



Revista Brasileira de Linguística Aplicada

ISSN: 1984-6398

Faculdade de Letras - Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais

Tagata, William Mineo
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Revista Brasileira de Linguística Aplicada, vol. 18, no. 2, 2018, April-June, pp. 255-280
Faculdade de Letras - Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais

DOI: 10.1590/1984-6398201812025

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Post-critique in contemporary ELT praxis

Pós-crítica na prática do ensino contemporâneo de língua inglesa

William Mineo Tagata*

*Universidade Federal de Uberlândia (UFU), Uberlândia, Minas Gerais / Brasil
wtagata@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: This article investigates the importance of critical thinking in English language teaching. It begins with an examination of the notion of praxis and its relevance for current critical literacy research and teacher education programmes. One such programme was a distance-learning course offered to English teachers from Brazilian public schools from November 2016 to November 2017. An analysis of excerpts from posts on Moodle forums and online chats from this course was made in order to ascertain whether participants acknowledge the importance of critical literacy and are able to identify any hindrances to its implementation in the classroom. This article concludes by advocating a post-critical (HOY, 2005) approach to the development of English teachers' critical praxis, based on the concepts of self-reflexivity and ethics.

KEYWORDS: English language teaching; critical literacy; praxis; self-reflexivity; ethics.

RESUMO: Este artigo investiga a importância do pensamento crítico para o ensino de língua inglesa. Começa com um exame da noção de prática e sua possível relevância para pesquisas atuais de letramento crítico e programas de formação de professores. Um desses programas foi um curso a distância oferecido a professores de inglês de escolas públicas brasileiras de novembro de 2016 a novembro de 2017. Uma análise de excertos de postagens em fóruns e sessões de bate-papo no Moodle desse curso foi realizada com o propósito de verificar se os participantes reconheciam a importância do letramento crítico e identificavam alguns obstáculos a sua implementação em sala de aula. O artigo conclui defendendo uma abordagem pós-crítica (HOY, 2005) para o desenvolvimento da prática crítica de professores de inglês, baseada nos conceitos de autorreflexividade e ética.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: ensino de língua inglesa; letramento crítico, prática; autorreflexividade; ética.

Introduction

After a year of much heated debate during the presidential election campaign in the United States and the Brexit referendum in Britain in 2016, it is no wonder the expression “post-truth” – denoting a situation in which personal belief and emotion matter more than objective facts – was chosen word of the year by Oxford dictionaries. After all, it is well known that politicians taking part in debates often resorted to assertions that just felt true, despite having little or no basis in fact. Given the abundance of online information available at one’s fingertips, separating the wheat from the chaff can prove to be a daunting task, especially for those involved in the educational process. Indeed, teachers and students alike often have to grapple with the challenge of selecting reliable sources, in order to take a principled stand on a variety of contemporary issues. This assertion is corroborated by the following statement, posted on a Moodle forum by an English teacher taking part in a distance-learning course on critical literacy:¹

It is necessary to raise young people’s political awareness. Normally they think it is boring because of the media approach. It’s urgent to talk about how the opinion must to be formed. People need to learn how to search in good and trustworthy sources, more than one, in order to build a point of view.

The statement above implies the need for social and political changes in Brazil, including the politicisation of young people. This could result from learning to search for reliable sources of information, investigating how opinions are formed and questioning the truthfulness of information broadcast by the media. These are also the characteristics of a critically literate citizen that were discussed during the course mentioned above. I will provide detailed information about this below, but I would first like to lay some theoretical groundwork.

In the first part of the article I will examine the notion of praxis that lies at the heart of some critical approaches to language education, especially those which advocate one’s ethical engagement with the world, through a thorough examination of one’s own beliefs, hence the notion of *reflexivity*.

¹ I opted for editing the participants’ posts in English only when their grammatical mistakes could impede understanding.

Such an examination may also entail a radical analysis of one's critical forms of thought, leading Hoy (2005) to call for a *post-critical* orientation. In the subsequent section I will provide an overview of a distance-learning diploma course offered to English teachers from Brazilian public schools. I will analyse excerpts from online forums and chats to ascertain whether or not participants acknowledge the importance of critical literacy and are able to identify any hindrances to its implementation. Last, I conclude by pointing to the importance of a post-critical approach to ELT praxis, as well as the need for further inquiry into the relevance and applicability of critical literacy theories.

1 Praxis, reflexivity and ethics in critical approaches to ELT

The notion of praxis is central to critical approaches in education. Kubota and Miller (2017) trace the concept back to the work of Paulo Freire, who conceives of praxis as a combination of critical reflection and action in order to transform the world by redressing social and economic injustice. It is through praxis that the working class can critically reflect on the conditions of their oppression and act in order to break free from it. The symbiosis of theory and practice implicit in the Freirean concept of praxis suggests that practice without theory is thoughtless activism; on the other hand, theory without practice may lead to idealistic and empty verbalism. In short, praxis is seen as a whole that should not be dichotomized.

Praxis should thus be a key concept in language teacher education programmes, especially for teachers who are already practitioners that can critically ponder over their classroom experiences situated in specific contexts of practice. According to Pennycook (2001), critical applied linguistics underscores the reciprocity between theory and practice that constitutes the concept of praxis, understood as “a continuous reflexive integration of thought, desire and action” (p. 3). The author's emphasis on criticality is due to his contention that applied linguistics should address issues of power and inequality, transcending fixed knowledge, envisioning social and political change, and questioning taken-for-granted assumptions. One such assumption, for instance, is that English teachers are merely language teachers, whose job is to help students develop proficiency in a foreign language, which is likely to promote personal development, regardless of their situatedness in different contexts – a view that is characteristic of what Street (1995) has termed an autonomous model of literacy. A critical applied

linguistics, on the other hand, could highlight teachers' crucial role in the maintenance of the hegemonic status of English as the lingua franca of neoliberal ideologies and practices. "Like it or not, English teachers stand at the very heart of the most crucial educational, cultural, and political issues of our time" (PENNYCOOK, 2001, p. 23), whether they are aware of this or not. Through a critical approach to teacher education – one advocated by critical literacy studies, in particular – these crucial issues can be brought to the fore so that teachers can become aware of their possible complicitness with present social and economic inequalities.

