of questions made me curious, and I wanted to know the reasons for his curiosity. It was then that a whole universe of revelation tumbled out. His parents were in the business of selling flowers, and stringing them to make garlands for sale at temples, during festivals, and to customers on ordinary days. Besides this, there were other students whose parents worked as labourers—*coolies and hamalis*—in wholesale markets, carting and loading tons of flowers onto trucks and buses for sale in faraway places.

There were some students whose parents worked as flower decorators at wedding halls and other function halls. I was pleased to be teaching this poem to such a group even as I pondered the wisdom of extolling the glory of a flower which was not only foreign to them, but was also very far removed from their lived experience. Many of the students were not internet savvy and regarded textbooks and teachers as their only source of help. I decided to teach them using imagery and experiences they were familiar with. I divided them into groups; each group was given one aspect of cultivation and sale of flowers in India for discussion.

I asked them various questions about flowers such as the types of flowers that are cultivated and sold in India, the uses to which flowers are put, the reason flowers adorn homes and temples, the religious significance they have, the seasons in which flowers bloom, the varieties that are available in the market during that season, the vagaries of flower business, the marginalized lives of *coolies*, the pathetic plight of cultivators, the profits made by middlemen, the export of cut flowers, etc. I used authentic material from regional newspapers and magazines to

illustrate the religious and aesthetic significance of flowers.

This was a very illuminating session. I chose to stray from the business of teaching a poem with the aim of preparing for an exam and instead emphasized on the importance of flowers in the lives of my students, especially given that around 15 students had parents or relatives who made a living from growing, buying and selling flowers. What started out as an innocuous attempt at interpreting a poem became a lesson in comprehending how the less fortunate among India's population lived and breathed. I was struck by their amazing knowledge of the flower business and its ups and downs. I was equally awed by their immediate replies and readiness to communicate, which would certainly not have been there had the class been confined to just reading the poem.

Over the next few days, I transformed the class into one where inclusivity prevailed. Students got an opportunity to discuss among themselves which flowers sold best during which season, the lives of flower growers, flower sellers, and middlemen, etc. In short, we discussed everything connected with the business of flowers. Those were the best days of my teaching life since I was able to engage the attention of the students. I was filled with a sense of fulfilment. I also realized that student participation was determined by factors such as teaching approach, text, theme and the use of mother tongue when and where possible.

When teaching the text, I was careful not to judge the students on their opinions or their limited command of English; the appreciation on their faces was evident. It was a free and democratic process of negotiating a poem through a narrative of personal experiences. Relating the poem to the real lives of my students helped them understand the context and the circumstance of its composition, which a well-meaning lecture would not have been able to achieve.

Permission was given for generous use of the students' mother tongue. This was followed every now and then by an explanation in English by the teacher. This made them satisfied that a resource they could offer was being gainfully employed to engage with the text and the teacher. I applauded their point of view every so often and this stimulated a discussion among those who were normally extremely reticent as a result of the "Use-only-English" condition.

I emphasized on participation as a necessary condition for agreeing to let them use their mother tongue to interpret the poem. This generated a goldmine of ideas, suggestions and discussions around what the poem meant to them. It was probably one of the earliest instances of ecocriticism in an ESL classroom.

As Lopez-Gopar (2014), puts it, "Affirming identities, making sure both teachers and students see each other as intelligent and creative, and welcoming *all* students'

languages and ways of knowing into the classroom are the basis of critical pedagogies in language teaching” (p. 312). The most important lesson I took away from these poetry classes was that regardless of how foreign or alienating a text is for learners unused to or unfamiliar with the milieu, the teacher has a duty to make it understandable for the learners by relating it to aspects and ideas they are familiar with. Introducing a personalized way of teaching is needed too, which requires straying from the official script every now and then. The following conclusions therefore emerge from this small experiment I conducted out of curiosity, with a view to making classes interesting for myself and the learners.

PROMOTE A SYLLABUS THAT ENCOURAGES CRITICAL PEDAGOGY (CP)

The syllabus must be designed in a manner that it promotes critical pedagogy and reduces the urban rural inequalities. In a very broad sense, critical pedagogy “deals with questions of social justice and social transformation through education” (Akbari, 2008, p. 276). Critical pedagogy can thus be viewed as a pedagogic process that aims to teach language through methods and materials that draw from the local milieu, themes, and topics to enable learners to be socially and politically aware, even as they learn the language through topics and notions they intimately identify with.

Akbari (2008), cites examples of how critical pedagogy may find a place in the classroom. He addresses the issue thus:

In Iran there are still regions that are contaminated by landmines; these landmines are leftovers of eight years of war with Iraq. Each year hundreds of people get killed or are wounded by these landmines, and most of the victims are children and adolescents. Iran’s MoE [Ministry of Education], in collaboration with the red crescent society, has decided to offer a special crash course on land mines and safety measures needed in dealing with them for students living in affected areas. This course is offered as an extra in the curriculum and is not integrated into any subject area. From a CP perspective, it would have been advisable and possible to include the landmine topic in the English lessons or instruction students receive in the curriculum and in this way come up with a content that is both relevant and transformative to the immediate lives of the learners. (p. 280-281)

Therefore, students who are confronted with this text can be exposed to passages which familiarize them with landmines, places where they are planted and the cautionary measures that must be taken in areas laid with mines. As a follow-up communicative activity, learners can be divided into groups and given an information gap exercise in which they have to use maps to help their partners get

home safely while negotiating their way through farms dotted with landmines and suspicious objects. Such texts that emphasize local themes, enable the learners to easily identify with the topic in the event of difficulty in comprehension.

