



The Reading Matrix
Vol. 7, No. 2, August 2007

A RATIONALE FOR CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN EFL: THE CASE OF TAJIKISTAN

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Abstract

As EFL programs become more prevalent throughout the world, the cultural implications of English teaching are more often debated. These cultural considerations are extremely relevant in Islamic cultures, where English education can be viewed as contributing to the influence of Western Christian or secular pedagogy. This potential clash of approaches to teaching and learning should be critically addressed by EFL instructors. One method of doing so is introducing reading instruction with critical pedagogy. The article will illustrate how critical pedagogy and critical literacy instruction were implemented in a reading program in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. As a former member of the Soviet Union, the system of education in Tajikistan was developed with Soviet, atheistic ideals of education which clashed with those of local students and teachers. Thus, a critical approach to facilitating English reading clubs was introduced to allow students to mold the curriculum and discussions in ways that reflected their diverse cultural values. A key goal of the program was to promote student-led dialogue about texts that examined authors' motives and messages. The rationale for text selection and judging culturally relevant texts will be addressed as a model for other EFL programs and practitioners.

Introduction

Tajikistan is a small mountainous nation in Central Asia that borders China, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. The landscape of Tajikistan is remarkably beautiful and the cultures of the people are fascinating and complex in their linguistic and ethnic diversity. During its membership in the Soviet Union and since its independence in 1991 and the civil war that followed, Tajikistan has undergone incredible changes. These changes are particularly striking in the system of education (Lubin, 1999).

In this diverse multilingual nation, the statuses of languages, including Tajik, Russian, and Uzbek, have been often debated. In recent years, while most Russians have left the country, the government has attempted a shift from Russian to Tajik (Landau & Kellner-Heinkele, 2004). This has created a complicated situation for language instructors, most of whom already struggle with a shortage of basic materials. Recent changes in politics have also sparked the beginnings of an ideological shift in language teaching. In addition, English language instruction has been introduced and quickly popularized.

As I will illustrate, the introduction of English has the potential to align with students' goals and interests or further impact the rift between students' values and those

of the school curricula. This paper will discuss the ideological implications of English language teaching and advocate the use of critical pedagogy in English language courses. I will also provide examples of a critical approach to teaching reading by offering students culturally relevant texts.

English as an Imperialistic Language

During the past several centuries, English has become a language of power, mass communication, and cultural domination. As an elite language, English has made its way into foreign language education programs in universities around the world (Kazmi, 1997). Though typically marketed as a potential tool for opportunity and financial success, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) instruction does not often complement the cultures of its students or the local curricula. This has been particularly noticeable in the Islamic world.

According to Pennycook (1994), the kinds of knowledge and cultures to which English is strongly associated clash with or even threaten an Islamic worldview and lifestyle. Pennycook further notes the historical and current use of English language education as instrumental for spreading Christianity. In Central Asia, and in countries on every continent, Christian missionaries strive to convert Muslims to Christianity through the extremely profitable business of English language teaching. Interestingly, the growth of English language programs can also contribute to “the spread of Western secular thought” (Pennycook, 1994, p. 3). The latter influence can increase the divide between the Soviet secular model of education that remains in Tajikistan and the Tajik beliefs that students are taught at home. Such a divide surfaced in a study at the International Islamic University of Malaysia in which fifty out of fifty students reported that English is a means for spreading non-Islamic, Western, and “even anti-Islamic culture” (Ozog, 1989, p. 314).

Historical Factors and Language Policy in Tajikistan

Language policy has had considerable effects on teaching and learning in Tajikistan. Soviet/communist rule provided Tajikistan with universal education and led to major progress in terms of literacy and the participation of girls and women in schooling. Yet, this progress occurred at the expense of many facets of the Tajik language and traditions. Since the fall of the Soviet union, financial support for education and other public services has decreased drastically and access to education in one’s own language has been a controversial issue (Lubin, 1999).

Though, for many years, Tajikistan has supported Russian, Uzbek, and Tajik primary and secondary schools, Russian has clearly been the favored choice for higher education. Further, most parents prefer Russian schooling for their children as Russian-based education is considered the highest quality (Harris, 2006). When working in Tajikistan, I quickly realized how this preference for Russian has also caused Tajiks to adopt the disturbing notion of Tajik as a “street language” and Russian as a more sophisticated language. This is most prevalent amongst the many young people who relay stories from their parents about the “better days” with the Soviet system when “everyone had a job and the country was stable.”

In 1989, the government of Tajikistan named Tajik as the official language but began translating official documents and truly implementing the policy more recently

(Landau & Kellner-Heinkele, 2004). As Tajikistan is quite diverse, with various ethnic groups including Tajiks, Uzbeks, Russians, and Kazakhs, this policy was aimed at creating a more unified Tajik identity. This shift spurred dramatic changes in education, causing many of the remaining Russian teachers to leave the country. Various challenges accompanied this change. For instance, some ethnically Tajik teachers have a stronger level of academic language proficiency in Russian rather than Tajik as they themselves had studied in Russian schools. Further, though educators are now encouraged use more Tajik and less Russian, there are very few Tajik textbooks and materials available.