Similarly, Kubota and Miller (2017) argue that critical language studies should unveil all sorts of injustice, critically scrutinize power imbalances, and promote engaged praxis for attaining collective and individual well-being. This means that, as language teachers and citizens concerned with the construction of transformative praxis, we should all draw attention to and engage in a critical discussion, both inside and outside the classroom, on issues that have not been thoroughly examined in the educational milieu, despite their incalculable significance in the broader political context in Brazil. These include the genocide of the Guarani-Kaiowaa indigenous people in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, resulting from territorial conflicts with the landowners and their disposition to stall the demarcation of indigenous lands; or the demonstrations against the measures proposed by the Brazilian government to cut benefits and public services and weaken workers' rights, among other pressing issues in Brazil nowadays. These social movements, according to Freire and Macedo (2003), promote a pedagogy of resistance and demonstrate that education cannot be thought of as restricted to the school environment. According to Freire and Macedo (2003, p. 364), teachers' appreciation of social movements is crucial for critical pedagogy:

An educator's major contribution would be to appreciate the theoretical elements within these movements' practices. The critical educator should make the inherent theory in these practices flourish so that people can appreciate the theories of their own practice. The role of the educator, then, is not to arrive at the level of social movements with a priori theories to explicate the practice taking place, but to discover the theoretical elements rooted in practice.

In a similar vein, Crookes (2017) suggests that critical applied linguistics "support and assist progressive sectors of society", working to restrain its regressive sectors. Crookes believes that praxis is the key concept

characterising critical applied linguistics, at the core of which lies the ideal of social transformation towards the creation of what Freire termed “the viable unheard of.” Influenced by Pennycook (2001), Crookes advises that the emancipatory values associated with critical theories and practices be subjected to critical scrutiny, that is, the kind of problematising practice underlying critical approaches must entail self-reflexivity and willingness to inspect their own assumptions.

For Andreotti (2014), self-reflexivity is a key element of transnational and critical literacies, understood, respectively, as an investigation of globalisation dynamics, and a thorough examination of one’s social scripts in one’s responsible engagement with the world. Andreotti finds it important to make a distinction between reflexivity and self-reflexivity. While the former involves teachers inquiring into their own processes of decision-making in order to refine their teaching methods, the latter describes

the practice of tracing *individual* assumptions to *collective* socially, culturally and historically situated “stories” with specific ontological socially, culturally and historically situated “stories” with specific ontological and epistemological assumptions that define what is real, ideal and knowable (i.e. “root” narratives). This highlights that possibilities for thinking available to individuals, and individual ‘choices’ are never completely “free”, “neutral” or only “individual”, as the things we say, think and do are conditioned (but not necessarily determined) by our contexts [...]. Self-reflexivity also challenges the assumption of the self-evident subject — the idea that there is a direct correlation between what we say, what we think and what we do. It draws attention to the complex constitution of subjectivities, to the interdependence of knowledge and power, and to what is sub- or un-conscious in our relationships with the world. (2014, p. 36).

According to Andreotti, self-reflexivity implies, therefore, the realization that individuals are not the primary sources of linguistic and cultural meanings, and that their choices are influenced by the social, historical and cultural contexts in which they are located. It is the collective scripts or narratives circulating therein that constrain what is possible and cognizable. These contexts, according to Souza (2011), are necessarily heterogeneous, for they reflect the multiple communities we simultaneously belong to, and the different forms of meaning-making and epistemologies adopted by each one. To be critical, for Souza, is to be self-reflexive, that is, to be able to trace one’s interpretations to the heterogeneous communities

where our identities are constructed, and at the same time realize that individuals located in different communities – of gender or social class, among others – may have different interpretations of the same texts. This notion of self-reflexivity is illustrated by an amusing anecdote told by Paulo Freire.² It all happened in one of Freire's trips to Chile, where he was often invited to give keynote addresses. While talking to a Chilean professor, Freire inadvertently placed a hand on his colleague's shoulder, which caused the Chilean professor to warn him that in Chile it was unusual for men to touch each other. "This set me thinking," says Freire, "there must be something terribly wrong with a culture that discourages such a simple display of affection." A few years later, Freire travelled to Tanzania for the first time, for another keynote address. During a stroll on the university campus with an African colleague, Freire felt extremely uneasy when his colleague suddenly grabbed his hand and continued walking, hand in hand with him. When his colleague let go of his hand to light a cigarette, Freire rapidly tucked his hand into his pocket and felt immensely relieved. This caused him to surmise that there was also something wrong with a culture like his own, which forbids this kind of affectionate gesture between men. Freire's realization of the situatedness and limitations of his own culture in encounters with alterity can only be described as a result of critical self-reflexivity.

Only through self-reflexivity – or "listening to ourselves listen" – can we engage in critical praxis, attentive to "the importance of learning to listen and reflect on how one understands and perceives how one's meanings may have come from social groups and not from oneself" (SOUZA, 2012, p. 80). In other words, self-reflexivity can lead one to trace one's interpretations to a "particular social grid of intelligibility" (HOY, 2005, p.232), and realize that this "grid of intelligibility" is just one among others, related to different social, cultural and historical contexts.

Hoy's formulation of criticality is related to the practice of "deconstructive genealogy". While discussing Derrida's notion of critique, Hoy (2005) notes that criticism alone is not enough, especially the kind of criticism that is purely negative or that seems to leave the critic no room for doubt. Instead, Hoy suggests that the kind of criticism at the heart of

² This anecdote is reported by Freire himself during an interview at the beginning of a documentary entitled "Grandes educadores: Paulo Freire". The full documentary is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_sDqoZ8BFw.

deconstructive genealogy “disrupts methodological smugness by calling into question “the very grounds of critique” (p. 229), so that the critic can remain open to self-criticism. This self-critical disposition, characteristic of Derrida’s concept of deconstruction, is grounded in

an unconditional right to ask critical questions not only about the history of the concept of man, but about the history even of the notion of critique, about the form and the authority of the question, about the interrogative form of thought. (HOY, 2005, p. 228).

