

Theoretical Analysis, Classroom Practice, Opinion Essays

The Promise and Precarity of Critical Pedagogy in English for Academic Purposes

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Abstract

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has become an increasingly prominent sector of the English language teaching profession in British Columbia, providing English language preparation for post-secondary education across a range of disciplines. This theoretical paper gives overviews of EAP and critical pedagogy, then delves into four central tenets that are parallel in both fields: decoding, contextualization, praxis, and critical thinking. Beyond the parallels, it explores both promising initiatives and tensions in the enactment of critical pedagogy in EAP, not least of which is the precarity of many instructors in the field. Recognizing the contributions of EAP and moving the field from the margins of the academy would make for better opportunities to realize the full potential of international students and international education through critical pedagogy.

Introduction

International education is celebrated for bringing diversity and additional income to post-secondary institutions in Canada (BCCIE, 2019; Government of Canada, 2020). The gateway through which many multilingual international students enter the academy is English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instruction: language instruction that is designed to prepare students for not only the linguistic but also the cultural demands of studying in English in Canada.

The field of teaching EAP is a teaching field that is consistently positioned in the service of the academy (Haque, 2007; MacDonald, 2016). Despite their deep linguistic knowledge, breadth of pedagogical proficiencies, and responsiveness to distinct disciplinary practices, EAP instructors are typically tasked with preparing international and multilingual students for the “real work” of coursework (Murie & Fitzpatrick, 2009, p. 166) to come later, rather than being acknowledged as members of the academy themselves. That same academy professes a pursuit of deeper and critical learning and of nuanced and transformative education. Central to this intellectual endeavour should be critical thinking and critical pedagogy: a deeper understanding and engagement with contextual factors with an eye to improving them for all. As aspects of academic habitus, there are important parallels between EAP and critical pedagogy. However, there are also deep divisions between the stated goals of international education, the positioning of EAP in the margins of the academy, and the enactment of critical pedagogy. This paper discusses the underlying principles of EAP and critical pedagogy, draws out parallels between the two, and discusses critical tensions that threaten the inclusion of critical pedagogy within EAP instruction.

EAP as a Field

EAP is “the study of English for the purpose of participating in higher education” (Bruce, 2011, p. 6). The study and practice is at once both a narrow and wide field; it is narrow in its particular focus on preparing students’ English language skills for future studies, but wide with variables such as the academic level of studies an EAP student pursues (undergraduate, graduate, or professional work), whether instruction is English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) or discipline-focused English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP), and/or if English studies are embedded in their course of study in a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) model (Ding & Bruce, 2017; Hyland & Shaw, 2016). Each of these variables is impacted by language ideologies, institutional discourses, and curricular goals.

EAP curricula are ostensibly informed by English language features valued within academic modes of communication. Most obviously, this mode of communication is academic writing that summarizes and synthesizes other academic work after having determined the main ideas, salient arguments, and key points. Academic texts may also draw from functions such as comparing and contrasting ideas and explaining the causes and effects of certain choices. EAP students need to gain familiarity with the various linguistic features of these functions, as well as where and why they occur. Students also need to build their academic lexis for both receptive and productive purposes. EAP is essentially “a needs-driven activity,” where “deconstructing learner need in relation to academic skills and competencies is complex and multifaceted” (Bruce, 2011, p. 7). Curricula need to suit students’ linguistic proficiency, academic readiness, and cultural dispositions and expectations as they arrive in the EAP classroom, with an eye to preparing them for their academic careers. The core and peripheral concerns of the present and future situations need sophisticated navigation and deep contextualization.