Examining Divergences in Cultures and Pedagogies

When textbooks are available, they are generally older Soviet texts that represent communist values and relatively foreign cultural symbols. These books represent a broader challenge –the seventy year mismatch between values taught in school and those taught at home. Since the establishment of the Soviet educational system, Tajik teachers have been forced to teach with curricula that differed greatly from their social norms and beliefs. For example, Harris (2006) explains that the Soviet curriculum incorporated parallel gender roles for girls and boys and espoused the communist version of morality. The syllabi and texts were thematically linked to Russian life and culture which Tajiks found difficult to relate to or fully understand. Harris also points out that most Tajiks are Muslim and collectivistic; yet, they were expected to educate children with an individualistic atheistic model. At school, pupils learned that concepts such as God and faith did not exist while concurrently learning the values of Islam at home. Though most schools continue to reflect the Soviet ideology in many ways, teachers are also, little by little, gaining more freedom and influence on pedagogy. To some extent, they can now choose course content that mirrors their students’ interests and many are doing so.

Much like Russian education, English teaching is potentially imperialistic and can be used to subjugate EFL students’ languages and cultures. As a result, I strongly believe that teachers bear a responsibility to use a critical lens for English education. Such a lens could empower their students through reflective dialogue and a curriculum that mirrors the students’ goals and interests.

In the nineties, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) became well-known as the advocate for culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billings proposed this critical approach in relation to the differences between African American students and their White teachers who are often misinformed or know too little about the cultures of their students. Ladson-Billings defines culturally relevant teaching as using “students’ culture in order to maintain it and to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture” (1994, p. 17).

In the same vein as Ladson-Billings’ approach, Banks (2001) proposes a “cultural pluralism” model of education as one of multiple paradigms for teachers with a democratic view of instruction. This innovative model would “focus on the maintenance of cultures and traditions” and would “promote the liberation of ethnic groups; to educate ethnic students in a way that will not alienate them from their home cultures” (Banks, 2001, p. 94). Thus, instructors would not simply briefly acknowledge the diversity of their students; they would actively learn about that diversity by making it an integral part of the curriculum.

Both Banks' and Ladson-Billings' approaches emerged from the American educational environment. However, this essential change in the style of instruction and learning, which actively incorporates learners' cultures into lessons, should be expanded to all educational settings, particularly EFL. One reason is that foreign EFL teachers' worldviews often differ greatly from those of their pupils. As a result, a culturally relevant approach could simultaneously inform both instructors and students in a reciprocal way through a mutual exchange of ideas and opinions.

Facilitating Culturally Relevant Teaching in English Education

As an American ELF (English Language Fellow) in Tajikistan, I was concerned about the connection between language education and power. I wanted to critically and continuously examine my instructional practices and text selection process to try to complement rather than devalue my students' backgrounds and perspectives. As an educator, I knew that I could not be completely free of cultural bias, as we are all somewhat influenced by the cultures in which we were raised. Yet, I knew that a critical approach to teaching and learning could allow my EFL students and me to explore issues of power. We did so through dynamic student-lead discussions about cultural and political issues we encountered in readings as reflections of our lives.

When I prepared for my teaching post, I knew I needed to bring a variety of texts that my students might enjoy but I knew little about Tajik people or Tajikistan. I was aware that Tajiks spoke the Tajik language which is Persian with the Cyrillic script and that the majority of Tajiks and were Muslim. I also knew that, though they differ politically, Tajikistan has been historically, culturally, and linguistically linked to Iran and Afghanistan in many ways. As a result, I searched for a diverse group of novels, some of which were related to Iran and Afghanistan.

Since books, particularly novels, about Tajikistan are difficult to find, I tried to locate novels about countries and peoples that are geographically close and/or Islamic. Texts that I chose included "Shabanu," (Fisher-Staples, 2003) a novel about a family of nomads in Cholistan (a region in Pakistan), and "Life in the Villages" which details the impressions of the former first lady of Egypt, Jehan Sadat, during a visit to her husband's village (Sadat, 2002). The characters in these texts are Muslim and, as I later learned; their social situations bear many resemblances to those of my Tajik students. For instance, "Shabanu" mentions transitions for Muslim girls as they mature and prepare to become wives and the roles of girls' parents in selecting a spouse. "Life in the Villages" depicts the striking social and cultural contrasts of women and men who live in rural communities versus cities. These aspects became key topics of discussion as students felt that they relate to their own way of life.