According to Hoy, this radical necessity of calling into question the validity of concepts or notions developed in the history of thought, even those pertaining to critical forms of thought, is what defines a *post-critical* orientation. “Post-critique is thus self-critique all the way down” (2005, p. 228). This notion of post-critique is equivalent to Andreotti’s and Souza’s account of self-reflexivity, or to what Kubota and Miller (2017) call *hyper self-reflexivity*. As Andreotti notes, we should all bear in mind “our constitutive blindness to other forms of seeing, knowing and being in the world that do not fit what we recognize through the frames of references we have become used to” (2014, p. 45).

Awareness of one’s blindness to unfamiliar epistemologies can foster the sense of humility that Kubota and Miller (2017) deem important in critical theory and practice. In addition, it can promote an ethical attitude towards ontological and epistemological difference. In this sense, self-reflexivity and ethics are inextricably linked, insofar as the former is a precondition for the latter. Rather than a universally applicable set of rules that determine what is right or wrong, ethics should be viewed as a work in progress, in the sense of being located in specific situations. This formulation of ethics, which is analogous to Bakhtin’s³ own account of the centrality of ethics in language and culture studies, demands that we pay full attention to the minute particularities of each situation and assume full accountability for our own actions in the world. As physicist and American feminist Karen Barad points out, when interviewed by Dolphijn and van der Tuin (2012), “ethics is therefore not about right responses to a radically

³ I have discussed Bakhtin’s conception of ethics, its similarities with Deleuze’s, Foucault’s and Barad’s understandings of ethics, as well as its implications for foreign language teaching and learning, elsewhere (TAGATA, 2017).

exteriorized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the living relationalities of becoming, of which we are a part” (DOLPHIJN; van der TUIN, 2012, p. 69). For Barad, being ethical entails the capability of responding to and being responsible for someone. In her view, responsibility also means *response-ability*, that is, the ability to respond that prompts mutual and implicated responses. In the final analysis, this suggests that the *self* and the other are always already imbricated. Consequently, objectivity is not a matter of distancing – which in practice does not exist, given one’s entanglement in specific material and discursive configurations – but of responsibility, or *response-ability*. In this sense, ethics is about “mattering, about taking account of the entangled materializations of which we are part, including new configurations, new subjectivities, new possibilities” (DOLPHIJN; van der TUIN, p. 69).

2 Critical literacy in a distance-learning course

The diploma course in English language teaching, literacies and technologies that I referred to above took place from November 2016 to November 2017. It was a distance-learning, 60-week course, totalling 360 hours. The course aimed to enable Brazilian public school teachers to teach English in light of contemporary Applied Linguistics research and theory, encourage participants to become researchers of their own practice, develop their digital literacy for educational purposes and provide opportunities for critical reflection about English language teaching and learning and the educational use of technologies. Participants were primary and secondary school teachers of English, as well as public employees with a degree in language or linguistics, expected to devote approximately 10 hours per week to their studies. The course was based on Moodle,⁴ where participants had access to all materials – including academic articles and videos – assessment tasks, videoconferences, forums, and chat sessions. In total, the course comprised ten subjects, among which “New literacies, English language teaching and the role of schools in the 21st century,” was under my supervision. This subject aimed to promote a discussion about the contribution of new literacies, multiliteracies and critical literacy theories to a critical understanding of English language teaching and learning. For four

⁴ Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) is a learning platform used for online courses.

weeks, from January 23rd to February 19th, the 18 participants, most of whom were part time or full time English teachers in public schools, were expected to complete Moodle assignments based on instructional videos and academic articles, including a lesson plan for teaching English in a critical literacy perspective.

At the end of the second week, participants were supposed to take part in an online chat on Moodle, in order to share their comments on the concepts presented by the videos and articles. In the following extracts from the chat, participants seem to acknowledge the importance of new literacy and multiliteracy studies to critical praxis in ELT, but at the same time raise some difficulties concerning their implementation in the classroom:

Excerpt 1⁵

10:34 Debora: Since I'm not from the field, these terms literacy/new literacies are new for me, so I had some difficulty at first. I had to read many

⁵ The participants' names have been changed (pseudonyms were used for the sake of anonymity). Also, these unedited excerpts were originally written in Portuguese, and subsequently translated into English for publication in this journal. Here are the original excerpts in Portuguese:

Excerto 1:

10:34 Debora: Como eu não sou da área, esses termos de letramento/novos letramentos são novos para mim, então tive uma certa dificuldade no início. Precisei ler vários outros artigos para compreender melhor. Mas achei os textos, o vídeo e a videoaula fundamentais para entender esses novos conceitos.

10:34 Rita: O tema é muito importante para desenvolver a prática na sala de aula, isso é inquestionável

10:34 Teresa: isso! ai que raiva! eles fala um monte e no final: mais estudos devem ser feitos.. affeeee

10:34 Tiago: muita teoria e pouca prática

10:35 Marta: mas estou com minha mente fervilhando de ideias... conhecer essas teorias nos encorajam a buscar uma mudança na nossa prática

10:35 Marta: e nos faz situar enquanto professores... estou achando meu lugar no mundo rs

10:35 Joana: nós sempre queremos uma receita...mas acredito que o ponto seja cada um montar a sua, adaptá-la conforme a teoria..

10:36 Elaine: nosso desafio é: como desenvolver uma aula interessante com poucos recursos?

10:37 Roberto: para mudar, precisamos ouvir os alunos tb

articles to understand them better. But I found the texts, the videos and the videolesson fundamental for my understanding of these new concepts

10:34 Rita: The theme is very important to develop in the classroom, that's out of the question

10:34 Teresa: Indeed!!! Bother! They talk a lot and in the end: "more studies must be carried out..."

10:34 Tiago: Too much theory and little practice

10:35 Marta: but my mind is teeming with ideas... these theories encourage us to seek change in our practice

10:35 Marta: and situate ourselves as teachers... I'm finding my place in the world lol

10:35 Joana: we always want a recipe... but I believe the point is for each to create their own recipe, adapt it according to theory...