Teaching EAP requires the development of language knowledge and disciplinary readiness, which draws on significant breadth and depth of knowledge from the instructor. For those who completed general language teacher education, as is almost exclusively the case,

Adapting more general language pedagogy and professional practice to meet the needs of the academy goes to the heart of the challenge faced by many competent ELT [English language teaching] practitioners who are asked by employers to develop and teach EAP courses in order to meet the increasing demand for this type of course. In effect, such teachers are being required to create and deliver courses in a specialized area of English language teaching (an area that differs considerably from more general ELT courses) without the requisite specialist training and support. They are being asked to introduce students to academic discourses and practices in systematic and theorized ways although they themselves may only be able to draw upon their own personal, eclectic experiences and intuitions about the academic world that is the object of their pedagogy. (Bruce, 2011, p. 68)

Further, the purpose-driven and seemingly unproblematic content of EAP curricula may or may not recognize the breadth of international student identities, plurilinguistic repertoires, and networks (Duff, Zappa-Hollman, & Surtees, 2019), or rely on Western-dominant frames of reference, rather than critical pedagogy that supports critical thinking.

EAP and International Education

EAP is often positioned as a gateway (if not gate keeper) to international students' participation in higher education in Canada. Institutions set English language proficiency requirements for admissions, typically through the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), or other standardized language assessments. Students who do not yet meet these scores typically register in English courses to improve their qualifying test scores, and most of these courses are subsumed under an EAP umbrella. Previous scholarship has discussed how standardized tests such as IELTS do not adequately represent the full range of linguistic demands of academic study (Moore & Morton, 2005; Stigger, 2019). It is also important to recognize that EAP courses are often international students' first encounter with the Western academy, and are often construed as sites of acculturation as much as language training grounds. While EAP curricula are often expected to not only incorporate but "train" students in critical thinking (Moore, 2017) and intercultural communication (Douglas & Rosvold, 2018) through critical pedagogy (Haque, 2007), the institutional discourses around international education risk undermining authentic engagement in the potential that international voices bring to the academy.

Despite the qualitative arguments made for internationalizing education, most of the measures of the impact are quantitative: the number of international students enrolled and their economic impact (BCCIE, 2019; CBIE, 2020). In British Columbia in 2017, international education (much of which is EAP) contributed \$2.7 billion to the provincial economy, 39% of which was from students enrolled in public post-secondary institutions (BCCIE, 2019). It is important to acknowledge this figure represents not only direct tuition fees international students pay for their classes, but also "spin off" economic benefits through housing, extra-curricular activities, and general student support offered through their host institutions and agencies. To be critical thinkers, however, people involved in international education and the field of EAP must look beyond the economic benefits international students bring to institutions. Institutions that not only host but compete for these students, as well as the instructors who directly engage with them, need a clear-eyed view of the differing philosophical frameworks of international education that range from socio-cultural or academic rationales to political or economic interests (Knight & de Wit, 1999, as cited in Knight, 2012; Qiang, 2003). This understanding would include acknowledging the impact of positioning international students as economic vehicles versus rights-bearing citizens (Roberston, 2011) as these discourses both inform and impact interactions. Administrators, educators, and policy makers need to query the role of international students in "nation building via higher education" (McCartney & Metcalfe, 2018, p. 216) and EAP instructors' roles in mediating this endeavour not only for and with post-secondary institutions, but for and with international students as well. It is time to revisit the foundations of critical pedagogy and how it relates to EAP.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is not something to deliver, but something to engage in. It is a situated, dialectic practice that prioritizes not only the needs and aspirations of students, but the transformation of oppressive contexts (Darder, 2018; Guilherme, 2012). A central goal is to empower agentive citizens, rather than produce technically competent, yet passive, peons to

perpetuate the status quo (Guilherme, 2012, p. 3). It is a pedagogy to engender “a common striving towards awareness of reality and towards self-awareness” (Freire, 2013, p. 163), rather than a methodology to train for standardized proficiency. In the foundational *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2013) problematized a “banking” model of education, stating, “dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person’s ‘depositing’ ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be ‘consumed’ by the discussants” (p. 158). Instead, critical pedagogy interrogates and responds to contexts with humility and faith in change. It seeks to transform rather than accommodate hierarchies, and, in the process, to liberate both the oppressed and the oppressor.

The dialectal act of responding to and reconfiguring contexts engenders a deeper understanding and critical awareness of interacting forces on individuals and society. It moves towards a reconsideration of established views and underlying assumptions of the “political and cultural superstructure of society” (Bronner, 2017, p. 2) and forces participants to think about their learning. It begets critical thinking, that is, “thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity” (Freire, 2013, p. 159). In essence, critical pedagogy embodies the promise of transformative education.

