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# The Routledge Handbook of Teaching English to Young Learners

Edited by Sue Garton and Fiona Copland

# The Routledge Handbook of Teaching English to Young Learners

*The Routledge Handbook of Teaching English to Young Learners* celebrates the ‘coming of age’ for the field of research in primary-level English Language Teaching. With 32 chapters written by international scholars from a wide geographical area including East Africa, Mexico, the South Pacific, Japan, France, the USA and the UK, this volume draws on areas such as second language acquisition, discourse analysis, pedagogy and technology to provide:

- An overview of the current state of the field, identifying key areas of TEYL.
- Chapters on a broad range of subjects from methodology to teaching in difficult circumstances and from Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) to gaming.
- Suggestions of ways forward, with the aim of shaping the future research agenda of TEYL in multiple international contexts.
- Background research and practical advice for students, teachers and researchers.

With extensive guidance on further reading throughout, *The Routledge Handbook of Teaching English to Young Learners* is essential reading for those studying and researching in this area.

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# The Routledge Handbook of Teaching English to Young Learners

*Edited by Sue Garton and Fiona Copland*

First published 2019  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Garton, Sue, 1961– editor. | Copland, Fiona, 1962– editor.

Title: The Routledge handbook of teaching English to young learners / edited by Sue Garton and Fiona Copland.

Description: Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2018. |

Series: Routledge handbooks in applied linguistics | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018008566 | ISBN 9781138643772 (hardback) |

ISBN 9781315623672 (e-book)

Subjects: LCSH: English language—Study and teaching (Primary)—Foreign speakers. |

English language—Study and teaching (Elementary)—Foreign speakers.

Classification: LCC PE1128.A2 R69 2018 | DDC 372.652/1—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018008566>

ISBN: 978-1-138-64377-2 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-62367-2 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman  
by Apex CoVantage, LLC



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# Critical pedagogy and teaching English to children

*Mario E. López-Gopar*

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## Introduction

Children from across the globe have been ‘adding’ English to their linguistic repertoire. In different parts of the world, English language teaching (ELT) differs tremendously in terms of historical, socioeconomic and political dimensions (Mohanty 2006; López Gopar 2016; Pennycook 2016). This addition of English, whether or not imposed by the educational system, to children’s linguistic repertoire (López-Gopar, Núñez Méndez, Montes Medina and Cantera Martínez 2009) is by no means ‘neutral’, ‘apolitical’ or ‘ahistorical’ but rather inherently connected to discriminatory practices, social inequality, hegemonic power and identity negotiation in the aforementioned contexts (Chun 2015; López-Gopar 2014; Motha 2014). In order to address these issues and thereby resist the imperialistic nature of the English language (Canagarajah 1999), especially in the face of English being taught subtractively and resulting in social class division (López-Gopar and Sughrua 2014; Mohanty 2006; Ricento 2012), teacher educators, researchers and classroom teachers have found in critical pedagogy a theoretical starting point to critically analyse the effects of ELT around the globe. Grounding their teaching ‘praxis’ or otherwise ‘reflection plus action’ (Freire 1970) in the local contexts and physical realities of their students, many teachers resist the effects of the ELT industry and negotiate their and their students’ identities within the search for social justice (Canagarajah 1999; Cummins 2001).

Critical pedagogy emerged from the work of several authors in Europe, North America, and South America (Kirylo 2013). Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator, is widely considered the father of critical pedagogy. ‘Freire’s legacy is unprecedented for an educator: None other has influenced practice in such a wide array of contexts and cultures, or helped to enable so many of the world’s disempowered turn education toward their own dreams’ (Glass 2001, 15). Freire believed that every single person could teach us something, including students to teachers. Showing the world how much he had learned from the Brazilian peasants was Freire’s greatest teaching.

