



From Critical to Disabled Pedagogy By Luke Prodromou

I am not sure whether the title of this article should refer to 'Disabled pedagogy' or 'Enabled pedagogy'. Either way, the name is designed to echo the well-established 'Critical Pedagogy', so let me begin with that and come back to the question of names at the end of the article.

Critical pedagogy, of which disabled pedagogy is, in my view, one manifestation, is an approach to education which aims to raise awareness of social and political issues and to enable learners to take action in pursuit of a better world.

Both the awareness and the action seem to me to be essential components of critical pedagogy and this clearly chimes with the philosophy and aims of the Thessaloniki-based Disabled Access Friendly campaign:

Philosophy of the campaign

To encourage language teaching that raises awareness of the needs of the disabled.

Aims of the campaign

To encourage improvements in accessibility.

Critical pedagogy does not see teachers as mere technicians, connecting learners to language systems and fixing errors in the system when things break down, as plumbers and electricians do.

'Critical' teaching is principled - it has a coherent view of society and the role of power in shaping relationships in society. The critical language educator connects knowledge of grammar and vocabulary to knowledge of social problems and how to act to solve these problems.

Critical pedagogy is thus the extreme opposite of the 'empty vessels' view of education, where the learner is seen as passive and totally dependent on the teacher.

In Critical Pedagogy, learners are active agents in the classroom and, by extension, in society. In conventional, mainstream pedagogy, students are exposed to the rules of English

(form, meaning and use) and then are tested on them. This is, in a nutshell, the methodology prevalent in most countries and teaching contexts today.

In recent years, the new wave in language education has been the attempt to integrate content and language, language and content (CLIL).

This has meant the extension of topics considered legitimate to include in course materials school subjects such as history, geography, art and so on.

This is a step in the right direction in terms of opening up the possibility of including the world outside in the bland, sanitized world of ELT.



A monument about Paulo Freire in front of the Brazilian ministry of education

So where was critical pedagogy in all this? In education, in general in the UK and the USA, there were some practitioners of critical thinking and teaching but very few in ELT.

Critical Pedagogy is influenced by the work of the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, the father of 'consciousness raising' and 'praxis' in education: 'praxis' in everyday English might be glossed as: 'action-leading-to-a more-just society'. (1).

Freire begins with the learners' words and their world and encourages them to think critically about their world and how to transform it.

A crucial aspect of Freire's approach which ties in neatly with the aims of the Disabled-Access Friendly Campaign, is the connection the educator strives to establish between the individual and society, 'me' and the group, and to reflect on problems in their social and/or political context.

Reflection does not stop with the self or gazing at our navel; it empowers the learner to act collectively, to bring about change.

In its later manifestations, the work of Freire has inspired teachers wishing to harness education in the cause of a more just world for minorities: ethnic, cultural, social.

The youtube video clip 'Disabled Greeks face daily challenges getting around' (2) informs us that people with disabilities are the 'biggest minority in the world'.

A Freirian critical pedagogy might be a useful framework for developing a coherent approach to Disabled Access Friendly materials.

In ELT, for me, Freire has meant moving from the practice of language to the practice of freedom, from the present perfect to a 'future more perfect' or, at least, less imperfect.

The Disabled Access Friendly campaign is a natural practical application of the principles of Freire's 'liberation pedagogy'.

There are simple ways in which teachers can move along the pedagogic scale towards a more critical practice.

Let me give an example. Imagine we are teaching an exam class at B2 level and students are going through transformation-type sentences, like the following:

1. *Although he overslept, Clive wasn't late for work.*

SPITE

In _____, Clive wasn't late for work.

2. *Harry couldn't get his parents' permission to buy a motorbike.*

REFUSED

Harry's parents _____ permission to buy a motorbike.

3. *My grandfather was sixty when he learnt to swim.*

UNTIL

My grandfather _____ he was sixty.

4. *Sheila had to finish the accounts and write several letters as well.*

FINISHING

In _____ the accounts, Sheila had to write several letters.

5. *Sally decided not to do her homework and*

INSTEAD

Sally went to a nightclub _____ her homework.

6. *Liza's grandfather is teaching her Chinese.*

TAUGHT

Liza _____ Chinese by her grandfather.

In the normal run of things, learners might be asked to show their knowledge of lexicogrammatical patterns by completing these and similar sentences correctly. This is useful on the level of language form and, to a limited extent, meaning.

The exercise is a testing rather than teaching device and does little to help the student use the forms and nothing at all to raise awareness of the real world of which these forms are a pale reflection.

And even as non-critical language teachers, we would be interested in how these forms and meanings might be put to use.

However, we can move closer towards the critical end of the pedagogic spectrum by simply modifying the rubric a bit. First, we could go through the task as it is in the teXtbook or teStbook (as my punctuation suggests the difference between the two is not always very significant).



So once students have the correct answers and the requirements of exam practice, strictly defined, have been met, we can move on to a more challenging use of the same material.

