The Praxis of English Language Teaching and Learning (PELT)

Beyond the Binaries: Researching Critically in EFL Classrooms

Mark Vicars, Shirley Steinberg, Tarquam McKenna and Marcelle Cacciattolo (Eds.)

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CRITICAL NEW LITERACIES: THE PRAXIS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING (PELT)

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Beyond the Binaries: Researching Critically in EFL Classrooms

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Contents

Employing the Bricolage as Critical Research in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

SHIRLEY R. STEINBERG

In this chapter, I discuss critical theory and critical social theory in terms of their implications for research and teaching in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). I attempt to focus on practical implications of the critical conversation for those interested in critical pedagogy, research, and good teaching in TEFL. The research bricolage is presented in light of viewing ways in which different epistemological research "methodologies" can be employed when doing TEFL research.

The chapter is structured into two sections that focus on (1) a clarification of the nature of critical research and (2) methodologies of critical research, using the bricolage and the implications for TEFL researchers.

Criticalized Research

Critical research makes the assumption that the inequalities of today's society need to be addressed and that the world would be a better place if these unjust realities could be changed. Consequently, we explore the world, TEFL included, for the purpose of exposing this injustice, developing prac-

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tical ways to change it, and identifying sites and strategies by which transformation can be accomplished. Although the notion is simple, the process of accomplishing it is disconcertingly complex. Critical research needs embrace these five notions:

1. It is not rooted in positivism, or notions of rationality, objectivity and truth. Positivist rationality involves the assumption that human beings control their destinies through the application of social techniques derived from empirical science. Through scientific reason, educators, social workers, psychologists and other cultural workers can make use of sciences of control to produce obedient citizens.

2. Critical research attains an awareness of its own value commitments and those of others, as well as the values promoted by dominant culture. One of the main concerns of critical research involves the exposure of the relationship between personal values and practice. Critical research makes its value assumptions known to its consumers (e.g., that English language speaking should be employed for peaceful, socially just and democratic purposes).

3. It cultivates an awareness of the social and political construction of professional consciousness. Critical research understands that academic researchers are socialized into professional cultures with certain mores and expectations. It insists on making public these hidden customs.

4. Critical Research uncovers aspects of the dominant social order that undermine the pursuit of critical egalitarian and democratic goals. It attempts to expose the specific methods upon which power deploys to crush critical objectives in the larger effort to protect its own privileges (e.g., the ways in which corporate and governmental financial support of research often shape the questions which researchers ask and the answers they provide).

5. It is always conceived in relation to practice. Critical research is never disinterested and it exists to improve practice (see Kincheloe and Berry 2004). The employment of a bricolage allows a socially just and polysemic approach in creating thicker textual readings of research.

Critical Traditions

Critical research draws upon emergent schools of social theory. First, Frankfurt School critical theory (a discourse of social transformation) is associated with the work of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse (many others are part of the Frankfurt School). Second, Michel Foucault's genealogy (the reconstitution of ostensibly mundane historical memories that are dangerous to the dominant way of understanding the world) attempts to understand social practices even when the researcher has been shaped by the social practices). Third, the practice of poststructuralist deconstruction (a method of reading, an interpretive strategy, and a philosophical position that views the world as full of texts to be decoded and explored for unintended meanings) is associated with Jacques Derrida. Fourth, the critical currents (ways of understanding the world that challenge the certainty of modernist science with its linear, cause-effect forms of logic and rationality) associated with critical cultural studies and critical pedagogy.

Using these critical theories in combination with the pragmatic tradition out of which John Dewey's progressive education developed, an oppositional research impulse can emerge. Dewey wrote in the early 20th century about a form of research that consciously challenged the technicist desire for certainty. A notion of critical TEFL research is nurtured by Dewey's notion, as it undercuts mainstream educational comfort with taken-for-granted sociocultural and educational patterns. In a dominant culture that has not always valued self-reflection on the part of its teacher professionals, critical research becomes a de facto oppositional activity as it pushes professionals in a variety of fields to reconsider their assumptions (Greene 1988). Kincheloe and Berry (2004) argue that critical forms of inquiry do not claim truth in a way that is unaware of the metaphors that guide their meaning. Indeed, such critical research forms do not conceive knowledge as simply something to be discovered. Information produced by critical inquiry, a self-conscious social text is produced by a plethora of mutually-informing contexts. This concern for context becomes a defining feature of critical research, as practitioners focus their effort on conceiving new ways of contextualizing scientific knowledge, teaching and students. The critical theory of TEFL research and teaching is often influenced by a governing body intent on the neo-liberal

imposition of English language teaching, and most often ignores any social text whatsoever. In the case of Asian TEFL education, I have found that socio-cultural education, criticality, deconstruction, or social consciousness is non-existent. Indeed, the only goal is to sell English materials from the UK, Australia or New Zealand, most of which include cultural information directly from the authoring country, and not the country engaged in the teaching. Students are taught in rudimentary, rationalistic, positivistic and anti-social manners to regurgitate classes into empirical exams.

