Examining Language Learning from a Critical Perspective

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Critical theory, a perspective of sociocultural theory, is a useful tool for examining the role of context in shaping our understanding of language learning and teaching. In examining context, the critical perspective considers the sociopolitical nature of language practices since it maintains that one must study and critique the relationship between power and language in order to gain a more complete understanding of the practices and interactions in which learners engage (Pennycook, 1999; Phillipson, 1992; Zuengler & Miller, 2006). This understanding, critical theorists contend, will foster social and educational changes leading to more equitable educational practices.

In exploring the role of English both from a global perspective and the local perspective of Bangladesh, I find critical theory a powerful lens to examine the relationship between language, context, and power. English language teaching (ELT) has become a global operation, though it is generally held to be a non-political activity (Canagarajah, 1999; Phillipson, 1992). Consequently, few ELT professionals seriously consider the political nature of their profession. They work under the assumptions that ELT pedagogical practices are universally relevant and applicable. Such assumptions, according to critical theorists, fail to take into account the role of power and context in language learning.

At present, though ELT is a worldwide profession, the flow of ideas regarding English language teaching and learning mainly emanate from the core English-speaking countries [1] (Canagarajah, 1999, 2002). This situation has locked the West, including the core English-speaking countries, and developing countries into an unequal power relationship. Taking a critical stance, Canagarajah argues that the West holds a monopoly over the developing countries since the latter rely heavily on western-generated products. This uni-directional exchange, he notes, has led many educators in the developing communities to accept core-produced methods, materials, training programs, research journals, among other things, as “the most effective, efficient, and authoritative for their purposes” (p. 135). With each new teaching product, he argues that a need is created, and this is followed by a demand in the developing countries, which use their limited resources to purchase these products. In this manner a vicious cycle of dependency is maintained.

Within the micro-context of Bangladesh, English creates a similar power divide between the local elites whose strong command of English ensures educational and professional success and the vast majority of the population for whom English acts as a barrier, rather than a bridge to future economic benefits. Only three percent of the Bangladeshi population speaks English, while eighty percent of the population resides in rural communities with limited or no access to English language education (Hossain & Tollefson, 2007). Hence, practical opportunities to practice the language are almost non-existent for rural learners (Hasan, 2004; Hossain & Tollefson, 2007). This situation allows the elite to have an unfair advantage since this group often uses English as a precondition for access to social prestige, employment, and educational rewards (cf. May, 2001; Phillipson, 1992).

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[1] Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, New Zealand, and South Africa.

May (2001), therefore, cautions, "It is simply disingenuous to present English as some kind of tabula rasa, available at no cost and for the benefit of all" (p. 202). In that, he echoes Phillipson's (1992) arguments which claim that English creates inequalities both within a community and among societies. In other words, just because English is hailed as a global language, that does not mean that ELT is value-free and context-independent or that the opportunities which English promises are distributed equally among learners. Making a similar claim, Canagarajah (2002) contends that the world of English has been stratified by unequal distribution of power and material resources.

According to critical scholars (e.g., Canagarajah, 1999, 2002; Norton, 1995, 1997, 2000; Zuengler & Miller, 2006), the issues stemming from differences in power need special attention since learners develop more than language competency when exposed to English. As Canagarajah (1999) explains:

> Just as the personal background of the learner influences how something is learned, what is learned shapes the person: our consciousness, identity, and relationships are implicated in the educational experience. (p. 15)

Simply put, the languages we learn shape our identities. The local power structure of language learning contexts can legitimize certain identities while devaluing others. Speaking on the role of power in shaping identities, Canagarajah (2002) maintains that in a society, certain values, norms, practices, and codes are held in higher esteem than others so that learners who do not share the mainstream norms, values, and/or codes may feel that they are at a disadvantage. He contends that ignoring these structural inequalities or power dynamics can cause learners to develop a negative identity. This in turn can contribute to unsuccessful teaching and learning of English.

Using critical theory as a framework, we can thus explore and critique inequitable educational practices resulting from unequal distribution of power within a classroom which mirrors the uneven power structure of the society in which it is embedded. An understanding of the relationship between power, language, and learners' identities is crucial if we are to envision changes leading to more equitable educational practices.

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