



**BECOMING A CRITICAL LANGUAGE TEACHER:
a reflexive journey**

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ABSTRACT

Based on prior collaboration with Brazilian colleagues, the author reflects on his understanding of the scope and substance of critical work in English Language Teaching (ELT). Towards this goal, he examines and debates the terminological distinction between critical pedagogies (i.e. emancipatory modernism, PENNYCOOK, 2001) and critical literacies (i.e. problematizing givens, cf. PENNYCOOK, 2001) as proposed by some Brazilian scholars (e.g. MENEZES DE SOUZA, 2011; JORDÃO, in press). Inspired by this debate, the author re-examines his own early development as a critical educator at the Sichuan Foreign Language Institute in Chongqing, Peoples' Republic of China. The article then discusses the challenges of applying Western-based critical theories in Chinese settings, followed by a specific lesson in critical ELT attempted by the author. The final section of the article explores the implications of this activity in respect to varied understandings of criticality in the service of language teaching.

Keywords: Critical pedagogies and literacies. English Language Teaching in China. Interculturality.

RESUMO

Com base num projeto colaborativo com colegas brasileiros, o autor reflete sobre sua compreensão do escopo e fundamento do trabalho crítico no Ensino de Língua Inglesa (ELT). Com esse objetivo, examina e debate a distinção terminológica entre pedagogias críticas (ex.: modernismo emancipatório, PENNYCOOK, 2001) e letramentos críticos (ex.: problematização de pressupostos, cf. PENNYCOOK, 2001) como sugerido por alguns teóricos brasileiros (ex.: MENEZES DE SOUZA 2011; JORDÃO, no prelo). Inspirado nesse debate, o autor analisa sua própria formação inicial como educador crítico no Instituto Sichuan de Língua Estrangeira em Chongqing, República Popular da China. O artigo discute os desafios da aplicação de teorias críticas do ocidente em ambientes chineses, sequenciado por uma aula específica em ELT crítico ministrado pelo autor. A parte final do artigo explora as implicações dessa aula em relação aos vários entendimentos de criticidade na prática de ensino de língua.

Palavras-chave: Pedagogias e letramentos críticos. Ensino de língua inglesa na China. Interculturalidade.

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1 INTRODUCTION

For the past five years, I have worked closely with many Brazilian colleagues through my participation in the Brazilian national project, *Novos Letramentos*, and through a project called Brazil-Canada Knowledge Exchange (BRCAKE), funded by the Social Science and Humanities Council of Canada. A key concept for these projects has been the notion of critical literacies in English Language Teaching (ELT), and how they might be invigorated through the kinds of transnational collaborative efforts that have characterized BRCAKE and *Novos Letramentos* meetings (e.g. MONTE MÓR; MENEZES DE SOUZA, 2009; TAVARES; BRYDON, 2012).

Having spent much of my professional life immersed in critical theories, literacies and pedagogies, I have found my discussions with like-minded Brazilian colleagues to be always enriching and sometimes challenging, requiring me to reconsider many of my most cherished assumptions regarding the relevance of critical work across diverse settings. Such reconsiderations underpin this article and relate to the core question of what it means to be critical: Is it defined by intentions, outcomes or contexts? To what extent is criticality programmatic, defined by generalizable principles, practices, or content through which issues of language and power are addressed in explicit ways? Or, is it more spontaneous in practice—a case of identifying critical moments in which new meanings can be juxtaposed in ways that raise awareness of inequalities and ideologies sustained through everyday language and texts (CHUN, 2015; PENNYCOOK, 2012).

How we define terms such as pedagogy and literacy is also a reconsideration of note. In conversations with several Brazilian colleagues, I have learned of a progressive distinction, in which critical pedagogy—as exemplified by Paulo Freire’s **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**—is seen as reflecting a somewhat outdated and overly deterministic program (cf. emancipatory modernism, PENNYCOOK, 2001) in which teachers engage in revealing the “truth” of the text and the “false consciousness” and reproduction of social inequalities it conveys. Counter-posed against this purportedly monolithic and outdated approach, is a contemporary notion of critical literacies, informed by post-structural and postcolonial thinking (cf. problematizing givens, PENNYCOOK, 2001) whereby the “inner world” of the subject-in-discourse (i.e. teacher, student, citizen) is of preeminent concern (e.g. MENEZES DE SOUZA, 2011; JORDÃO, in press). Inspired



by theorists such as Foucault, Mouffe, Lacan, Rancière, Mignolo, Sousa Santos, the intensively reflexive and introspective agenda of such a critical literacy program shifts its focus from the “truth of the text” to the socio-historical and epistemological conditions of its reception/production. In the spirit of post structuralism, the purpose of such a shift is to challenge the universal and objective claims made by Western scholarship in the service of a more ethical and equitable model of intercultural education (cf. MORGAN, 2007).