Parallels in Critical Pedagogy and EAP

In discussing the relations and tensions between critical pedagogy and rigorous EAP practice, it is important to recognize how their key attributes parallel one another. To begin with, deciphering academic texts, both their meaning and linguistic features, is central to EAP. The process of “decoding” disciplinary vocabulary, concepts, and patterns of argumentation is accompanied by practicing “encoding” meaning into disciplinary terms (Irwin & Liu, 2019). The movement from the everyday to the academic relies on increased objectivity and abstraction through particular linguistic features well beyond a general communicative purpose (Liardét, 2016). Further, there are valued patterns of encoding and decoding through texts and across disciplines that build meaning; deliberate movement between types of knowledge (and knowers) is key to not only texts, but good pedagogy as well (Maton, 2014). Freire (2013), too, discussed the practice of “decoding,” the process of unpacking phenomena and their “investigation by means of abstraction” (p. 162). In the context of critical pedagogy, it is a parallel “dialectal movement of thought” (p. 162), from the concrete to the abstract and back again, that facilitates participants’ recognition of themselves and their relevance in it through “naming the world” (Darder, 2018, p. 74).

A more fundamental construct of critical pedagogy is the centrality of contextualization: “a critical investigation into people’s lives and their actual needs” (Darder, 2018, p. 90). This contextualization is putting aside “arrogance” (Freire, 2013, p. 158) and patronizing assumptions about what educators think others need and engaging in dialectal methodology that generates more authentic themes from participants’ perspectives and lived experiences (Darder, 2018; Guilherme, 2012). It rejects rigidity in favour of responding “to collective micro- and macro-contexts and, therefore, is sensitive and attentive to ontological, epistemological, social and pedagogical issues and changes in language and culture education” (Guilherme, 2012, p. 4). In order for pedagogy to be appropriate and critical, it must be situated in the lives and needs of participants. In the context of EAP, this means adherence to four main principles: authenticity,

groundedness, interdisciplinarity, and relevance. This adherence means texts and tasks should be real (not contrived), research-informed, representative of the fields of influence and application, and relevant to students' needs (Hyland & Shaw, 2016, p. 3). Of particular consequence to the discussion at hand is the principle of relevance, contextualizing course curricula with "needs analysis to systematically identify the specific skills, texts and communicative practices that *a particular group of learners* [emphasis added] will use" (p. 4). This is a pedagogy that is both specific to situated, disciplinary usage and responsive to the students who are engaging with it. It cannot assume shared background knowledge, and it cannot frame "others" with different background knowledge and discourse practices as deficient. A systematic framing of needs analysis for EAP was articulated 35 years ago when Hutchinson and Waters (1987) set curricular planning questions that began with "why do learners need the language?"; "who will the learner use the language with?"; and "where will the learner use the language?" (as cited in Bruce, 2011 and Hyland & Shaw, 2016). This framing puts learners before language and requires nuanced curricular responses to shifting student demographics and their goals.

A third parallel is praxis. For Freire, praxis was built upon both reflection and action, "a dynamics between theory and practice" (Guilherme, 2012, p. 1), setting them into an iterative cycle: "praxis as dialogical manifestation of critical knowledge and creativity, rooted in reflection and action for transformation" (Darder, 2018, p. 85). In the EAP context, praxis is research-informed teaching practice. While this is reminiscent of a thorough student-centred needs analysis, it also relies on the interdisciplinary knowledge base that converges in EAP: applied linguistics, writing and rhetoric, intercultural communication, identity and motivation theories, and pedagogy. Research examines the language patterns of valued texts, their pedagogical deployment, EAP students' emergent reproduction of academic English features, the impact of EAP context on students' identity, and back again. EAP teaching both applies research to pedagogy and informs future avenues of investigation.