Defining critical pedagogy remains a challenge and is open to contestation. According to Porfilio and Ford (2015), ‘The question, “What is critical pedagogy?” is one that will elicit various and probably irreconcilable answers’ (xv, quotations in original). Following

from Freire (1970) who held critical pedagogy as a non-prescriptive method, educators have appropriated and reinvented critical pedagogy according to their own contexts as well as the lived experiences of their students. Hence, Porfilio and Ford (2015) from general education studies as well as Norton and Toohey (2004) from language education refer to critical *pedagogies* (in the plural) so as to acknowledge the multiple approaches and practices of educators and their students who are concerned with how to work against discriminatory practices and alleviate human suffering through pedagogy. Critical pedagogies are ‘concerned with the ways that schools and the educational process sustain and reproduce systems and relations of oppression, [and how education] can also potentially be a site for the disruption of oppression’ (Porfilio and Ford 2015, p. xvi). Critical pedagogies thus become ‘an empowering way of thinking and acting, fostering decisive agency that does not take a position of neutrality in its contextual examination of the various forces that impact the human condition’ (Kirylo 2013, p. xxi). Focusing on the education of young children, critical pedagogues attempt ‘to create an equitable educational system and model where all classes, ethnicities, sexual orientations, nationalities, languages, and voices are included’ (Christensen and Aldridge 2013, p. 5).

Although critical pedagogy and its connections to English language teaching have been theorised for the last three decades (Auerbach 1986; Canagarajah 1999; Cummins 2000, 2001; Pennycook 2001; Phillipson 1992; Peirce 1989; Norton and Toohey 2004), its introduction into classrooms with young learners has not been well documented or summarised. Hence, the purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of different attempts to reinvent critical pedagogies in ELT classrooms with young students (K–6). To this end, in the following sections of this chapter, I provide a historical overview of critical pedagogies in education in general and their connection to ELT; address the critical problematisation of ELT; discuss current studies of critical pedagogies in ELT; present recommendations for critical ELT practice; and contemplate future directions of critical ELT. I begin with critical pedagogy in general.

## Historical perspectives

Critical pedagogy as a recognised academic construct is relatively new. It began in the early-1970s, prompted by Freire’s seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Nevertheless, as Kirylo (2013) points out, ‘the consciousness of it as a way of thinking and acting has been around through the ages’ (xix). After Freire, several authors have followed in ‘reinventing’ critical pedagogy, naming it ‘a pedagogy of love’ (Darder 2002), ‘transformative education’ (Ada and Campoy 2004), ‘transformative pedagogy’ (Cummins 2000) and ‘revolutionary pedagogies’ (Trifonas 2000). In addition, Porfilio and Ford (2015) have identified three waves of critical pedagogy during the last five decades. These waves are not exclusive but rather overlap in time, while concurring on social justice as their main goal.

The first wave of critical pedagogy emerges from Freire’s early work and the introduction of that work in education in North America during the 70s and 80s. In this first wave, according to Porfilio and Ford (2015), critical pedagogy ‘inherited most directly the theoretical inclinations of the Frankfurt school and its insistence upon the centrality of class’ (xvii, quotation in original). Using Marxism as his starting point, Freire (1970) focused on the notions of oppressor and oppressed from the perspective of social class while working with and for Brazilian peasants. In the area of ELT, also focusing on social class, Auerbach (1986) noticed that although ESL teachers were teaching students how to follow orders in low-paying jobs, they were not questioning the nature of those jobs. During this first wave,

Freire's work, along with that of Giroux (1988) and McLaren (1989), was criticised on the basis of its alleged deterministic view of social class, male-dominant theorization and failure to exemplify itself within an educative context (Crookes and Lechner 1998; Ellsworth 1989; Johnston 1999; Yates 1992). This last criticism, the avoidance of classroom application, resulted in the second wave of critical pedagogies.