10:36 Elaine: Our challenge is how to give an interesting lesson with so few resources?

10:37 Roberto: in order to change, we have to listen to students too

10:38 Paula: In schools in general they're not concerned about understanding concepts and they just mechanically obey what the system imposes

10:39 Rita: The other day I was working with the theme "internet chat" in the classroom, wow, they couldn't stop talking about experiences with the internet outside school. I thought it was really interesting

10:38 Paula: Nas escolas em geral não se preocupam entender conceitos e sim mecanicamente obedecer o que vem do sistema

10:39 Rita: Outro dia estava trabalhando com o tema chat de internet na sala de aula, nossa, eles falaram demais experiências fora da escola com internet. Achei bem interessante.

10:39 Mara: Os alunos sabem ler mas não sabem ir além do que está escrito no texto

Excerto 2:

10:42 Mara: Em se tratando de tecnologia temos um problema sério, nossos alunos, do turno da manhã, que ainda são bem jovens, passam a noite na internet e na sala não se interessam por quase nada, precisamos trabalhar com os pais também

10:43 Helena: esse é meu problema, minha escola não disponibiliza o uso da net para a escola toda, sendo assim é impossível trabalhar com internet na sala de aula

10:44 Paula: Acredito que o maior problema é que falta, ou seja, muitas vezes ficamos acomodados nas dificuldades dos alunos, consideramos que eles são mal alfabetizados. Porém, se a gente puxar e cobrar cada um pode ir em busca do que precisa

10:39 Mara: students can read but they can't go beyond what's written in the text.

Excerpt 2

10:42 Mara: In terms of technology we have a serious problem, our students in the morning, who are still very young, spend the night on the internet and hardly take an interest in anything, we should work with their parents too

10:43 Helena: this is my problem too, my school doesn't make the internet available to everyone, so it's impossible to use the internet in the classroom

10:44 Paula: I think that only tight ox carts can screech, I mean, we often accommodate to the students' difficulties, considering them to be hardly literate. However, if we stretch ourselves we can pursue what we need

In excerpts 1 and 2 most participants appear to agree on the relevance of new literacies and multiliteracies theories, which can motivate teachers to bring about a methodological change in the classroom – a change that Roberto thinks has to take into account students' expectations and experiences outside the classroom. A considerable part of these experiences appears to involve the use of digital technologies – this is mentioned by Rita, who was impressed by her students' enthusiasm for and active participation in online chats outside school. Seeing that an ample amount of new literacies research is conducted on the use of new information and communication technologies as educational resources, we can safely assume that participants recognise the importance of this kind of research for the classroom. In addition, according to Marta, new literacy and multiliteracy theories promote a reconceptualisation of the teachers' roles and can thus help them “find their place in the world.” This may encourage them to reflect on students' learning anew. This point is made by Paula in excerpt 2, who claims that “only tight ox carts can screech,”⁶ implying that teachers are often stuck in a comfortable position, blaming their students' low degree of literacy for all their learning difficulties. This allegation, suggests Paula, is made without thorough, critical inquiry into the reasons for their learning difficulties. On the other hand, a critical literacy perspective may encourage teachers to leave their comfort zone and conduct a critical investigation into their own practice: “if we stretch ourselves we can pursue what we need.”

⁶ This Brazilian saying means that only in times of trouble does one seek help or assistance.

Despite acknowledging the importance of critical literacy, some participants seem to resent the fact that the articles they have been asked to read so far are much too theoretical and do not offer enough practical advice. As Joana notes, teachers are fond of practical “recipes”, it being up to each one to create their own recipe, based on existing theories and contextual factors. This resentment occurred even though participants were aware that new literacies and critical literacy theorists often refrain from prescribing methodological actions based on fixed syllabuses for ELT teachers, prioritizing contextual sensitivity instead. Perhaps their desire for less theory and more practical advice stems from their difficulty in recognising themselves as researchers of their own praxis, or even in accepting that practice and theory are linked, as the concept of praxis suggests. This lack of recognition, according to Paula, seems to be typical of public schools in general, where compliance with the rules of the educational system is the norm. On the other hand, the fact that Paula was able to identify teachers’ lack of critical reflection and their acquiescence in the norms imposed on them can be read as a sign of self-reflexivity. By taking part in discussion forums and online chats, teachers may have the opportunity to distance themselves from their professional contexts, critically reflecting upon their praxis. In this sense, it might have been useful to increase the number of Moodle forums and online chats, and reduce the number of academic articles. Kubota and Miller (2017) draw attention to the process of commodification of theories in the academic milieu, leading to the fetishisation of concepts⁷ (ANYON, 1994 apud KUBOTA AND MILLER, 2017, p.19) The authors suggest that we should strive to reconceptualise the dichotomy between theory and practice, and challenge the primacy of the former.

In the following excerpts, participants are discussing the possibilities of teaching English in a critical literacy perspective in their schools:

⁷ This process of commodification of knowledge, suggest Kubota and Miller (2017), “is only intensifying in neoliberal institutions in which the production of knowledge via scholarly publications, rather than the enactment of socially transformational activities, is directly linked to professional rewards” (p.18).

Excerpt 3⁸

10:48 Mara: Yes, that's what the high school syllabus proposes to do, to prepare the student for the job market

10:48 Mara: or for the ENEM

10:48 Ana: but from the perspective of the job market, right Mara?

