

**CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN THE ESL CLASSROOM: A TEACHER REMINISCES**

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Critical Pedagogy(C.P.) has been with us for more than three decades now, following the successful movement by Paulo Freire(1973) to make education and by extension, pedagogy, inclusive ; yet, to what extent is C.P. used in L2 classrooms and how successful have these attempts been ? This article reports on a teacher's experiences of teaching literary texts in the L2 classroom and the concomitant conclusion that C.P. will go a long way in fostering interest in L2 while protecting the interests of learners.

Article Info:

Article Received 10/1/2015

Revised on: 18/2/2015

Accepted on: 03/3/2015

Keywords: *Critical Pedagogy, Second Language Classroom, Teaching Methods, Indigenous Materials, Authenticity*



INTRODUCTION

This is a trip down the memory lane when I graduated with an MA in literature and was ready for any teaching assignment that came my way. My wish was fulfilled when I got an opportunity to teach literature to students on undergraduate programmes – BA, B. Sc and B.Com courses. In many states of India, English is offered as a compulsory second language in state universities to students registered on arts, sciences and commerce courses. The idea is to equip them with the requisite English language skills to enable them to use English effectively primarily in writing and reading. As part of the syllabus, students are required to study works by major literary figures, including those from the Victorian and Shakespearean era as well as non-English writers and poets writing in English (R.K.Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Chinua Achebe, etc) from across the globe.

I realised then that the choice of texts matters as much as the teaching methods to teach effectively; students relate better to texts that reflect their own lives and society they live in than those that talk of ideas and ideals in an abstract fashion. The contrast was made apparent when I taught two poems, one by Mathew Arnold, “Dover Beach” and another by Wole Soyinka, “Telephone conversation”.

The most famous line in Dover Beach – “...the sea of faith...” – was impossible to render justice to by way of literal translation since the whole poem has to be read and understood in light of the transformation that was taking place in an England getting used to industrialisation and scientific thinking. The conflict between science and religion, faith and doubt, spirituality and rationalism was at its peak and nothing it seemed would arrest the march of science and technology from then on. I found it difficult to teach the text to students since the poem posed problems at many levels: linguistic, cultural, stylistic and of course, topically too.

Teaching “Telephone conversation” was very easy and highly entertaining both for me and the students since the topic and the colloquial use of English rendered interpretation that much easier. Also I was able to use the poem to talk about discrimination in general while keeping an eye on

racial discrimination. Caste system, ethnic differences, racial and other prejudices were freely discussed and notes exchanged between me and the students, many of whom were drawn from the oppressed classes and were first generation learners.

Curiosity got me thinking about the possible causes that make a text easy or difficult to comprehend and any possible means to offset the disadvantages of using texts that make life difficult for students, particularly those students who hail from rural areas and have had their education in Telugu/Urdu medium.

It is helpful to recall why English is essential for anyone desirous of a fruitful career:

We must keep in mind that English language acquisition is something difficult to avoid. English is now a prerequisite for participation in a vast number of activities. The global village is being constructed in English language, as are the information highways. Access to findings in science and technology is made through English and scientists who want to participate in the discussions which are currently taking place internationally must have a command of the tongue. Moreover, the entertainment field, as well as the arts, is moving steadily toward a realm where English is a requirement for participation. In industrial, financial and diplomatic arenas, English is also making gains. Individuals who desire or need to participate in the international movement will be rendered incapable of doing so without learning English. (Modiano341) [1]

Any idea that calls for preparing graduates for the workforce without arming them with English is tantamount to carrying a rusted knife for a gunfight. Dispensing with English was or is never a sane option, more so now than ever considering that all MNCs demand a good command of written and spoken English from recruits.

THE STUDY

To better understand the difficulties associated with teaching certain texts and the reasons students gravitate to some literary texts better than others, a survey was conducted in colleges offering undergraduate courses. A questionnaire was administered to students (about 400 in all) while data was collected from 8 degree



colleges in Telangana state. In particular the questionnaire asked of the students the possible reasons they found a text difficult to comprehend despite help from teacher or peers. The questionnaire focussed on the following:

- (a) Culture portrayed in the text
- (b) Language of the text
- (c) English used by the teacher(which is difficult to follow)
- (d) Non- use of the mother tongue when teaching the text
- (e) Highly abstract or vague use of language

Predictably, more than 58 % of students chose (a), (b) ,(d) and (e) as primary reasons for their inability to appreciate a lesson, be it prose or poem. To check the reliability and validity of their claims, an informal talk also followed the administration of questionnaire. The talk corroborated what I had suspected all along: students wanted English for instrumental purposes and they much preferred a module that taught them how to survive in a job market that was demanding adequate command of English from potential employees.