The second wave began around the late 80s and early 90s and now included applied linguists questioning the 'neutral' role of the English language and the ELT industry around the world. At this time, as stated by Porfilio and Ford (2015), critical pedagogies embarked on two routes: the feminist/poststructural philosophy as well as the postmodern philosophy, both of which acknowledge class domination. The work of Jim Cummins with minority children in the late 80s falls into the second wave. By analysing why minority groups have failed in schools, Cummins (1986) realised that the work of critical pedagogy should focus on the relationships between educators, children and the children's families and thereby challenge the way these children are viewed from a deficit perspective in terms of their cultural and linguistic background. Valuing the linguistic background of children, Cummins questioned the notion of the 'English-only unproblematized school.' This type of critical stance was adopted by applied linguists as well.

Applied linguists developed their own critical pedagogies during the second wave by following or combining the two routes: the feminist/poststructural and postmodern philosophies. For instance, Graman (1988) criticised adult ESL classes. He argued that the exclusively linguistic-based instruction seemed irrelevant and non-engaging to students as it was not tied to the students' own lives. In more general terms, questioning the role of English as a globalised language, Phillipson (1992) argued that English had been spread for economic and political purposes and posed a major threat to other languages. In the late 90s, critical pedagogy in ELT again gained momentum with a special edition of *The TESOL Quarterly* entitled 'Critical Approaches to TESOL', edited by Pennycook (1999), as well as with the work of Canagarajah (1999) on resisting linguistic imperialism, Morgan (1998) on teaching grammar around community concerns, and Pennycook (2001) on critical applied linguistics. In addition, Norton and Toohey (2004) edited the book *Critical Pedagogies and Language Learning*, arguing that 'advocates of critical approaches to second language teaching are interested in relationships between language learning and social change' (1).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century and into the fourth and fifth decade of critical pedagogy, a third wave has begun to evolve. This wave returns to social class while maintaining the problematisation of 'underlying assumptions about the operations of power and oppression, ultimately leading to the inclusion of various forms of identity and difference' (Porfilio and Ford 2015, p. xviii) that were developed in the second wave. According to Porfilio and Ford (2015), the return to issues of class 'does not represent a retreat . . . [but] comes as a result of a resurgence of Marxist educational theorizing . . . and the economic crisis of 2007–2008' (xviii). This crisis gained the attention of educators in education in general and in ELT as they realised 'the devastating ways that processes of capitalist value production . . . can make and remake our daily lives' (Porfilio and Ford 2015, p. xviii) and the realities faced by young children in schools. Recently, in applied linguistics, different authors have also started to focus on social class (Block 2014; Block et al. 2012; Chun 2017). In addition, the work of López-Gopar and Sughrua (2014) on the connection of modernity/coloniality and social class within ELT emphasises the inherent role of ELT teachers as accomplices of class division if their teaching is not problematised.

To conclude this history of critical pedagogies, it can be said that 'the field of critical pedagogy now represents a constellation of insights from other intellectual fields,

including feminist studies, environmental studies, critical race theory, cultural studies, and Indigenous studies' (Porfilio and Ford 2015, p. xviii). Critical pedagogy is now an intellectual bricolage of its three waves of development, without ignoring the issues faced by educators and children and their communities in their current sociopolitical contexts. These issues will be the focus of the next section, in which I expand on the focus of the third wave of critical pedagogies in connection to the introduction of ELT in primary schools worldwide.

## Critical issues and topics

In the same way that critical applied linguists have criticised the 'neutral' role of the English language, the rapid spread of ELT in public elementary schools must be problematised, especially because it has become a world trend. Enever (2016) states: 'The unprecedented scale of reform in the rush towards English has been consolidated over the first two decades of the twenty-first century' (354). This rush to learn English raises important issues in terms of inherent ideologies and material consequences for the contexts and children. Such a rapid and seemingly non-reflective manner of ELT making its way into elementary schools seems fuelled by a neoliberal ideology that equates English with economic success (Pennycook 2016). When school administrators and parents decide to bring English into children's education, they base their rationale on the idea that English will open doors to a 'brighter' economic future. Indeed, Sayer (2015) documents how different language policies in different countries base the inclusion of ELT in elementary schools on 'national development and modernization' (China), 'economic development' (Malaysia), 'economic imperative' (Taiwan), '[i]nternationalization of Chilean economy' (Chile), 'developing human capital . . . [and] economic development of the country' (Bangladesh) and 'enhance[ment] of Vietnam's competitive position in the international economic and political arena' (Vietnam) (pp. 49–50). Sayer (2015) concludes these policies are 'couched strongly in a neoliberal discourse of economic development' (p. 50).