10:48 Roberto: there's too much instrumentalisation in teaching...all done for a specific goal, which in a way alienates the students from the social context

⁸ Here are the unedited excerpts originally written in Portuguese:

Excerto 3:

10:48 Mara: Sim é a isso que o programa do Ensino Médio se propõe, preparar o aluno para o mercado de trabalho

10:48 Mara: ou para o ENEM

10:48 Ana: Mas do ponto de vista do mercado de trabalho né Mara

10:48 Roberto: há muita instrumentalização do ensino...tudo voltado a uma finalidade específica, o que de certa forma aliena os alunos em relação ao contexto social

10:48 Ana: pq podemos prepara los para o mercado de trabalho mais criticamente

10:48 Mara: sim

10:48 Ana: e não treiná-los

10:49 Ana: pq o que se quer hj é um individuo treinado

10:49 Ana: e não critico

10:49 Ana: é uma falsa criticidade

10:49 Joana: essa questão de realidade social é importante, muitas vezes nem nós entendemos essa realidade, entramos e saímos do bairro da escola sem nos dar conta da vida levada lá

10:50 Ana: as mudanças pretendidas são calculadas

10:50 Teresa: acho complicado atender a necessidade de alunos que não conhecemos

Excerto 4:

10:52 Paula: As tecnologias quando bem trabalhadas com propósitos relevantes oportunizam o desenvolvimento autêntico do aluno no sentido de ele mesmo produzir seu conhecimento

10:52 Ana: acho isso muito complicado. os alunos tem uma visão totalmente fechada em tudo. assistem esses noticiários sensacionalistas e reproduzem sem refletir

10:53 Roberto: Talvez nem isso Alice...tem uns que nem TV veem

10:53 Ana: quando propomos alguma reflexão mais profunda eles não conseguem

10:53 Roberto: só ficam no celular

10:54 Joana: creio que o movimento deva partir do que é comum do que é comum aos alunos e expandir, mostrar outros pontos de vista

10:48 Ana: because we can prepare them for the job market more critically

10:48 Mara: Yes

10:48 Ana: and not train them

10:49 Ana: because what they want today is a well trained individual

10:49 Ana: and not critical

10:49 Ana: it's false criticality

10:49 Joana: This question of social reality is important, we often don't even understand this reality, we get in and out of the school neighborhood without realizing what life there is like

10:50 Ana: the proposed changes are calculated

10:50 Teresa: I think it's complicated to meet the needs of students that we don't know

Excerpt 4

10:52 Paula: Technologies, when well approached, with relevant purposes, promote students' authentic development in the sense that they can produce their own knowledge

10:52 Ana: I think this is too complicated. Students are close-minded about everything. They watch sensationalist TV news programs and reproduce them thoughtlessly

10:53 Roberto: Maybe not even that, Alice. Some don't even watch TV

10:53 Ana: when we propose some deeper reflection, they can't do it

10:53 Roberto: they're just on their cell phones

10:54 Joana: I believe we should start from what students are familiar with and then expand, show them other points of view

While participants do not deny the importance of critical literacy in ELT, they also raise two problems regarding its implementation in their schools. First, what Roberto refers to as “the instrumentalisation” of education in excerpt 3, which makes students oblivious to their social reality. The fact that high schools only seem to prepare students for the job market or for the ENEM⁹ is one facet of this instrumentalization; according to

⁹ A standardized national exam which evaluates high school students in Brazil.

Ana, what schools do is train students to become acritical workers, unaware of the social contexts in which they are located. This calls for the pedagogy of resistance advocated by Freire and Macedo (2003) in times when schools provide few opportunities for social change, including teachers' and students' emancipation. In times like these, one cannot think of education as restricted to the school environment, and has to seek opportunities for transformation outside it. This is pointed out by one of the participants, Joana, in the following Moodle forum post:

We teachers are often so distant from our students that they see us as beings from another planet. Once a student was surprised when I said I had an Xbox. [...] I believe we educate not for the production of workforce, but for emancipation, in this context in which we live, of lack of hope for a better future I think only education can change. Although the system wants to put teachers against students and vice versa (this is my perception of facts I witnessed in the public school), it's exactly the efficiency of this relationship that can change the status quo.¹⁰ (Joana)

According to Joana, not only does the school fail to educate students for emancipation, but it also sets teachers and students against each other. This must be opposed in order to bring about a conceptual change that is long overdue. Joana also alludes to a second, related hindrance to the implementation of critical literacy, which was also mentioned by Teresa and herself in the previous chat, which is their lack of knowledge of their students' needs and social realities – Joana admits not being familiar with the neighbourhood where the school is located, and feels that her students perceive this distance, too. This probably causes a feeling of insecurity when planning instructional activities appropriate to students' needs. Joana recommends that teachers start from what students know and expand this knowledge by exposing them to different points of view, with access to

¹⁰ Here is the original post in Portuguese: Muitas vezes nós professores estamos tão distantes dos nossos alunos que eles nos veem como seres de outro planeta. Certa vez um aluno ficou surpreso quando falei que eu tinha um Xbox. [...] Acredito que educamos não para produção de mão-de-obra, mas sim para emancipação, nesse contexto em que vivemos, de tanta falta de esperança num futuro melhor eu acredito que só a educação pode mudar. Apesar do sistema querer colocar professores contra alunos e vice-versa (minha percepção dos fatos presenciado na escola pública), é justamente a eficiência desse relacionamento que pode vir a mudar o status quo.

other sources of information than sensationalist news programmes that students watch uncritically. As a result, they seem unable to engage in the kind of critical reflection that teachers would like to bring to the classroom, as remarked by Ana. Paula notes that purposeful work with new information and communication technologies could enable students to produce their own knowledge autonomously and perhaps foster their critical thinking. However, Roberto notes that they are only interested in using their smartphones in class, which means that not all uses of technology can be conducive to the development of critical thinking, as already mentioned by Paula.

After reading two critical literacy papers – Souza (2011) and Janks (2012) – and watching a video lesson, participants were expected to post their comments on Moodle about the importance of critical literacy for ELT. Here are some of their posts:¹¹

Critical literacy pedagogy is so important because many teachers in our country consider literacy, a person who just knows how to read and write well without mistakes, but literacy is beside that. Critical literacy makes us to value the experiences that students bring outside the classroom, not just study grammar but read current texts, then we need to read these texts without an innocent form and we need to transmit that to the students, because this way to change the view of policy (Bruna).

In my opinion the Critical Literacy Pedagogy is very important to help society read, between the lines. Students who learn the importance of all the literacies, that are aware of their knowledge (formal or informal), that know their place in society and how this society function and are exposed to the critical learning of another language are more critical and capable of reading and changing the reality they are in (Rosana).

