

Vergara, F. (2015). Social Justice Awareness in TEFL/TESL: Exercising Critical Citizenship Skills through Literature. *International Journal of Educational Policies*, 9(2), pp. 47-52.

ISSN: 1307-3842

## **Social Justice Awareness in TEFL/TESL: Exercising Critical Citizenship Skills through Literature**

**Francisco Vergara\***

*ENS Villa del Totoral*

*Instituto Antonio Nores: Nivel Terciario*

*Facultad de Lenguas – UNC*

### **Abstract**

The highly commercialized field of Teaching of English as a Foreign/Second Language participates in the wider neo liberal strategy of avoiding critical assessment of the legitimacy of the current hegemonic world order. We start from the premise that a powerful mechanism for perpetuating oppression consists in discouraging awareness of its existence. With this in mind, the present paper provides concrete examples of a Marxist/Post colonialist approach to the teaching of Literature in English as an effort to encourage the development of much-needed critical intellectual skills to better read society. The proposal is thought to be implemented with both general students of EFL/ESL and students at English Teachers' Training College. Ultimately, this paper seeks to explore ways in which part of the rich literary tradition in English can be used for a social justice-oriented education in the context of the TEFL/TESL classroom.

**Keywords:** *Social Justice Awareness, TEFL Literature Teacher Training*

---

\* Vergara, Francisco, ENS Villa del Totoral, BA in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, Address: Santa Rosa 1175 1F Cordoba 5000 (Argentina) mjfvergara@gmail.com

## Introduction

It is estimated that around one billion people study English at some level as a Foreign or Second language (Gradol 2006). The vast majority of them are low-income children and adolescents who have their only basic education in English at underfunded state schools in the developing world. However, the contents of English language courses and their materials are designed in American and British publishing houses with a target student in mind who differs quite substantially from the average “Third-World” learner.

Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) is an elite organization. Not surprisingly so, given the fact that English is the de facto language of neoliberal globalization. The linguistic branch of multinational capitalism is formed by a cartel of providers of English language teaching materials. Within this group, Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, Macmillan and Longman Pearson figure prominently. The philosophy behind their products seems to be the promotion of Anglo American bourgeois values and the illustration of their lifestyles.

### **English Teaching and Learning in the *Non-developed* World**

It is an unfortunate fact that most of the one billion learners of English have very low chances of becoming independent speakers of English. Poor quality of education, few hours of teaching in often crowded classrooms and high attrition rates plague schools in the developing world. Effective foreign language learning is largely reserved to fee paying schools which serve the more affluent sections of the native non-English speaking population. It is them who interest the heads of the international TEFL/TESL industry.

The resulting product is a self-reinforcing cycle of transmission of knowledge in which the developing world elites (and aspiring elites) learn about the lifestyles of their developed world counterparts. The existence of a mass of fellow people excluded from the closed circle of capital flow is not considered, much less called into reflection.

Clearly the average student from the perspective of the English Teaching industry and the actual global average student of English are not the same person. In reaction to this sort of calls for a critical reassessment of international English language education towards a more truly global and inclusive approach, conservative counterarguments invoking "moderation and neutrality" may appear. Social theorist Ivan Petrella (2012) comments on some of his university students' responses to the invitation to merge intellectual academicism with a critique of social injustice:

"You want me to ground my thinking in this perspective? If we are, aren't we grounding our thinking on a position that relies too heavily on cases of extreme need, on cases of extreme poverty?(....)Why focus on these aberrations, why focus on these outlier cases, instead of a more mainstream perspective? But the

point (...) here is that these (cases) are not extreme or unusual. They represent the way most of the world actually lives. It is from a North American perspective where these cases may seem extreme. But from a global perspective, it is the American and the European standard of living that is unusual"

### **Ideologies and Possibilities of Resistance in EL Education**

Oppressive ideologies have traditionally been tools for social control and the field of TESOL has been no exception. Van Dijk (1993) observes that "textbooks are ideologies embedded in curriculum". The variety of capitalist ideology present in curriculum and material design in our field consistently portrays a particular lifestyle, set of values and interests as natural and universal. Consumerism, above all, is at the core of their philosophy. Complementarily to these subtly propagandistic tendencies, denial by omission is also observed in standard English language course design. It would be strange, for instance, for EFL textbooks by the major publishing houses to devote significant space to invite readers to reflect on the social and ecological crises that affect large sections of the world population (many of whom happen to at least transit through an English language class at some point in their lives).

It is neither accidental nor surprising that certain current human-caused problems such as social stratification both intra and internationally, poverty, exploitation, and environmental destruction, are left out from EFL curriculum. Their inclusion might eventually lead to-what for education business establishment would be-unwanted awareness among teachers and learners about the causes and reasons behind serious social ailments. It is therefore in the capitalist sector best interest to avoid discussion of many of its questionable practices. To use Chomsky's words (1996): "the whole educational system from the beginning on through gets you to understand that there are certain things you just don't say"

According to McLaren & Farahmandpur (2005), "naming, let alone questioning the social, political, cultural, and economic arrangements under capitalism constitutes a form of political intervention and activism that for many educators is simply too risky." Although this certainly does not exempt teachers from their failures, it should be acknowledged that in the case of TEFL, ignorance is probably an even stronger obstacle than insufficient courage. Little is offered during the teaching training stages in terms of critical social skills. The influence of corporate agenda in the contents of English teaching training programmes is firmly established. It is a common perception among recent graduates that they have been preparing, first and foremost, to sell a product (i.e.: English language) which is in high demand. The idea that the hegemonic system of wealth production and concentration may be detrimental to the welfare of many members of society, or that it should be profoundly transformed, is infrequent.