The neoliberal ideology behind ELT has been challenged and problematised. Pennycook (2006), for instance, points out the 'many myths about English as a "marvelous tongue"' and its 'exclusionary and delusionary effects' (p. 100–101, quotation marks in original). In terms of exclusion, Pennycook (2006) argues that the 'door opened' by the English language lets in very few people and leaves thousands of people out. In their analysis of social class and ELT in Mexico, López-Gopar and Sughrua (2014) state that in Mexico only 5% of the country can afford some sort of English education, ranging from elite bilingual elementary schools to private English institutes. Concerning the delusionary effect, most jobs in Mexico that require some level of English do not offer salaries much higher than those of other jobs that do not require English (López-Gopar and Sughrua 2014). This is also the case in other countries, such as Colombia, which promote English proficiency from an early age: 'the payoff of knowing English is almost inexistent for accessing the labour market, since only a very small percentage of jobs require bilingual proficiency and most of them are located in Bogotá, Colombia's capital' (Herazo Rivera, Jerez Rodríguez and Lorduy Arellano 2012, p. 209). These authors – as echoed by Block (2014), López-Gopar and Sughrua (2014), Mohanty (2006) and Ricento (2012) – conclude that bilingualism (English and Spanish) contributes to 'deepening the social educational inequity . . . that has traditionally existed in Colombia and Latin America in general' (209). Similarly, Lamb (2011) has found that ELT could widen the social class gap in Indonesia as higher-status children make more progress in English than do more disadvantaged children. Not only does ELT in primary schools

impact social and economic inequality, but it also affects the minoritised languages in the local contexts. This is another issue to be problematised.

In the same way that ELT in elementary schools is connected to neoliberalism, ELT also juxtaposes with the local linguistic realities in which it is being implemented. The sole focus on English as a medium of instruction or as a second or foreign language has resulted in ‘othered’ languages being pushed aside. These languages become ‘otherised’ since they are perceived as inferior to English and not worthy to be learned or promoted through public and/or private funding (López-Gopar 2016). In other words, English has become the (only) language to learn. For instance, Indigenous languages such as Zapotec in Mexico, Quechua in Perú and many others abound in Latin American countries (Mejía 2009; Sayer 2015) as well as Asian countries (Spolsky and Moon 2012), yet in the elementary schools of these countries the teaching of additional languages remains primarily focused on English rather than on a multilingual approach allowing room for all languages. This phenomenon has had detrimental effects on minoritised and Indigenous languages (Rahman 2010). Indigenous language practices have been confined to private spaces and associated with shame while English is seen as progress and modernity.

The preponderance of English over ‘othered’ languages is tied to social class as well. Focusing on India in particular, Mohanty (2006) states, ‘As the voiceless minorities suffer the sinister exclusion of mother tongues, the silent elites enjoy the pre-eminence of dominant languages, such as English’ (5). Mohanty goes on to argue that ‘English thrive[s] at the cost of other languages, and in many countries the myth of English medium superiority is propagated to the detriment of the poor and the marginalised’ (p. 5). For example, as Mejía (2011) argues, in Colombia ‘the development and promotion of one powerful language – English – is privileged at the expense of other languages which form part of the local language ecology’ (14). Regarding English, othered languages and social class, Mejía further states that the elite bilingualism (English/Spanish) usually attained by the rich who can afford access to elite bilingual schools ‘provides access to a highly “visible”, socially-accepted form of bilingualism’; whereas other forms of bilingualism (Spanish/Indigenous languages or creoles) ‘leads . . . in most cases to an “invisible” form of bilingualism in which the native language is undervalued and associated with underdevelopment, poverty and backwardness’ (7–8, quotations in original). It seems important, though, to move away from this ‘either, or’ stance; that is, having to choose either an Indigenous or minoritised language or the English language. As Pennycook (2006) argues, the way forward is ‘not so much in terms of language policies to support other languages over English but rather in terms of opposing language ideologies that construct English in particular ways’ (112).