As the facilitator of reading classes and clubs, I planned for the students to have as many choices as possible in terms of themes, cultures, genres, etc. The goal was for their selection of texts to shape the direction of the sessions. Since I knew that many English learners do enjoy classic novels or contemporary British and American novels, I made those available as well. Additional contemporary choices were "The Joy Luck Club," (Tan, 1990) a story about Chinese women living in both China and the U.S., and "Hatchet," (Paulsen, 1999) the tale of an American boy who struggles to survive after his plane crashes in the Canadian wilderness. Though *Hatchet* was selected by one of my classes, particularly because the main character was male (as were most of the students in

that group) and because it was an exciting adventure, students in the other groups preferred the more culturally similar novels. None of the groups selected “The Joy Luck Club,” which surprised me slightly because Tajikistan borders China and there is a Chinese minority in Tajikistan. Thus, I naively imagined that they would be curious to learn more about Chinese culture. However, as most teachers know, it is impossible to predict exactly what will peak students’ curiosity before getting to know them.

As the clubs progressed and we chose additional novels, students expressed enthusiasm for “Reading Lolita in Tehran” (Nafisi, 2003), a story about a female Iranian professor and her students during the period of the revolution, and “The Kite Runner” (Hosseini, 2003), a story about loyalty, friendship and ethnic tensions between boys growing up in Afghanistan. Students expressed a great deal of enthusiasm for “The Kite Runner” and, while it was one of the most challenging texts, it easily generated the richest discussions. The students often mentioned empathizing with the Afghan characters’ plight. For instance, one of my students, Mohammad, in his reflection of the text, wrote:

The story takes place in a neighbor country. Since it’s a neighbor country, I’m familiar with the situation there. So, I’ve the ground to say that the novel is real...The best thing I liked in these novels was that they were based on real events...there is something in common between some stages or moments of his life with my life.

Hosseini’s writing style further appealed to students because of his honesty in describing both the gritty details of the hatred spawned from ethnic rivalries and the themes of forgiveness and unconditional love. This story was largely character driven and, for my students, contrasted sharply with Nafisi’s “Reading Lolita in Tehran.”

In our conversations on Nafisi’s work, it became apparent that the students, though clearly intrigued by the story, felt a distance from the narrator who was also the central character. At first, we attributed this to the complex nature of the text, which incorporates several references to Western classics with which my students were not very familiar. Later, we decided it was more due to the author/narrator’s perspective. To each of us, Nafisi seemed strangely biased toward a Western view of the world. Another student, Niso, wrote in her reflection that “In reading Lolita in Tehran, author described just the negative side of Iran. I didn’t like it.”

In addition, Nafisi comes from a background of privilege and, though she experienced quite traumatic events during the Iranian revolution, her international education, wealth, and accompanying social status afforded her comforts beyond anything my students could relate to. Thus, I realized that social class and political orientation may be as significant as culture in determining what texts could be relatable for students. It is important to note that, though students did not connect personally to “Reading Lolita in Tehran” or prefer Nafisi’s style, the novel still generated an interesting discussion and served as an additional source with which we could articulate comparisons.

Nafisi’s novel raised the topic of responsibility authors have in terms of cultural representations. Students felt that, although she is Iranian, something seemed insincere about Nafisi’s representations of Iran; she chose more negative depictions of Iran much in the same way that American or other Western authors have time and time again,

perhaps because they sell. The book, which was written for an English-speaking audience, depicted the image of Iran that many or maybe most Americans already have.

Fisher-Staples' novel, "Shabanu," like "The Kite Runner," contrasts with Nafisi's style and was as popular amongst students as "The Kite Runner." "Shabanu" is a tragic coming of age tale that deals with the controversial topic of arranged marriage (a girl is promised by her father to a man she does not love). When I read the text, I was concerned that the author may have been somewhat biased in darkly describing a traditional practice that Americans rarely understand. However, my students felt that the story was very genuine in the range of emotions and reactions the characters had to this situation. When debating the author's responsibility in depicting culture, I asked the students what they thought about Fisher-Staples being American. Many of them were shocked as they had not yet read the supplementary interview section in the text and did not realize that she was not Pakistani and probably not Muslim (she had; however, lived in Pakistan). Much to my surprise, they felt that her writing was accurate in regard to Islamic values, traditions, and practices and that it was difficult to guess that she was not Pakistani. During this and other discussions, I learned to trust students to make their own distinctions about cultural authenticity and that their conclusions may differ from mine which generates an even more exciting debate.

Conclusion

In my reading students' reflections and synthesizing our discussions, I realized that offering them choices for texts and course content was perhaps the best pedagogical decision I made. Even EFL instructors who know little about their students' cultures can create a dynamic learning environment using culturally relevant pedagogy as a bi-directional tool in which both the teacher and students gain cultural insight through discussions of texts. During this process, teachers should remain critical of their own biases and views and encourage their students to challenge them as well as each other.

Lastly, though I learned much about the cultures of my students, most of whom were Tajik and a few of whom were Uzbek, Turkmen, Kazakh, and Russian, I do not claim to be an authority on their cultures and interests. As an EFL teacher and a Tajik/Persian speaker, I was able to gain valuable insight into what types of texts my students enjoyed. However, as an American, I am still a sort of outsider in their world. Nonetheless, I believe that my efforts to provide them with choices contributed to their growth as readers as well as their motivation to read. I also know that we acquired valuable knowledge of each other's worldviews in exploring and debating our reactions to texts.

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