First of all, we can focus on the content of these sentences as, behind the innocent forms, there are the shadows of people doing things in the real world.

We can ask: how many males/females are mentioned? What are the males doing? What are the females doing? Do you know anybody like 'Clive' 'Harry' or 'Sheila'?

The next variation on the original task, which I call 'Gender Bending', involves the learners in changing the sex of the subjects in the sentences. The rubric would be:

'Now rewrite the transformation sentences, changing the gender of the pronouns from 'he' to 'she', 'she' to 'he' and replace the masculine names for feminine and vice versa. Make any other changes necessary. For example:

Although she overslept, Katie wasn't late for work.

SPITE

In _____, Katie wasn't late for work.

2. Harriet couldn't get her parents' permission to buy a motorbike.

REFUSED

Harriet's parents _____ permission to buy a motorbike.

3. My grandmother was sixty when she learnt to swim.

UNTIL

My grandmother _____ she was sixty.

4. Sean had to finish the accounts and write several letters as well.

FINISHING

In _____ the accounts, Sean had to write several letters.

5. Sean decided not to do his homework and went to a nightclub instead.

INSTEAD

Sean went to a nightclub _____ his homework.

6. Larry's grandmother is teaching him Chinese.

TAUGHT

Larry _____ Chinese by his grandmother.

Next, we ask: are all the sentences still correct - are they possible? Which ones sound strange? Why? What do we learn about the roles of men and woman in society from these sentences? What do men typically do? What do women typically do?

For homework, I get students to complete the 'test' again using the newly 'gendered' sentences. This is both good revision and, potentially, thought-provoking in terms of content. It also empowers our hapless learners-cum-exam candidates and makes them more active in the teaching-testing cycle.

The next, freer stage is for students to write their own original examples, using the same lexico-grammatical framework. Their examples should place men and woman in un-stereotypical roles which will generate discussion about roles in society.

A further awareness-raising task is to ask students to write a story to include, verbatim, one or more of these transformation sentences and the 'people' they refer to. This aims to take the shadows of people - Clive, Sheila et al - and to give them life: to make the shadows into flesh and blood.

A student might, for example, choose to make her/his grandmother a Chinese speaker who teaches 'Larry', her grandson, Chinese. This particular sentence could be the starting point for raising awareness of not only sexism but ageism, too.

In the past, when I did this with my FCE classes, it never occurred to me that there were disabled people in the community for whom these innocent-looking sentences would be reminders of the things they could not do in the normal routine of life in a disabled-unfriendly city like Athens or Thessaloniki.

Now, after eighteen months of being involved in the Disabled-Access Friendly campaign, I see new, unexpected possibilities in transforming formal exercises like these.

I would now ask my learners to look at the sentences and their 'actors' from the point of view of, say, a person in a wheelchair: how many of the situations could apply to a disabled person?

The interesting cases would be the ambiguous ones; for example, 'buying a motorbike' 'learning to swim' 'going to a nightclub'.

I am not sure how aware students are of the capability of disability; for example, would they question whether a disabled person gets up early to go to work? Do disabled people work as accountants? Do they go to nightclubs?

A final discussion point might include one of the following:

- * make a list of jobs wheelchair users can/can't do, in your opinion.
- * search on the internet to check your opinions.
- * look around the city on your way home; could a wheelchair user accompany you on the same route - why, why not?
- * suggest ways in which the city could become 'friendlier' for wheelchair users.
- * make a list of the things you could not do if you suddenly became a wheelchair user for some or all of the time.

This brief exercise in materials adaptation gave me the opportunity to reflect on my own teaching practice in order to make it include modest elements of critical thinking about social issues.

There are many possibilities, much richer and more thought-provoking than this small example snatched from unpromising exam material.

The Disabled Access Friendly website will provide a wide range of downloadable material at all levels for integrating language and content relevant to mobility-disability.

In this article I have reflected on my assumptions about teaching over the years and the way I approached classes in the light of my long-standing interest in Critical Pedagogy and my newly-discovered interest in applying its principles to Disabled Pedagogy.

We have a long way to go, but I see now what for most of my forty years of teaching was invisible to me: that our community has a largely forgotten minority of wheelchair users and that my assumption that they are 'disabled' hides the fact that they are actually very able and can be enabled further if we are aware of their needs and act to facilitate those needs.

I now see more clearly that the history of ELT methodology has put out of bounds a whole range of important topics that concern the way we live.

In making so many social issues 'taboo', mainstream methodology has 'disabled' teachers: we have been denied access to whole stretches of interesting content that would make language teaching a true branch of education rather than a kind of technical skill, in the same category as plumbing.

We could be language educators but we are language 'fixers'. Through awareness raising tasks that integrate language and content the negative associations of the prefix 'dis-' in disabled and disability can be transformed into a positive -into 'enabled' and 'capability'.

(1) Freire, Paolo. 1997 (2nd edition). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin.

(2) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h5UErykzKmY&feature=player_embedded

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