Empowerment Through Acknowledgment of Power and Oppression

As critical theory is grounded on the recognition of the ways in which power oppresses, the forces of oppression have to be identified (Kincheloe and Steinberg 2008). In the context of critical research in TEFL, one of the first places where critical inquirers might look for oppression is positivist English language teaching itself. Critical observers have maintained that prediction and control of external phenomena are presupposed in the language of foreign language teaching, science, mathematics, and statistics. The external phenomena in question involve the control of nature to serve human ends (Aronowitz 1988). *Modernist TEFL is committed to expansionism or growth, which are terms that frequently are confused with progress.* In the case of most English language teaching, the goals are *to become global,* and *to speak English in order to be competitive in international markets.* Expansionism of this type demands that individuals be programmed for the progress-oriented agenda even when it conflicts with their best interests or the best interests of the community. *Modernist TEFL is committed to the production of profit and measurement.* Too often, ideas, commodities and people themselves are evaluated in light of their relation to profits. The obsession with instrumental rationality and measurement defines the goals and outcomes of traditional TEFL education. When individuals engage in actions that are contrary to the interests of profit making, empiricism tends to reshape their behavior by labeling it as "soft" research. Finally, most TEFL study is committed to the preservation of bureaucratic structures, which are maintained by "scientifically proven" measurements. Empirical research serves as the force that pro-

cesses people in relation to the smooth functioning needs of bureaucracies. It is the bureaucratic need, not the human need, which takes precedence when a conflict arises. In a democratic context, critical teacher researchers decide what needs to be learned and discovered in their classes, how such experiences might contribute to sophisticated thinking necessary to democratic citizenship, how to help children learn it, how English can fit *into and* with a native tongue and culture, and how such learning might then be assessed. In a positivistic system we know that the quality of our teaching, our research, and student learning will be tested and measured even if it is never clearly specified what exactly constitutes the purpose of testing. Even if the tests serve to fragment, narrow, deflect, and trivialize the curriculum, we still must use them because accurate scientific measurement takes precedence over such curricular considerations. This positivistic obsession with measurement, exemplified by the high-stakes testing, and the discourse of top-down standards, forces us to assume for the sake of testing efficiency that there is a specific body of knowledge to be learned, and there are correct methods for teaching and learning it.

Positivist TESL instruction/research forces us to unquestioningly accept the validity of the specific body of knowledge to be learned and that such truth belongs in our classrooms. Teachers and educational researchers need not trouble themselves with inquiry about the constituent interests of this knowledge. Educational researchers need only concern themselves with empirical investigations of how best to teach this information. If we manipulate this variable in this specific way, do students acquire more or less of the knowledge? Thus, many would argue, educational issues in this positivistic framework are reduced to technical issues. Questions of ends or purposes are subservient to questions of means or techniques. Critical theorists have labeled this tendency "instrumental rationality." Advocates of critical qualitative approaches to educational research argue that the purpose of educational activity must always be an integral aspect of the research process (Kincheloe and Berry 2004).

Much of TEFL research and teaching searches for results driven by the desire to make large profits through courses, claiming to the students that they will learn English and make large profits through global interaction. This becomes a force of domination not because of its intrinsic truthfulness,

but because of the social authority (power) that it brings with it. Expressions such as "researchers contend," "research has proven" and "the test results tell us" signify a power difficult to counter. Critical observers are quick to warn their audiences not to perceive this concept too simplistically. The way in which positivist TEFL research exerts its power is often subtle and rarely takes place without eliciting resistance. Many of the instructors do not have graduate work in the TEFL field, often teaching with a quickly acquired certificate, or assigned courses at the last minute. The field itself, suffers from low esteem, as it is not considered scholarly, nor even pedagogical in nature. The shape and nature of TEFL administration and course design should be analyzed by informed researchers who refuse to allow grand ideological pronouncements to substitute for specific inquiry.