In this short article, I am not able to explore this terminological distinction (i.e. critical pedagogies versus critical literacies) in any detail other than to say that the distinction itself may be particular to and hence relevant for Brazil’s own socio-political and educational development. My own experience of these terms is that both critical literacies and critical pedagogies have longstanding histories in applied linguistics and ELT, encompassing both emancipatory modernist and post structural elements (see e.g. CROOKES, 2010; LUKE, 2013; MORGAN; RAMANATHAN, 2005; NORTON; MORGAN, 2013; PENNYCOOK, 2010). Indeed, both terms may be complementary and necessary for ELT; on its own, post structural (hyper) reflexivity, and the self-doubt it can inflict, may not be sufficient for classroom purposes, in which the presentation of exemplary lessons and materials are also required and may be necessary foundations for the development of critical language teachers.

To reiterate, it is not my purpose here to judge the validity of the pedagogy/literacy distinction above. What I want to reemphasize is that it is a provocative and productive debate, one that has generated useful reflection on my own professional development as a critical practitioner, starting with my first experiences of teaching English as an International Language in the Sichuan Foreign Language Institute in Chongqing, People’s Republic of China, during the 1987-88.

2 TOWARDS CRITICAL LITERACIES AND PEDAGOGIES IN CHINA: points of comparison/concern

As with many teachers, the first experiences can be the most memorable and formative in terms of developing a professional identity. In my own case, the cultural, ideological and pedagogical challenges of teaching in China motivated much of my own scholarly development while at graduate school at the Ontario Institute of Studies of Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto shortly after my return from China. It



was an exciting time for critical work at OISE with professors such as Roger Simon and Jim Cummins offering innovative courses in critical pedagogies, which attracted applied linguistics students such as Alastair Pennycook, Bonny Norton, Angle Lin, Ryuko Kubota, and Awad Ibrahim, all of whom have gone on to make important contributions to critical English Language Teaching. It was a highly stimulating environment for inquiry, and as I eagerly studied various works by Freire, Giroux, Shor, and Simon, I became more interested in their applicability in the Chinese setting that I had just experienced. I was also reading a lot about Chinese history, philosophy, and education at this time, which enhanced the comparative inquiry I was pursuing. One particular area of interest for me was the teaching of history from a critical perspective. In adult ESL citizenship programs, for example, the issue of how we engage with official curricula regarding nation-state identity is challenging, especially when we recognize that students in many settings are required to take citizenship tests that include history questions (e.g. FLEMING; MORGAN, 2010). To what extent should we challenge or problematize this material as well as the histories that minority students bring to the classroom?

Giroux's (1988) influential work on critical literacy is illustrative of potential tensions in applying Western critical theory for Chinese ESL/EFL students. Prior to the quotation below, he admonishes some critical educators for being too narrowly focused, both in providing literacy skills specific to economic success as well as focusing on enhancing the status of minority cultures in schools. As Giroux notes,

This particular approach to radical literacy is theoretically flawed for a number of reasons. First, it fails to view working-class culture as a terrain of struggle and contradiction. Second, it suggests that those educators working with subordinate groups need only to familiarize themselves with the histories and experiences of *their* students. There is no indication here that the culture that each student brings to the schools may be in dire need of critical interrogation and analysis. (GIROUX, 1988, p. 150-151, emphasis his).

Giroux's critique of the educator's engagement with “history” is mostly well directed. Many ESL classes still deal with history and tradition in superficial ways. In reality, the representation of history, particularly its singularity, has often been an act of social imposition reflecting the ideology of dominant groups with the intended assimilation of immigrant and minority communities. In critical pedagogy, different ways of engaging with the past—introducing contested **histories** (or **her stories**, from a



gendered perspective)—are essential for a radical project.