### **Promoting Political Literacy in the English Language Class: Engaging Literature**

At this juncture, it might be fair to wonder whether those involved in the Teaching of

English as a Foreign or Second Language have any responsibility, or better still, any possibility to change the mostly bleak picture we are here portraying. Social critique and call for equality of access to education might fit neatly into the academic activities of fields such as Sociology of Education, but are they even relevant to TEFL?

One possible answer is that an English language teacher's primary function is to promote proficiency among students in the target language. In this view, the target language mainstream culture and society are described as they are; in as far as they are necessary to achieve linguistic competence. Problematising and foregrounding the power dynamics and legitimacy of social practices is beyond the scope of a language teacher's duty.

An alternative view holds that as an integral part of a system which at its present form acts as a tool for imperialism, exclusion, and subjugation, the English language educator has an important role to play in countering hegemonic discourses and promoting critical reassessment of their practices. This can be performed in a variety of ways, our focus in the following section will be on English Language Literature as a potential resource for critical social engagement in the classroom.

In the middle years of the 20th century, George Orwell (1943) famously reflected on the significance of literary texts as thought-provoking political commentaries:

To dislike a writer's politics is one thing. To dislike him because he forces you to think is another, not necessarily compatible with the first. But as soon as you start talking about "good" and "bad" writers you are tacitly appealing to literary traditions and then dragging in a totally different set of values. For what is a "good writer"? Was Shakespeare "good"? Most people would agree that he was. Yet Shakespeare is, and perhaps was even by the standards of his own time, a reactionary in tendency, and he is also a difficult writer, only doubtfully accessible to the common man.

The vast English language literary production offers a wealth of opportunities for the critical educator to exploit. In the process of fostering critical citizenship skills, novels may provide an excellent starting point for addressing issues of historical and contemporary social justice within the foreign language learning environment. Rather than rushing through reading assignments with minimal exploration of only the most basic elements such as characters and plot, the conscientious work with selected fictional and nonfictional books can become a highly constructive and informative experience.

Students and teachers' familiarity with renowned authors in the English language social critical tradition should not be taken for granted. Neither should it be assumed that the topics of class oppression depicted by Dickens, or the totalitarian practices denounced by Orwell, to give two examples, are common knowledge among participants in the EFL class. In most cases there is much to be discovered by exploring the historical conditions surrounding a story's development. A useful starting point to better understand the implications of a literary piece is to be found in

the analysis of its social and political conditions of creation. It may be claimed that, in addition to being productive, this approach also has ethical implications, as "history matters to political literacy, to think politically is to think historically, and since the past is in some ways a history of injury, not thinking about the past or not thinking historically is both politically illiterate and pernicious" (Simpson 2012).

Temporal and local relevance constitute fundamental aspects to consider in the selection and design of a critical literature project. Steinbeck's *The Winter of our Discontent*, for instance, may tell us an engrossing story about a 1960s small town struggling man, but more generally and perhaps more importantly, it may hint at the cost of honesty in a corrupt society. The establishment of reasonable connections- whenever possible-between the issues presented by a literary piece and learners' historical and social context should be a priority.

### **Limits and Opportunities of a Social Justice ELT**

Admittedly, there are real obstacles to the successful implementation at a large scale of a social justice awareness approach to the teaching of literature in English as a foreign language. The most obvious limitation is the minimal level of English language proficiency necessary for the reading and analysis of rather complex texts and concepts. Beginner students with virtually no previous English language knowledge will generally not be able to deal with this sort of activities, however meaningful and valuable those might intrinsically be. But once appropriate foundations have been built, and starting at pre-intermediate levels, increasing possibilities open for the study of literature (often by means of adapted versions) and its subsequent socio-historical analysis.

It is perhaps at the level of English Teaching programmes where this approach may yield the best results. For one thing, the level of English language proficiency is usually high at Teaching Training environments, at least toward the final stages of the course. Secondly, it is the would-be teachers who are in a position to eventually become agents of change through their future involvement with students. In order to break the cycle of materialistic individualism and conformity prevalent in the capitalist world it is of utmost importance to dare to politically engage those in charge of training (linguistically or otherwise) the workforce.

Finally, it is worth remembering that the teaching of language and culture is not a neutral undertaking. Inclusions and omissions are, for the most part, not based on "scientific", much less accidental reasons, but rather respond to vested interests in the larger economic system. The role that current capitalism expects from the teaching of English to speakers of other languages is the creation of docile consumers and the transmission of corporate values. In this context, the need to "de-indoctrinate" promoting critical awareness of a dehumanising and dysfunctional order becomes crucial. The raw materials to start our small contributions to resistance and social change may already lie in the libraries. The rest is up to every educator's commitment and choice within the particular and often adverse conditions a social justice education strives to be actualized.

## References

- Chomsky, N. (1996). *The Big Idea-Interview with Noam Chomky*. Interviewed by Andrew Marr. [Television] British Broadcasting Corporation. February 1996.
- Graddol, D. (2006). *English Next*. London: British Council.
- McLaren, P. & Farahmandpur R. (2005) *Teaching Against Global Capitalism*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Orwell, G. (1943). "Literature and the Left". Tribune, [online] 4 June. Available at: <http://georgeorwellnovels.com/essays/literature-and-the-left/>
- Petrella, I. (2012). *Ivan Petrella on Liberation Theology in the 21st Century* [online] Available at: < <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZAKBoVaOPs> [Accessed 2 Feb 2013]
- Simpson, G. (2012). *The Wednesday Lectures hosted by Raimond Gaita 2012 - Prof. Gerry Simpson "Political Literacy"* [online] Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=abYumaBYp7U>
- Van Dijk, T. (1993). Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis. *Discourse and Society*, 4 (2), 249-83.

*International Journal of Educational Policies*

ISSN: 1307-3842

<http://ijep.icpres.org>

<http://ojs.ijep.info>

©IJEP