An example is the way in which an unexamined scientism subverts our attempts at democracy. With the increase of environmental hazards resulting from scientific "progress," citizens sometimes seek to legitimate a "totalitarianism of hazard prevention" (Beck 1992, p. 80). In the attempt to prevent something bad (environmental side effects), something worse (suspension of democratic principles) is produced. In this context, the population is divided along a new set of axes—expert versus non-expert, or those who possess the language and methodology of modernist scientific research versus those who don't. The mass of non-experts, the experts maintain, must be provided with technical details that will condition them to respect the magic of the scientific elite. The cultivation of such respect is tantamount to a pacification program designed to quell public protest, criticism or resistance (i.e., to disempower and depoliticise). Use of media has been employed to create populist narratives geared to "simplifying" this scientific research. We saw the global warming debate reduced to Al Gore's sophisticated PowerPoint documentary, and naturally, a backlash politically funded and fought on partisan grounds, which continues years later.

Such an example of anti-democratic scientism highlights the empowerment impulse in critical research. Inquiry that aspires to critical status is connected to the larger effort to confront various kinds of anti-democratic impulses, especially those embedded in the discourse of science. Such research thus becomes a transformative effort unembarrassed by the label "political" and unafraid to consummate a relationship with an emancipatory conscious-

ness. Emancipatory consciousness involves the attempt to free oneself from the tacit controls of racial, class-based and gendered discourses and lived practices. Horkheimer (1972) succinctly argued that critical research has never been satisfied with merely increasing the knowledge base. Therefore, a critical rendition of TEFL research attempts not simply to understand the dynamics of English language teaching and pedagogy, but the interesting ways in which they intersect. Also, TEFL education research attempts to change English language teaching and pedagogy by moving them into the emancipatory domain. Critical TEFL researchers use their work to empower English language educators to construct their practice along well-analyzed moral, ethical and political principles.

English language teachers who enter schools with such understandings and research abilities are prepared to make a cognitive leap. Indeed, the stage has been set to move to postformal thinking (Kincheloe 1995). As critical researchers with a vision of "what could be" and a mechanism for uncovering "what is," these teachers see the sociopolitical contradictions of both language teaching and schools in a concrete manner. Such recognitions encourage reflection as they induce teachers to understand how these sociopolitical distortions tacitly have worked to shape their worldviews and self-perceptions. With a deeper understanding of such processes, practitioners recognize the ways in which power operates to create oppressive conditions for some groups and privilege for others. Thus, critical research opens new ways of knowing that transcend formal analysis (Steinberg 2006; Kincheloe and Berry 2004; Horn 2000).

Critical Pedagogical Research in TEFL

Critical social research (in the critical pedagogical/theoretical sense) can be labeled as "hyperreal"—this implies researching an information society which is socially saturated with ever-increasing forms of representation (e.g., filmic, photographic and electronic) all of which have had a profound effect on constructing the cultural narratives that shape our identities. The drama of living has been portrayed so often on television that individuals are increasingly able to predict the outcomes to be the "natural" and "normal" course of social life (Gergen 1991). As many critical cultural studies ana-

lysts have put it, we become pastiches or imitative conglomerations of one another. Our emotional bonds are diffused as social media assaults us with representations that have shaped our cognitive and affective facilities in ways that still remain insufficiently understood. The need for immediate communication gratification has plunged the linked in, connected, wired masses in such a way that education is usurped by non-theoretical, non-professional commentary, and a viral curriculum becomes the dominant discourse (Steinberg 2009). An example of a postmodern media event was clear in the 2014 Ebola culture of fear created by tweets, Facebook and mainstream news stations creating feeds based on those viral announcements of the spread of epidemic. News became saturated with news about news, news from social network sites, and as afterthoughts, doctors and researchers were brought in to discuss the possible epidemic. And, back to production of capital and profit, the "experts" employed also presented agenda-ridden commentaries, depending on their political, ideological stances, or on which pharmaceutical company's press releases and research were being used.