In opposing these ideologies, one should place ELT materials and textbooks on the table and subject them to critical scrutiny. ELT materials and textbooks, often forming the course programme, become the main or sole encounter with the English language for many children. This includes whatever content, worldviews and ideologies are behind and within the materials and textbooks. For this reason, critical linguists have paid particular attention to the discourses represented in ELT materials, especially because ‘European and North American publishers exercise a powerful influence on ELT publishing globally’ (Gray 2016, p. 96). In addition, as Gray (2016) further suggests, ‘textbooks (when not produced locally) can be methodologically and culturally inappropriate’ (97, parenthesis in original). McKay and Bokhorst-Heng (2008) take a more critical stance, arguing that in the same way the ideologies behind English has otherised languages, ELT materials tend to produce othered cultures, rendering these cultures inferior to the ones represented in the materials, which are ‘portrayed as having modern and desirable behaviour’ (184).



Regarding ELT materials used by children in Mexico, López-Gopar, Núñez Méndez, Montes Medina and Cantera Martínez (2009) conducted a critical analysis of *Inglés Enciclomedia*, one of the first attempts of the Mexican government to bring English into public elementary schools through the use of technology and textbooks that all Mexican children nationwide were to use in order to learn English. Influenced by the US-style production of ELT materials, the software and textbooks used in this programme were designed and published in the USA. In this study, the authors discuss the example of an ‘engineer’ represented in a photograph by a white man who is being assisted by a black man, making the point that this seems to reinforce racialised discourses present in the USA (See Chun 2016, for a similar discussion related to didactic materials used in the teaching of English for academic purposes.) López-Gopar, Núñez Méndez, Montes Medina and Cantera Martínez (2009) conclude that these ELT materials used by millions of Mexicans focus on a fake reality far from the one experienced by children in Mexico and thereby allude to a supposed superiority of US ways of being and knowing that render Mexican children’s own cultures as inferior.

Even though materials present hegemonic discourses of the English language, ELT materials are mediated by teachers and their interactions with the students. This makes room for resistance (Chun 2015, 2016) and carves out spaces for students’ othered languages and cultures. This resistance, then, pushes back against the neoliberal ideology of ELT in elementary schools as well as the colonial legacy of the English language vis-à-vis Indigenous and minoritised languages. This seems achievable, at least as a full first step, by addressing ELT programmes, materials and teacher preparation from a critical perspective. This criticality is ongoing at the present time; and for that reason, in the next section, I describe various critical pedagogues’ current studies that attempt to problematise the issues addressed above.

## Current contributions and research

Current critical research on teaching English to children falls between the second and third waves of critical pedagogy, utilizing ethnographic and critical action research methodologies while incorporating new theories in education in general and applied linguistic in particular. In this section, I describe critical research projects decidedly not treating students as objects but rather as subjects of their own histories as well as experiencers of complex and emotional lives. These studies, in Lau’s (2017) terms, attempt to ‘illuminate . . . the complex shifting interstices between power, identities, and agency within the classroom and wider social environment’ (77).