I think the activities suggested by Professor Janks would be appropriate for English lessons in Brazil, firstly helping to develop our students' critical literacy and secondly because English is a global language and, the role of English is very important on the world setting, because English allows both teachers and students to have access to a range of texts and information that help to develop the critical sense and sense of citizenship. As we interact with people and cultures different from ours, we reflect about our lives and social relationships (local/global), and that makes us more critical of our reality. In addition, teaching the English

¹¹ Participants could choose to write in English or in Portuguese. Again, I chose not to edit their posts.

according to the critical literacy can prepare the student to dialogue with people from other cultures and be open to differences this is very significant for the moment in which we are living (respecting differences). I agree with Lynn Mario when he says: “It is essential to learn to read by reading or listening to yourself listening to the other” (Elaine).

In the first and second posts, critical literacy is believed to bring about changes to the way we conceive of literacy and learning, valuing students’ knowledge acquired outside the classroom, as well as the way they read and understand their own roles in the world, as a result of learning a foreign language. In the third one, Elaine also believes that English grants teachers and students access to texts from various sources and making it possible to “interact with people and cultures different from ours”. This, in turn, can help develop the kind of self-reflexivity that we referred to earlier, expressed in Souza’s (2011, 2012) recommendation that in encounters with difference we “listen to ourselves listening” to the Other. This self-reflexivity is also mentioned by the following two participants, Sonia and Rita:

Teaching a language is teaching to think about ourselves, the world, the power relationship. In our context, the education is a way that government has to keep the control. In our schools, the system delimits the possibility, delimit the teaching contents, delimit the teaching. This governmental participation, firstly, conduct the educational organization to get some objectives and some economic advantages – the educational results influence the foreign investments. The new literacies in the educational context is a way to show our students the language dynamic. It’s an opportunity to construct a new vision of language. Literacies is a window to the complex world organization by the language and the discourse. Therefore, the teaching is an opportunity to understand the political, social and historical context in our country. It’s a way to think about our society and our economic domination. Our students should think about their social position, their social importance, their social image, their social participation (Sonia).

Otherness. That was the word that came to my mind while I knew the various definitions of critical literacy. The *otredad* of Octavio Paz. To see the “one in the other”, to see the “others of the other”. From what was said in the video lesson this would be the main relevance of critical literacy: the ability to interpret reality through the perspective of the other as well. Understand that truth is relative, not absolute. This conception of critical literacy becomes very important in these days. With the advent of social networking, all individuals “have a voice” and

express themselves, even if unconsciously, when they post, enjoy or share certain messages. [...] Only the critically literate individual will be able to deal with “different others” in a respectful way, so as to preserve their human dignity. Currently, Brazil is experiencing a moment of total apathy with the political class. [...] However, this is an ideal time to induce a debate in the classroom, which through the pedagogy of critical literacy should lead each citizen to reflect on this moment in order to answer some questions: would corruption be an exclusive fault of our political representatives? Or, was corruption widespread, as a metastasis, in all spheres of our society? How does corruption affect us, affect our day to day? How can we fight it? [...] I believe that this would be the relevance of the pedagogy of critical literacy, enable the individual to reflect, interpret reality, the context in which it is inserted and realize that what happens in another country, as in the United States, for example, will affect us here in Brazil and inversely (Rita).

In the first post, critical literacy implies a “new vision of language”, one in which language and power are closely intertwined. A critically literate citizen is able to recognize the political motivations behind governmental policies and place school curriculum under scrutiny. In this sense, teaching is seen “as an opportunity to understand the political, social and historical context in our country”. This opportunity is also mentioned by Rita, who considers self-reflexivity to be crucial at a time of political unrest and wide public dissatisfaction with corrupt politicians. It is thus necessary that each citizen critically examine their own complicitness in corruption and its effects on our daily lives. In addition, self-reflexivity can lead to the realization that what happens in one country may affect all others. This entails taking account and being respectful of an Other whose perspective on reality must be considered, since “truth is relative” (according to Rita, one of the participants above) and alterity is always already embedded in one’s identity, as summed up by Octavio Paz’s understanding of “otredad”. In this day and age, when technology allows everyone to express themselves online, being critical also means being accountable for one’s opinions and actions, exercising extreme care when dealing with “different others” in order “to preserve their human dignity”, according to Rita, as well.

There is no denying that critical literacy is relevant to ELT praxis in the sense that it can promote the social, political and educational changes mentioned by the participants above. However, this does not mean that critical literacy theories are applicable to all professional contexts. The

following posts refer to some hindrances to the implementation of critical literacy in schools:

In the school where I work there's a conservative mindset. We sing the national anthem every week, students are forbidden to use their cellphones, most teachers aren't concerned with interdisciplinary projects, there's a lot of indiscipline in the classroom, which makes it utopic to leave the teaching of grammar and structure aside. [...] As for teacher preparation at university, we just do theory and little practice in our university degree courses, especially when studying multiliteracies and new literacies, and teaching practicum without supervision (Roberto).¹²In my conception we unfortunately can not form readers at school, that is, those students who read a lot is already in the habit of reading. Now why can not we make readers? Because unfortunately many times we teachers are not readers, let alone critical readers. [...] As for political issues, problems are intertwined with those of reading, because we teachers often do not know much about our unions or how our pensions and career plans will remain. And when we know we do not try to transform this reality, we remain only in complaints. Anyway, I believe that for a critical literacy we first need to reflect and problematize what is lacking in our training as a teacher in relation to political and other issues. Secondly, we urgently need to expand the literacy possibilities of our students so that they can go beyond literary and didactic books and begin to read the world and only then can they try to transform it (Angela).