In the Indian context, one may include texts that deal with agrarian crisis, naxalism, casteism, water wars, floods and famines and ecosystems—all problems faced by families below poverty line, or other themes that relate to the current state of society. This would enable learners to relate to the text and therefore make an attempt to understand it. They may also make an attempt to learn a second or third language better through such relevant contexts and themes.

INVOLVE LEARNERS AND TEACHERS IN PERIPHERY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

For any solution to have its intended impact, the changes will have to come from within and be bottom-up in nature. The stakeholders who matter most in the language game are teachers and students. The responsibility therefore rests on the shoulders of the teachers and learners to design materials and endorse pedagogy that makes learning and teaching sensitive and appealing to the sensibilities of the deprived and the dispossessed.

Teachers, for example, can endorse essays, articles and columns that appear in local newspapers, magazines and journals when called upon to use authentic material in the second language classroom. Short stories, essays, and articles by Indian writers and poets who write in English, such as R. K. Narayan, Sudha Murthy, Kamala Das, Nissim Ezekiel, Jayanta Mahapatra, will bring alive the richness of English with an Indian flavour. In addition to teaching the language, such materials may also sensitize students to their responsibility towards the society they live in.

Teachers and learners can sit together and identify the topics, themes and issues that the students have a liking for. Love, friendship, compassion, adventure, adversity, success stories of first generation Dalit entrepreneurs, start-ups, jobs, war, terrorism, tourism, etc., are topics that often appear in newspapers and are much talked about. Debates, group discussions and seminars can be organized which, in addition to providing language inputs, also make learners responsible citizens, a mission critical pedagogy aims to achieve.

INTRODUCE THE LOCAL TO ENABLE AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE GLOBAL

Kumaravadivelu makes some interesting observations about the kind of pedagogy that may be implemented to make the teaching-learning process sensible and constructive. He imagines the active participation of both teachers and learners.

According to him, teachers need to consider from a pedagogic point of view, how they can:

1. make their learners aware of the complex connection between language use and cultural identity,
2. sensitize themselves and the learners to the cultural richness that surrounds their classroom environment,
3. create conditions to enable and encourage their learners to participate in the negotiation and articulation of their cultural meanings and values,
4. treat learners as cultural informants and recognize and reward their cultural knowledge and individual identities,
5. design tasks and assignments to dispel stereotypes that create and sustain cultural misunderstandings and miscommunications; and finally,
6. help learners to read cultural events and activities in ways that resonate with their experience. (Kumaravadivelu , 2006, p. 274)

PROMOTE MULTILINGUAL APPROACH TO LEARNING SECOND LANGUAGE

Teachers ought to be encouraged to use L1 in the second language classroom. Studies by Auerbach (1993), and Lucas and Katz (1994), have shown that the use of mother tongue/L1, far from retarding the acquisition of L2 or L3, is actually helpful. Schweers (1999), Tang (2002), Januleviciene & Kavaliauskiene (2002), Kim and Petraki (2009), have all investigated mother tongue use in the second language classroom and reported beneficial results based on the data generated.

Phillipson (1992) has in fact referred to “Use English to teach English” as the “monolingual fallacy”, a myth perpetuated to create a job market for Centre teachers of English in the Periphery. This myth enables them to happily teach English in any part of the globe without making any effort to reach the taught in their home language, leaving the responsibility of acquiring the second/foreign language entirely in the hands of learners, whose only source of scaffolding is their L1. Thus Arabic speakers in Arabia and the Middle East are expected to learn English through English, since the native speaker teachers neither speak nor wish to learn Arabic.

For those teachers or students, who believe that using L1 will not work in a multilingual classroom where the teacher does not speak the learner’s language (L1), Lucas & Katz (1994), who investigated the use of mother tongue by learners in bilingual instructional programmes for language minorities in the USA, provide

the answer. They actually investigated areas where L1 could be used for maximum advantage to understand how it may be used. Some of these are featured below.

Teachers set up situations or activities that specifically required students to speak in their native languages with each other. For example, one teacher devised a group writing assignment that required the use of the native language of the learners. At another site, students read or told stories from their countries to each other in their native languages and then translated them into English to for other students.

Less fluent or experienced students were paired with more fluent or experienced students of the same language background during classroom instruction activities so that the more fluent students could help the less fluent ones understand the given instructions.

Teachers encouraged students to use bilingual dictionaries if they did not understand something in English and there was no one who could translate for them.

Students were encouraged to get help at home in their native languages from their family members. For example, at one site, a teacher, knowing that a student's father was more proficient in English than the student, instructed the student to ask her father to explain the Social Studies assignment to her in her native language.

Teachers gave instructions in the students' native languages to make sure all students knew what they were supposed to be doing. To ensure that students had access to academic content, they clarified the ideas and concepts originally presented in English and checked students' comprehension.

Books in the students' native language were provided and students were encouraged to read them.

Awards were given for excellence in languages that are not commonly studied (e.g. a senior award was given to students who excelled in the Khmer language) (Lucas & Katz , 1994, p. 554-556)

CONCLUSION

Critical pedagogy is the need of the hour since a greater number of learners from economically weaker sections of the society are now making their way into a system from which they have been excluded for long. However, to ensure social justice through teaching and learning a second language, one needs to jettison "pejorative language ideologies" (Lopez-Gopar, 2014, p. 312) and promote

ideologies that aim to trim inequality and injustice, be it in society or in education. This would be the finest way to keep alive a momentous tradition and “thought experiment” that Freire introduced and wanted carried forward.

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