Current research projects in elementary schools reinvent critical pedagogy by challenging the monolingual and assimilationist ideologies prevalent in different societies while attempting to negotiate children’s affirming identities. In Canada, Cummins and Early (2011) led the Multiliteracies Project. In this project, researchers collaborated with classroom teachers to explore the use of multimodalities in the creation of identity texts, which can be considered ‘the products of students’ creative work on performances carried out within the pedagogical space orchestrated by the classroom teacher’ (Cummins and Early 2011, p. 3). The different case studies documented in Cummins and Early’s (2011) edited collection (and also showcased online at [www.multiliteracies.ca](http://www.multiliteracies.ca)) prove that change can actually happen and that ‘actuality implies possibility’ (19). Hence, it is possible for minority students, usually viewed as deficient, to perform their ‘identity as intelligent, imaginative and linguistically talented’ (p. 4). For instance, in one case study included in the edited collection, the classroom teacher had three students collaborate to create a bilingual multimodal text entitled *The New Country*, which reflected the experience of an Urdu-speaking student



who migrated to Canada. The girls in the study not only shared their linguistic resources and developed linguistic and literacy skills, but also invested their identities in this text, which made them feel proud that they were capable of authoring stories.

Building on the Multiliteracies Project, Stille (2016) conducted research in a multilingual and multicultural elementary school in a large Canadian city. By analysing the creation of children's migration stories, she concludes that '[l]anguage teaching and learning is not distinct from students' lived experiences . . . [which] tend to be interpreted according to monolingual, monocultural assumptions and educational practices' (p. 494). In another study, where a French teacher and an English teacher collaborated in a multi-age classroom (Grades 4–6) with children from different backgrounds, Lau et al. (2016) transgressed the monolingual hegemony by using both English and French and by adopting a literature-based curriculum and a critical literacy approach in order to address the issue of children's rights. They claim that 'students came to appreciate the importance of dynamic bi- and multilingualism,' acquired 'a nuanced and measured understanding of social prejudice as well as their own embodied fear and assumptions toward those in the social margins' and most importantly 'bec[a]me critical bilingual users to enact social change' (121). These studies, which move away from an English-only policy and which recognise and value students' bi-multilingual repertoires,

give a larger purpose to language teaching and learning; such initiatives highlight openings and agentive social movements within which students and their teachers can enact change and resistance to dominant and potentially marginalizing monolingual, monocultural approaches to English language teaching.

(Stille and Prasad 2015, p. 619)

Researchers in different parts of the world have also worked with children to go beyond the English-only ideology in order to promote multilingualism. Conteh and Meier (2014) brought together researchers from continental Europe, the UK, China, Mauritius, the USA and Australia who reflected on the possibilities and challenges of the multilingual turn in language education. As an example in Europe, Hélot (2016) as well as Hélot and Young (2006) report that mainstream/monolingual children begin to regard othered languages as interesting when they are introduced to the languages through meaningful class activities such as language and culture presentations by the parents or children who speak the othered languages. In language awareness projects, the human aspect is the *sine qua non* of the promotion of languages and interculturalism. Also, language awareness projects must be considered only the first step, and othered languages must become part of the curriculum should they not want to remain tokenistic. In this regard, Hélot (2016) concludes that language awareness could be instrumental 'in redressing the unequal balance of power between dominant and dominated languages, and between their speakers, only if it allows for a debunking of language ideologies and opens the door to a truly multilingual education for all students' (p. 12). In the USA, Woodley and Brown (2016) discuss how a teacher worked with a complex classroom, which they succinctly describe as: 'Eight home languages. Twenty-seven students. Twenty-seven levels of English language development, home language literacy, and content knowledge' (p. 83). By honouring and welcoming all students' languages into classroom, Woodley and Brown argue: 'All students deserve to hear what their classmates have to say about how they use languages. This can help to dispel stereotypes or negative perspectives about multilingualism' (p. 96).