The Chinese experience suggests some interesting dilemmas for a unitary “radical” approach. First, let me give some interesting examples. China’s revolutionary leader, Mao Ze Dong, took the traditional fable about the “Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains” and used it for contemporary political purposes (MILTON; MILTON, 1976). The story is about an old man who, finding two mountains obstructing the front of his home, instructs his sons to remove them: “When I die my sons will carry on, when they die there will be my grandsons, and then their sons and grandsons,” and so on. “God was moved by this and sent down two angels who carried the mountains away on their backs.” Mao wrote, “We must persevere and work unceasingly and we, too, will touch God's heart. Our god is none other than the masses of the Chinese people” (MILTON; MILTON, 1976, p. 378-379). While teaching in China, I heard many variations on this parable. In one form, the angels were Mao and Zhou En Lai; in another, Mao was god. This surprised me for I couldn’t understand how such a common text could have so many variations.

Another example is the widely read and circulated story of Comrade Lei Feng who was killed by a falling pole. His life story was official exemplification of the sacrifice to be emulated by all citizenry. During my stay in China, which was at the height of economic liberalization by Deng Xiao Ping, an article appeared in the People’s Daily, which suggested that Lei Feng had, in his time, cherished personal possessions and made a profit in his endeavors. Once again, my surprise was at how a common historical text could be so brazenly transformed and received with anything but derision and skepticism.

Erbaugh (1990) raises two relevant points. First, she notes that biographies in China, as in the case of Lei Feng, are written as moral models and are often partly fictitious. If the moral and ideological requirements of the community change, then “history” is culturally permitted to conform to a new moral imperative. To this end, another important point she raises is the Chinese valuation of the end product over the process of getting there. A **pragmatics** of history, where the authority of meaning is vested in the contingency of specific use rather than in its formal representation, would help explain Mao’s reliance upon traditional proverbs, set phrases and calligraphy to motivate social transformation (MATALENE, 1985). This practice, as well, would seem to challenge the assumption that rote learning canonical “Great Books”—a practice that most of my students in China valued—is an obstacle to social



transformation. The irony here is that for many Chinese students the multivocality and mutability of meanings, in history or in texts, may be symbolic of long established forms of authority rather than new strategies for change. Accordingly, a critical project might have to incorporate a degree of latitude in which gaining familiarity with our students' histories, in some situations, might be sufficiently ambitious rather than a "liberal" compromise. In the next section of this article, I revisit a specific lesson I taught in China, in which the textual treatment of history is implicated in the critical L2 literacy strategies I (awkwardly) utilized.

3 EXPLORING 'TAIWAN JOURNALIST' IN MY EAP COURSE

My posting in the Sichuan Foreign Language Institute during the academic year '87-'88, was in the preparatory department, which provided intensive English for Specific/Academic Purposes instruction for students selected to study abroad. Reflecting the specific concerns of my department, I became interested in examining the problems students might have in negotiating an unfamiliar academic culture of knowledge in Western universities. In preparing my course, the writings of Marilou Covey were extremely useful. During her research, Covey had noted that, over two years, between 60% and 70% of those who had failed the English Proficiency Test (EPT) at University of Toronto were Chinese (1983, p. 50). Covey's analysis of the EPT results revealed that University of Toronto teachers had negatively judged Chinese students by certain pedagogic conventions that were often not shared nor deemed legitimate by visiting Chinese students. Some of the professors' comments cited by Covey include, "They have a tendency to overgeneralize." "They seem to not like to be specific." Other teachers noted an absence of formal discourse styles recognized as essential in Western academe: "University students need to be outspoken and forceful." "In this society they have to be critical or they'll be discarded" (COVEY, 1984).

These teachers perceived that they were judging Chinese students' compositions by universal standards of form, cohesion and unity. In fact, they were judging students on their ability to **think** in the culture of the language they were using. Following L2 writing research in the area of contrastive rhetoric studies (cf. KAPLAN, in CASANAVE, 2004), Covey argued that students who were able to recognize different cultural conventions between English and Chinese textual organization wrote better essays than those who felt there were no differences between them (COVEY, 1984, p.



2). Covey's research motivated me to search out concrete examples of compositions that could be used to demonstrate the kinds of contrastive insights she recommended. One day a small article in the China Daily newspaper caught my interest for possible application in my class. It was titled **Taiwan Journalist** and was published on Friday, Oct. 30, 1987:

Pi Jiexing, a Taiwan journalist covering the 13th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in Beijing received a telegram on Wednesday from a childhood friend of his father in Hangzhou.

The friend, Yu Baocheng, invited Pi to go to Hangzhou. Pi said that when his father was ill with cancer, he asked Yu and his relatives on the mainland to send some medicine. Unfortunately, there was no mail link between Taiwan and the mainland and the medicine had to go to Taiwan through other channels. By the time it arrived, the father had died.