It is misleading merely to identify postmodernism (the philosophical critique) and critical research bricolage with poststructuralism. Poststructuralism has attacked the premises and assumptions of structuralism and its attempt to create a scientific basis for the study of culture. Grounded on a firm belief in certainty and objectivity, structuralists posited that an unchanging and fixed human nature existed and could be described accurately by scientific methods. For example, intelligence was fixed and could be precisely measured by IQ tests. Poststructuralists have denied the existence of scientific certainty, arguing that human identity and consciousness are historically produced. Therefore, identity and consciousness take on different forms in different eras (Best and Kellner 1991). In this context, there are many similarities between postmodernism, postructuralism, and critical bricolage but they differ as to their referents. Postmodernism (the critique) is an umbrella category pertaining to a range of philosophical positions that critique the modernist thought produced in Western societies during and after the Enlightenment. Poststructuralism is an academic discourse that subverts particular scientific practices that assumed an unproblematic representation of the nature of reality. Poststructuralism is a critical postmodernist discourse, but not all critical or postmodern expressions are poststructuralist. Critical

bricolage can simplistically appear as a mixed-research methodology. While, indeed, different "methodologies" are employed, bricolage cloaks itself within a critical theoretical commitment to social justice and a critical pedagogical underpinning combining theory, discourse, identity, and the political.

The critical research bricolage I am proposing is not only based on critique. The synergism of the conversation between the research bricolage and critical theory involves an interplay between the praxis of the critical and the radical uncertainty of what is often referred to as the postmodern. As it invokes its emancipatory strategies for the emancipation of meaning, critical theoretical bricolage provides the postmodern critique with a normative foundation (i.e., a basis for distinguishing between oppressive and liberatory social relations). Without such a foundation, the postmodern critique is vulnerable to nihilism and inaction. Indeed, normatively ungrounded postmodern critique is incapable of providing an ethically challenging and politically transformative program of action. I argue that, if the critical pedagogical (postmodern) critique is to make a valuable contribution to the notion of schooling as an emancipatory form of cultural politics, it must make connections to those egalitarian impulses of modernism that contribute to an emancipatory democracy. In doing this, the project of an emancipatory democracy and the schooling that supports it can be extended by new understandings of how power operates and by incorporating groups who had been excluded by their race, gender, sexuality, abledness, religion, or class (Kincheloe and Steinberg 2008).

Critical research has never been reluctant to point out the limitations of empirical research, calling attention to the inability of traditional models of inquiry to escape the boundaries of a narrative realism. However, the research bricolage *does not* exclude empirical work, indeed, certain data can only serve to further the thickening of the tentative interpretation by the researcher. Certainly, in TEFL research and teaching, there is a place for quantitative data. The rigorous methodological approaches of empirical inquiry often preclude larger interpretations of the forces that shape both the researcher and the researched. Empirical observation cannot supplant theoretical analysis and critical reflection. The project of critical research is not simply the empirical representation of the world but the transgressive task of posing research itself as a set of ideological practices. Empirical analysis

needs to be interrogated in order to uncover the contradictions and negations embodied in any objective description. Critical researchers maintain that the meaning of an experience or an observation is not self-evident. The meaning of any experience depends on the struggle over the interpretation and definition of that experience (Weiler 1988).

The ways in which we analyze and interpret empirical data are conditioned by the theoretically frames used and dependent on the researcher's own ideological assumptions. The empirical data derived from any study cannot be treated as simple irrefutable facts. The employment of instrumentally rational positivist readings of data does not serve to present any type of truth except the "truth" which is predetermined by the researcher (due to the choice of methodology and positivist reading). They represent hidden assumptions, which the critical researcher must dig out and expose. As Einstein and Heisenberg pointed out long ago, what we see is not what we see but what we perceive (Kincheloe, Steinberg and Tippins 1999). The knowledge that the world yields has to be interpreted by men and women who are a part of that world. What we call information always involves an act of human judgment. From a critical perspective, this act of judgment or interpretation is a theoretical act (Kincheloe 1991). Critical analysts contend that theory involves understanding the relationship between the particular and the whole and between the subject and the object of analysis. Such a position contradicts the traditional empiricist contention that theory is basically a matter of classifying objective data.

Cultural Studies in Critical TEFL Teaching and Research

Over the last three decades, cultural studies' popularity has increased in universities throughout the world. As an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and sometimes counter-disciplinary field, cultural studies functions within the dynamics of competing definitions of culture. Rather than equating culture with high culture, cultural studies asserts that myriad expressions of cultural production should be analyzed in relation to other cultural dynamics and social and historical structures. Attempting to connect critical theory with the particularity of everyday experience, students of cultural studies argue that all experience is vulnerable to ideological inscription. At the same time,