Other critical researchers have been concerned with the role of English vis-à-vis Indigenous or minoritised languages. In Colombia, as mentioned above, the government has implemented the goal of making students bilingual in English and Spanish. Clavijo Olarte and González (2017) are therefore ‘concerned with the role of English as a foreign language among Indigenous minority groups that arrive in Bogotá’s public school because of forced displacements’ (p. 431). By using a community-based pedagogy with a critical perspective, Rincón and Clavijo Olarte (2016) have started to meet the needs of Indigenous children and to teach English by engaging ‘students in rich schooling experiences as a way to reconcile the curriculum with the real life of students within their communities’ (p. 68). In Brasil, Ball (in press) has also been using English, and Portuguese, to address community issues important in children’s lives by developing materials for the real world. These studies demonstrate that English can be used to discuss critical issues in children’s lives. In China, Adamson and Feng (2014) looked at four different models for trilingual education including Mandarin, English and Indigenous languages. They conclude that English does not have a detrimental effect as long as the Indigenous language is maintained and the ethnic identity fostered. They also make the case against the neoliberal ideology prevalent in ELT, claiming that ‘for a minority group the value of trilingual education goes beyond mere financial benefits to include greater confidence in one’s culture and identity’ (p. 41). In Mexico, for the last ten years, López-Gopar (2014, 2016) with the collaboration of other researchers as well as student teachers (López-Gopar, Jiménez Morales and Delgado Jiménez 2014) has attempted to teach English critically by developing the student-teacher’s critical awareness about the myths of the English language and its connection to neoliberalism, social class, modernity and its alleged benefits for all. Using the teaching praxicum as an opportunity to dialogue with children, the student-teachers have used ‘English in favor of Indigenous and *othered* children’s way of knowing, culturing, languaging, and living’ (López-Gopar 2016, p. 15, italics in original). They have developed critical thematic units, which are taught in English, Spanish and different Indigenous languages, to address important community issues such as water shortage, health and eating habits and discriminatory practices.

The studies summarised in this section are only some current examples of critical pedagogies in primary English language teaching. These studies demonstrate that researchers, teachers, student teachers and children have the agency to fight against discriminatory practices in ELT. Based on the studies presented in this chapter, in the following section I provide recommendations for practice that must be critically analysed, adapted and/or rejected according to each and every context.

## Recommendations for practise

It is important, first of all, to remember that critical pedagogy is not a method to be prescribed and followed. It is a political stance and a humanistic position. Being critical means to truly believe in each student and her reflective and agentive capacity: ‘Different children have different talents. No matter what form of knowledge they pursue, it should be valued and encouraged’ (Christensen and Aldridge 2013, p. 86). It is also imperative to remember that critical pedagogy requires a hope that change, transformation and social justice will occur, especially in current times when groups of peoples and cultures are treated as second-class citizens. Furthermore, critical pedagogy is not about changing the world. It is about small things, and the small changes in a classroom that can make a student feel intelligent, creative and truly appreciated at that particular moment. The student, then, can hopefully go on to change the world.

Authoring identity texts should be one of the most important aspects of critical pedagogies. ‘Language pedagogy in schools can be invigorated by an approach that emphasizes imagination, curiosity, and the growth of students’ critical consciousness. These capacities can be developed as students learn to read and produce culturally relevant, *plurilingual* multimodal texts’ (Stille and Prasad 2015, p. 620, my emphasis). In English classes where authorship is valued, English can be learned revolving around a common theme, health issues for instance. The teachers can focus on grammatical patterns and vocabulary needed to produce ‘simple’, yet powerful sentences, such as ‘beans make me stronger and keep me healthy’, which can later be part of a larger text such as books, posters or video story lines. In these classes, the children can also author these same texts in the languages they already know. Multimodal identity texts can work as a ‘three-dimensional prism [that] refracts light into an infinite rainbow of possibilities’ (Prasad 2016, p. 511). In addition, texts created in the classroom are able to challenge the ‘othering’ discourses present in ELT materials and textbooks. They also challenge the myths of the English language and present a different story to the world in a multimodal form and by way of English used together with othered languages. Finally, creating texts is feasible and economical as it goes against the neoliberal industry of ELT that has facilitated transnational publishing companies to profit from low-SES, middle-class people and outer-circle countries, such as Mexico, which desire English.