When I first read the article, there were aspects of it that confused me. In terms of surface structure, "time" seemed ambiguous. Time sequences of receiving a telegram, contents of the telegram, and relationships between sender and receiver were not clear to me. I expected the use of the past perfect tense and some clauses using time adverbials to clarify these contexts. Also, the use of the past tense in: "Unfortunately there *was* no mail link" might mean that mail links have since been established.

In the first paragraph, word order in: "a childhood friend of his father in Hangzhou," was problematic for me. Was the father in Hangzhou—"in Hangzhou" thus an elliptical relative clause—or was the friend in Hangzhou. Perhaps the word order for the generative case could have been "his father's childhood friend in Hangzhou" since the latter is more clearly inferred as the second paragraph unfolds.

The unity and cohesion of the piece were also slightly confusing for me. The first sentence of the second paragraph seemed to focus on Yu Baocheng, the friend, and his invitation to Pi to visit Hangzhou. However, this is not developed as the unifying theme for the paragraph as other ideas such as the father's request for medicine, his illness, lack of a mail link, and the eventual circumstances surrounding the father's death, are present in the paragraph. Overall, I thought the piece needed a strong topic sentence to focus and direct the reader. For example: "The absence of mail links between Taiwan and the mainland have caused many tragedies."

In my opinion, the article seemed to create an interpretive framework that was highly questionable in reality. The relationships between mail link, medicine and father's death are an interesting example. "By the time it arrived, the father had died"



suggested that the medicine could have saved or prolonged his life. Considering the nature of the illness, the reader might want to know more about the curative aspects of this medicine exclusive to Mainland China. Since the father requested the medicine during a period of grave illness, I ascertained that the quality of health care for the Taiwanese is not adequate compared to the mainland.

Another interesting point is the nature of mail service in China. In my opinion, the article implied that without mail links, service between Taiwan and the mainland was inefficient. From this, an easily made assumption is that the existence of mail links would make mail service more efficient. In reality, all mail to Taiwan is processed through Hong Kong in an expeditious manner. However, its arrival in Hong Kong from various points within China was frequently unpredictable during 1987-88, often taking weeks with the possibility of loss. The question as to whether direct links would speed up the process is rather difficult to determine.

In terms of writing strategies that I was familiar with, the article seemed to lack cohesion and led to more questions than answers. I believed that these formal “weaknesses” indicated that, for the author, pragmatic concerns far outweighed attention to structure. In this sense, the internal coherence of the text was less essential than the officially article sanctioned meanings it was intended to reinforce. For me, the **Taiwan Journalist** article seemed to be an excellent model to address a variety of compositional problems my students might later encounter in a North American university. As well, I was intrigued by the possibility of using **Taiwan Journalist** to raise my students’ critical awareness of their own sources of meaning making. Strategy for this latter activity was already being formulated in my intended lesson plans. By emphasizing the structural weaknesses of the text, I hoped to show my students that the readings they produced hadn’t actually been encoded in script. The only subsequent explanations for this discrepancy would be intertextual and ideological—the ability of the Communist Party to impose, through schooling and media, a preferred “common sense” understanding of the article.

When I presented the article to my students, I told them that four of their foreign teachers, so-called native English speakers, were confused about the content. This was quite a provocative statement since China Daily is the premiere English language newspaper published in China. Referring to the importance of **audience**, I told my students that if China Daily wanted to inform the world about life in China, it failed to do so in this article. I then proceeded to discuss all the points I found problematic. To



my pleasant surprise, the animated level of discussion was unprecedented and reflected many different points of view. As a class assignment, I simply asked the students to write about their impressions of the article. Here are some of their examples:

1) This is a 'piece of news item'. So, what is important for a reporter is to give readers a clear idea about what has happened regarding characters, places and dates related. Generally speaking, any readers, if not lacking some common sense related to the news, will not get confused. However, because of difference in cultural background and knowledge of China some readers, especially foreigners, may be puzzled. I think this is not important. They can consult other information or have a discussion with friends until they are not confused about the facts. In my opinion this article has touched the importance of the mail link between both sides of the Taiwan strait and tells people that separation of a country will cause pain and inconvenience among its compatriots. The story about Mr. Pi is just a vivid example. The author has attained his goal.

2) If some foreigners got a little confused about the story, the reason for this, I think, is their lack of basic knowledge about the affairs of China. For example most Westerners don't know the history and present status of China, especially the relationship between the Communist Party and the Guomindang. Furthermore, some foreigners don't respect the feelings of China's people about the Taiwan problem.