Viswanathan captures the essence of what it means to straddle two different worlds- the demands of syllabus and the transmission of knowledge in an intelligible form to learners- and the impossibility of satisfying both in an ambience that appears to favour only one of them:

When the cultural milieu of students cannot be invoked into their readings of literary texts because the milieu contradicts the construction of a homogenous universe of meaning, one reaches a psychological impasse, a radical tuning point of sorts, where either the syllabus or the students have to be thrown overboard. Whatever else may happen, it is clear that a harmonious integration of the two simply cannot, or perhaps ought not to, be orchestrated. (Viswanathan 40) [2]

If learners do not bring the language skills needed to grasp what is taught, it is implied that texts that demand adequate skills and sound background knowledge of socio cultural and historical events will make learning exacting, and sometimes impossible.

Texts that are pitched at a level higher than the learner's current levels of competence will take them further away from the learning curve instead of pushing them towards it. Texts such as that are wasted on students and serve no useful purpose to the cause of learning or teaching. Efforts must therefore centre on creating a pool of texts that bring the life around the learner to them in a language that they are trying to master.

IMPLICATIONS

A syllabus that promotes critical pedagogy must be designed to lower urban rural inequalities. In a very broad sense in which the term is used, Critical Pedagogy (C.P.) deals with questions of social justice and social transformation through education" (Akbari , 2008, p.276). In the context of the present study , however, CP is viewed as a pedagogic process that aims to teach language through methods and materials that draw on the local milieu, themes and topics to enable learners to be socially and politically aware, even as they learn language through topics and notions they intimately identify themselves with.

Akbari cites an example 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 instructions 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.(Akbari 280-281) [3]

As an example, students in this situation can be exposed to a reading passage which makes them familiar with landmines, places they are planted and



cautionary measures that must be taken in contaminated areas. As a follow-up communicative activity, the learners can be divided into groups of two and in an information gap exercise using maps, help their partners get home safely while negotiating their way through farms dotted with landmines and suspicious objects.

Texts that emphasise local themes such as the one quoted above allow easy translation in the event of difficulty in comprehension. In the Iranian context, where the example is drawn from, students know the background and consequences of a bitter eight year old war with Iraq and can easily understand what the text is trying to convey even if the words in English may seem alien to them.

Using the text the teacher may talk to learners about wars in general, the weapons used to fight wars, the aftermath of a war etc. to generate sufficient interest in them to follow the lesson. The only prerequisites are a bilingual dictionary and some mother tongue use. Once the attention of learners is captured it is easy to sustain it and give them more inputs in target language by and by.

Insofar as the Indian L2 classroom goes, it is advisable to use texts that learners identify with easily and immediately; for example, in telephone conversation, I was able to grab the attention of students by talking to them about caste discrimination one faces when applying for jobs, looking for accommodation, sitting for an interview, etc. and several learners were up with examples of the discrimination they had themselves suffered at the hands of society and this discussion was not just productive, it also opened up a whole universe of meanings and significant periods of introspection both to learners and the teacher.

INVOLVE LEARNERS AND TEACHERS FOR PERIPHERY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

It is common knowledge that ivory tower research adds another book or dissertation to a library shelf without making a meaningful contribution to a situation it so elaborately investigated. For any solution to have the intended effect, 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 onus is on teachers and learners to come up with materials and pedagogy that make learning and teaching address their needs. Teachers, for example, will find enormous use in essays, articles and columns that appear in local newspapers, magazines and journals when called upon to use authentic material in second language classroom. Short stories, essays, and novellas by Indian writers of English, such as R.K Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Ruskin Bond, and Chetan Bhagat will bring alive the texture and richness of English with an Indian identity. In addition to teaching language these materials will also inform learners about their responsibility towards a society they inhabit.

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

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