If child authors emerge in the classroom, then it is the children’s own lives that drive the curriculum. Stille (2016) argues: ‘Inviting students to bring the full range of their cultural and linguistic resources and diverse histories into the educational context potentially creates conditions for students to invest themselves into classroom activities and therefore support their language learning’ (494). When curricula, locally produced materials and teaching strategies revolve around the child, the complex lives and realities of the children become part of the conversation. Children do not only become experts in the classroom, but they also become agents of change as they start talking about real problems in their communities and in their own lives. Hence, classroom walls move beyond the classroom and encompass the children’s geographical and virtual communities. As Rincón and Clavijo Olarte (2016) state,

students’ communities provided alternatives for creating meaningful learning environments in the EFL classroom, transforming mechanical and decontextualized language practices into flexible ways to communicate what matters to students. When students are intellectually and emotionally engaged, better learning is achieved. (p. 80)

Once the children’s lives become the curriculum, their languages and cultural practices share the classroom grounds along with an English language and culture, rather than being subjugated to the language and culture. Most children around the world have directly heard that their languages and culture are not welcome in the ELT classroom. Hence ‘[s]tudents need direct messages and encouragement to develop or regain interest and pride in using their home languages in school’ (Stille et al. 2016, p. 499). When children’s languages are welcomed into the classroom, both children and family members become the teachers, and the English teacher, the student. In critical pedagogies, teaching and learning must be a two-way avenue. English has been detrimental to othered languages, especially when it has been positioned in educational policy as the only language to learn. The critical ELT

classroom, where the policy of English-only is changed to all-languages-and-semiotic-resources-welcome, can speak boldly against the ideology of English as the language of worldwide communication.

## Future directions

Critical pedagogies in primary English language teaching owe a great deal to children, student teachers and teachers. Their voices, desires and feelings must be taken seriously should we not want critical pedagogy to be yet another grand narrative and imposition in their lives. In future research, both children and teachers should be co-researchers as well. In this way, as Pinter (2014) points out, childhood can be understood ‘from children’s own perspectives’ (69). Pinter (2014) adds:

As research is a type of collaborative social practice that is likely to impact on children’s lives, it follows that children could be considered as co-researchers. Becoming co-researchers implies that adults need to hand over at least some of the control and responsibility.

(174)

Not only must critical pedagogy make room for children’s perspectives, but student teachers and teachers’ voices must be heard and their daily educational and personal lives’ constraints must be seriously addressed. ELT teachers reinvent real critical pedagogies on a daily basis by testing out their own theories and making immediate changes to their teaching practice. Researchers and teacher educators have a role as well. This role, however, is that of collaborator and not authoritarian. We must also understand that ELT teachers around the world are exploited (López-Gopar and Sughrua 2014), undervalued and denied job stability (Ramírez Romero et al. 2014). Once researchers and teacher educators acknowledge the realities currently faced by the ELT teacher, they can start developing respectful and collaborative research projects. Consequently, more studies will be needed to document these types of collaboration, especially now when millions of ELT teachers will soon be needed to supply the rush of ELT into primary and kindergarten school.

## Further reading

- 1 Cummins, J., and Early, M. (Eds.). (2004). *Identity texts: The collaborative creation of power in multilingual schools*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.

This edited collection offers both a theoretical background and classroom examples regarding the construct of identity texts in different countries and at different educational levels.

- 2 Copland, F., and Garton, S. (Eds.). (2014). Special issue: Teaching English to young learners. *ELT Journal*, 68(3).

This journal special issue includes different studies on ELT and children, covering a wide range of current topics and issues from different theoretical perspectives.

- 3 Pinter, A., and Zandian, S. (2014). ‘I don’t want to leave this room’: Benefits of researching ‘with’ children. *ELT Journal*, 68(1), 64–74.

This article focuses on the experience of two researchers who have conducted projects in which children have actively participated in and shaped the research activities in their own way.

## Related topics

Difficult circumstances, reflective voices from South America, contexts of learning

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