3) After reading the article, "Taiwan Journalist" in China Daily, I am confused and can't understand what the author really wants to say. I think this is not a good article, whether in the structure of the article or in the grammar.

When I finished the reading I couldn't catch the main idea of the article. In the article, there is no topic sentence. At first, the author was talking about Pi Jiexing. Then, the author turns to other topics.

Also, the author didn't express clearly what he wanted to say. It seems to me that the author wants the readers to guess. So, the article is just like a maze.

Furthermore, some sentences in the article were organized badly. For example, "There was no mail link...". The word "was" is not right here. Similarly, when the author talked about his father, the author didn't tell us when or where.

In short, the author couldn't tell the readers what he really wanted to say. He completed his article roughly and irresponsibly.

4 REFLECTIONS ON 'TAIWAN JOURNALIST'

The diversity of opinions expressed in my students' compositions revealed considerable individualism, creativity, as well as opposition. Indeed, in the activity above, several students responded with irritation and anger at the suggestion that they were unaware of the "real" (i.e. ideological) meanings in **Taiwan Journalist**. They knew what the story "meant." If I didn't, it reflected my "lack of knowledge." Equally important, they may have been suggesting that what I was lacking was not so much a particular "higher-order" (i.e. ideological or political) awareness, but more of a lack of "conventional" (i.e. cultural) literacy skills as they themselves experienced them. That



is, in respect to **Taiwan Journalist**, what I perceived to be specific weaknesses and inaccuracies in the article turned out to be stylistically consistent with several authors' discussions of Chinese textual conventions (e.g. COVEY, 1983; MATALENE, 1985). In fact, Matalene offers a description of China Daily articles with an uncanny similarity to **Taiwan Journalist**:

China Daily offered assertions rather than proofs and offered them according to a standard pattern: an opening description of a specific incident, a look back on the usually unfortunate history of the issue at practice, an explanation of the current much improved state of affairs and a concluding moral exhortation. (MATALENE, 1985, p. 800).

In sum, my strategy to reveal the political “indoctrination” of my students was premised on a rather shaky foundation: by revealing the “clumsiness” by which text-internal “errors” structured the article, I expected students to subsequently question and interrogate the text-external sources of their own meaning-making, ultimately becoming aware of how they are subjects of discourses. As two of the student examples (Nos. 1, 2) above clearly indicate, my strategy was not effective or appreciated: the provocative/disruptive potential of “errors” that I foregrounded failed to engage students, in part, because they were not errors or deviations from “convention” Chinese textual practices, as Matalene’s quote suggests. In ways, similar to the discussion of the mutability of Chinese history (i.e. the story of Comrade Lei Fung), there were clear gaps in my own critical awareness of how culture and politics are aligned or synthesized in Chinese writing, even when the medium of expression is English. At the same time, how should we understand composition #3, which might signify that my critical intervention had, for this student, partially achieved its goal? This may be true, but it may also reveal a student’s eagerness to show respect and deference to the teacher, especially one who has travelled from across the world and has much to learn about the local setting.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Becoming a skilled and inspiring language teacher is a lifelong journey of learning new things and reconsidering old ones. Arguably, the journey is made more difficult, yet potentially more rewarding when one’s ambitions and self-understanding include a transformative potential. This short article retraces some of my early steps



along the way towards my own development as a critical practitioner in ELT. My current development has been closely intertwined with my collaborative work in Brazil, where debates over critical pedagogy versus critical literacy (e.g. JORDÃO, in press; MENEZES DE SOUZA, 2011) have stimulated reflection on the **Taiwan Journalist** lesson from many years ago. I see both terms as usefully informing my approach in this article: the latter as evidenced by the deeply reflexive questioning of my practice, and the former in my attempts to relate pedagogy to real events and issues beyond the classroom.

In a recent chapter titled, “Regrounding Critical Literacy,” Luke (2013) reminds us that all critical literacies and pedagogies involve normative claims and demands. Whether our approach is “emancipatory modernist” in orientation, or instead, one that “problematizes givens” (PENNYCOOK, 2001), Luke (2013) urges us to always look beyond the discursive mediations we perceive and deploy; critical literacies on their own cannot bring about change unless they include a commitment to exploring material facts that precede and/or exceed their codification in texts: “Unpacking the relationship between discourse representation and reality remains **the** core question of critical literacy as theory and practice” (LUKE, 2013, p. 146). It is in the light of this core question that the literacy/pedagogy debate may be most productively continued.

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