I've never seen an English lesson in a public school in which language, in its concreteness, in its cultural and political aspects, in the everyday speech of ordinary people, in its informal aspects, was taught in the classroom. Even the practice of dialogues, intended to put oral language in action, is full of formal, repetitive, artificial expressions. I think that, beyond the physical restructuring of schools, it's even more important to promote a conceptual change, in the sense of understanding pedagogical practice as political ideological-practice that seeks to educate people

¹² The original post in Portuguese: Na escola em que trabalho, existe um pensamento conservador. Cantamos o hino nacional toda semana, é proibido o uso de celular, a maioria dos professores não se preocupam com projetos interdisciplinares, há muita indisciplina em sala de aula, o que torna utópico deixar o ensino de gramática e estrutura da língua de lado. [...] Quanto a preparação dos professores nas universidades, ficamos muito na teoria e pouca prática durante os cursos de licenciatura, principalmente quando se estuda multimodalidades e novos letramentos, e estágios sem supervisão.

capable of writing their own histories, of promoting social change (Daniel).¹³

According to the three participants, there is a conservative mindset that makes it difficult to implement critical praxis in schools. This mindset is explicitly mentioned by Roberto, who also alludes to a deficiency in teacher education at university, namely too much theory and little practice. Another shortcoming in teacher education is raised by Angela, who claims that teachers do not read. The two Freirean meanings of “reading” are invoked here, reading the word and reading the world. For Angela, teachers’ inability to read texts and to read the political world of unions, pensions and career plans are closely knit. Thus, before becoming critical teachers, we must start reflecting critically on the failings of our own education. Teacher education, according to Daniel, should prepare teachers to teach language in its “concreteness” and actual use, considering its political and cultural aspects. More important than the physical restructuring of schools is the conceptual change that could help us conceive of pedagogy as political and ideological praxis, suggests Daniel. Such change can also lead teachers to revise their opinions about their own educational roles and statuses. In some cases, English teachers blame themselves for their students’ lack of motivation, which is symptomatic of their lowered self-image. This appears to be the case of Elaine:

In the school where I work there’s a multimedia room and two computer labs for the whole school, which means I have to share them with other teachers and groups, with only few opportunities to use these spaces. Most students are not interested in learning the language, they say they don’t like it or don’t see any practical utility in it. At the beginning of last year, I gave them a text about the importance of English in a globalized world, but even so I couldn’t raise their interest in the English language, and for the rest of the year I struggled to make them participate in the lessons. I think I should make them understand the importance of

¹³ The original post: Nunca vi uma aula de inglês numa escola pública em que a língua, na sua concretude, nos seus aspectos culturais e políticos, no falar do dia-a-dia de pessoas comuns, no seu aspecto informal, ser ensinada em sala de aula. Até nas práticas de diálogo, supostamente exercício de colocar a língua oral em funcionamento, são recheadas de expressões formais, repetitivas, artificiais. Penso que, além da reestruturação física das escolas, mais importante é a mudança conceitual, no sentido de compreender a necessidade de se pensar as práticas pedagógicas como práticas político-ideológicas que busquem a formação de pessoas capazes de serem sujeitos autores de sua própria história, capazes de promoverem mudanças sociais.

English, so in this course I'm seeking to improve my practice, and I also intend to develop my linguistic-communicative competence to attract my students' attention, because many of them expect the teacher to be fluent, to know everything, to translate everything for them and to have lived abroad to deserve their attention. This is my reality!(Elaine).¹⁴

Elaine points out three obstacles to the implementation of critical literacy in her context. First, the fact that the school where she works lacks the technological resources and necessary infrastructure to teach English according to new literacies, multiliteracies and critical literacy theories. This dearth of resources is also mentioned by other participants working in different public schools. Second, the lack of interest in learning English on her students' part, however hard she tries to raise their interest and encourage them to participate more actively in her lessons. And last but by no means least, Elaine's own low self-esteem, manifest in her desire to improve her linguistic-communicative competence and thus meet her students' – and maybe her own – expectations that she should be fluent and have thorough knowledge of English. In her view, living abroad can testify to this knowledge and cause her to “deserve her students' attention”.

Unfortunately Elaine's low self-esteem stemming from her alleged lack of proficiency was not pursued further, owing to time constraints. In retrospect, I feel that a number of suppositions such as “English teachers should know everything”, “improving my English will help me attract my students' attention”, or “by living abroad I can earn my students' respect”, among others, could have been subjected to critical inquiry. This might have led to a serious discussion about the role of foreign language education in

¹⁴ The original post in Portuguese: Na escola em que trabalho tem uma sala multimídia e dois laboratórios de informática para a escola inteira, o que significa que tenho que dividir o espaço com outros professores e turmas, restando poucas oportunidades de uso desses espaços. A maioria dos alunos não tem interesse em aprender a língua, pois falam que não gostam ou não veem utilidade prática para eles. Logo no início do ano passado, eu trabalhei um texto com eles falando da importância da língua inglesa no mundo globalizado, mas mesmo assim não consegui despertar o interesse dessa maioria para as aulas de língua inglesa, e o resto do ano foi uma luta fazê-los participarem das aulas. Sinto que preciso despertá-los para que entendam essa importância, portanto estou buscando nesse curso de especialização melhorar a minha prática, me capacitando e pretendo também melhorar a minha competência linguístico-comunicativa para atrair a atenção dos meus alunos, porque muitos esperam que o professor seja fluente, que saiba tudo, que traduza tudo para eles e que já tenha morado no exterior para merecer a atenção deles. Essa é a minha realidade!

public schools in Brazil, or the significance of foreign languages in Brazilian students' lives. This, in turn, could have led participants to question their own educational roles and expectations: "how can English make a difference in my students' lives? Or what am I teaching them English for? To become proficient and apply for well-paid jobs in multinationals? Or to broaden their horizons and change their way of understanding (their place in) the world and relating to others?" Maybe Elaine's low self-esteem was shared by other participants, all of whom were non-native teachers of English in Brazilian public schools, who are often less well-paid than teachers in private language schools and may therefore harbour an inferiority complex. This inferiority complex, according to Kumaravadivelu (2016), is typical of non-native teachers of English, who only have an idealized notion of native speakers' linguistic competence and yet continue to reinforce it, remaining complicit in their own marginalization. Adopting center-based methods and materials, which constitute "the engine that propels the hegemonic power structure" (p.73), contributes to this marginalization. The author suggests that in order to counter the cultural hegemony of the center, non-native teachers ought to "engage in critical self-reflection" (p.75).

Such critical reflection is analogous to the self-reflexivity that I suggested is a key aspect of contemporary praxis in ELT. Both may involve a critical investigation of one's opinions and interpretations, tracing them to one's community and enabling one to revise them in encounters with difference. In the case of Elaine's low self-esteem, this critical reflection or self-reflexivity might mean asking herself how and when the idea that one has to live abroad to speak fluently took root, where the belief that English teachers should know everything comes from, why non-native English speaking teachers are viewed as less capable than native teachers, and may thus be undeserving of students' respect and praise. In times of globalization, with a plethora of English language varieties, to value only one variety of English could sound, at the very least, anachronistic. In times like this, according to Canagarajah (2014), rather than grammatical knowledge, what matters is *procedural knowledge*, which "might help us deal with the diverse and unpredictable communicative situations of globalization" (p. 771).

Although theorists such as Canagarajah prioritize linguistic diversity and speakers' intelligibility and communicative competence, linguistic imperialism is still "alive and kicking", as suggested by Kumaravadivelu (2016). Hence the need for critical reflexivity on all levels of ELT praxis, including classroom research, course planning, materials development,

teacher education, policy making, and teaching. As English teachers – both native and non-native speakers – researchers and intellectuals, we should all be aware of our complicity in sustaining linguistic imperialism; in reinforcing the neoliberal commodification of knowledge described by Kubota and Miller (2017), as well as the far-reaching influence of materials and theories produced in Europe and the U.S. to the detriment of knowledge produced elsewhere; in reproducing social and economic inequities; and, especially in the case of Brazil, in maintaining the chasm between public schools and universities – a problem mentioned by one of the participants above, Roberto. As intellectuals, we should critically reflect on our privilege of taking part in prestigious academic events and having access to knowledge that is confined to the academic milieu, or conducting research supported by funding agencies that does not yield any benefits to public schools. Above all else, we should be held accountable for our praxis, which must be guided by an ethical responsibility towards our students, colleagues and society at large.

Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed the importance of contemporary ELT praxis based on self-reflexivity (ANDREOTTI, 2014; KUBOTA; MILLER, 2017; SOUZA, 2012) or post-critique (HOY, 2005). This was the basis for the planning and implementation of the distance learning course offered to English teachers from public schools whose posts on Moodle forums and online chats were analysed herein. From this analysis it was clear that the distinction between theory and practice still holds among teachers, and that the concept of praxis is a better alternative in a critical approach to ELT, since it conveys the interconnectedness of theory and practice, and posits teachers as theorists. At least one of the participants of our diploma course, Tiago, resents the fact that undergraduate degree programs in foreign languages still put too much emphasis on theoretical knowledge and keep their distance from the reality of public schools, which may suggest that these programs should be redesigned with a view to bridging this gap. The emphasis on the importance of praxis could help develop a post-critical attitude to the commodification of knowledge that Kubota and Miller (2017) alluded to, which keeps us all comfortably nestled in our “academic bubble”. Designing and implementing distance-learning courses, such as the one analysed here, with opportunities for participants to exchange teaching experiences and critically examine their praxis may be seen as an effort to

find a way out of this bubble. Given the small number of participants, my own conclusions are necessarily tentative, but they do point to the need for more critical teacher education programs, as well as further inquiry into the applicability of critical literacy theories to ELT praxis. Such inquiry can help us prevent critical literacy from becoming another fetishized concept that merely increases the prestige of academia¹⁵, and at the same time challenge centre-based knowledge and materials (KUMARAVADIVELU, 2016); it can also point to ways of engaging with social movements so as to “make the inherent theory in these practices flourish so that people can appreciate the theories of their own practice” and recognize themselves as “organic intellectuals” (FREIRE; MACEDO, 2003, p.364).

By participating in Moodle forums and online chats, the participants of my diploma course were invited to critically examine the relevance of critical literacy theories. At the outset, I hoped that they would be able to trace their beliefs to the social and professional contexts they are located in, and resignify their own roles as agents of social change. In this process, they raised important questions about what it means to be literate, learning English in times of globalization, new information and communication technologies and education, and the present relevance of critical literacy in Brazil, among others. Furthermore, they mentioned a number of obstacles to the implementation of critical praxis in schools, namely shortcomings in teacher education, lack of technological resources, students’ low level of literacy and motivation in learning a foreign language, as well as the conservative mindset of colleagues and school administrators. These could have been further pursued. In retrospect, I feel that there should have been more opportunities for participants to engage in post-critique – that is, “self-critique all the way down” (HOY, 2005, p.228). This would have entailed a critical investigation into their complex entanglement in societal and institutional factors, including their own complicitness in their domination or their possible low self-esteem, resulting from shortcomings in their education, or from the fact they are non-native teachers of English. Faced with this inescapable entanglement, they would perhaps ponder the question of how to exercise agency.

¹⁵ Windle (2017) for example discusses how academic writing, even within critical approaches, can reinforce unequal relations of power and knowledge between the global north and south.

As noted by one participant, Rita, critical literacy means the ability to interpret reality through the perspective of others, and thus realize that truth is relative. If it is reasonable to deny the existence of absolute truths, nowadays it seems equally reasonable to expect a surge in post-truths, easily disseminated on social networking sites. Hence the need for a self-reflexive or post-critical stance, which entails assuming responsibility for our own words and actions, and acknowledging alternative interpretations of the same texts. For those of us committed to critical praxis, post-critique requires that we behave ethically towards an Other whose grid of intelligibility is necessarily different from ours; it also requires us to practise what we preach, and not lose sight of the practical implications (or the lack thereof) of our theories; to recognize the limits of our criticality and what it can achieve, remaining open to self-criticism; to understand that as English teachers we remain critical of (our complicity in) linguistic imperialism, and engage in a pedagogy of dissensus (SOUZA, 2012), appreciating the hybridity constitutive of all languages, identities and cultures; to fight dogmatism and cling to contextual sensitivity; and to allow for the emergence of Freire's "viable unheard-of" – also calling into question the conditions of this viability – rooted in the belief that "schools should stimulate the certainty of never being too certain" (FREIRE; MACEDO, 2012, p.361).

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Data de submissão: 29/05/2017. Data de aprovação: 20/04/2018.