Finally, there is critical thinking. Long the goal of higher education, EAP departments have been saddled with "training" students to think critically as part of their academic socialization tasks. Atkinson (1997) highlighted and critiqued the typical acritical incorporation of critical thinking into EAP pedagogies a quarter century ago, and it has often manifested as a "fifth skill" (in addition to reading, writing, listening, and speaking) in EAP curricula. In striking parallel with English instruction itself, critical thinking is often conceived of as a discrete set of skills that can be taught divorced from context and in preparation for academic pursuits. This "skills based" approach is the one most commonly found in EAP textbooks (Moore, 2017) as a checklist of "cognitive operations" (p. 21) that interrogates specificity, contradiction, and logic. However, Moore has also made direct relations with an "ethics approach" to critical thinking, which closely aligns with critical theory and critical pedagogy. Its goals encompass "the critical scrutiny of social structures and practices" (Moore, 2017, p. 22) from a normative stance to engender student agency in change-making within and beyond the academic institution in which they study. This is easily recognizable as drawing from Freire's (2013) aims of social transformation through discussion and engagement. Freire claimed that "critical thinkers...are committed to the change required for our continued humanization" (as cited in Darder, 2018, p. 88) in contrast to "naïve thinking, which sees 'historical time as a weight, a stratification of the acquisitions and experiences of the past,' from which the present should emerge normalized and 'well-behaved.' For the naïve thinker, the important thing is accommodation to this normalized

‘today’” (Freire, 2013, p. 159). Critical thinking, as skill or disposition, allows for a clearer view of context and provides the means for pushing the bounds of the existing parameters of what is towards what could be. Both the academy and critical pedagogy see critical thinking as a means of engagement.

At its core, critical pedagogy seeks to dismantle oppressive hierarchies and facilitate everyone attaining their full potential. The responsiveness to participants’ needs and the process of seeking that input is more open ended and may well be “messier” than a tidy curriculum aligned with standardized learning outcomes consistent across participant groups.

Promising Initiatives

Despite the default “practical orientation” of EAP (Hyland & Shaw, 2016, p. 2), some important critical pedagogy and research is occurring across a variety of contexts. Recognizing the critical lens that language itself can be, Motschenbacher (2019) has advocated for “an inclusion-oriented applied linguistics” (p. 288) that interrogates the “communicative phenomena” and “linguistic barriers” (as opposed to language barriers) that hinder students’ inclusion and agency. The most obvious of these barriers include discourses that position international students as deficient in knowledge and skills. Instead, Motschenbacher has called for a pedagogy of “applied linguistics [that] harnesses the very notions of negotiability, instability and changeability” (p. 288). This call mirrors the authenticity, groundedness, interdisciplinarity, and relevance central to strong EAP curricula (Hyland & Shaw, 2016, p. 3) beyond linguistic and academic needs to better represent the discursiveness of critical pedagogy. Further, the use of language detail can be “a mode of inquiry” (Moore, 2017, p. 24) where EAP pedagogy “demonstrate[s] the linguistic means by which different types of judgements are enacted in texts, or that enable a writer to assume some kind of authorial stance” (p. 23). This closer look at language features in contexts of racialized discourses (Chun, 2016; Motha, 2016), Indigenous-settler histories (Walsh Marr, 2019), queer linguistics (Sauntson, 2019), and queer critical race pedagogy (Aguilar-Hernández, 2020), draws attention to normative and exclusionary language practices and facilitates students’ critical thinking and language development. Pushing back against the “commodification and disembodiment of language,” Meighan (2021, p. 77) has advocated for looking more closely at language itself to decolonize our frames of reference towards a “more equitable, sustainable and transformative way of viewing and interacting with the world” (p. 78). None of these topics is in competition with or in contradiction of one another. This language-informed critical pedagogy is an opportunity for EAP instructors to think about the question, “What does pedagogy look like if we refuse to separate the intersectional experiences” of students? (Aguilar-Hernández, 2020, p. 683) as “social inequities are multi-pronged and manifest in higher education classrooms” (p. 692). This questioning is the academy’s opportunity to embrace the insight and diversity that is, or at least could be, internationalization and critical language awareness.

Critical Tensions

Critical pedagogy prioritizes “the creation of a world grounded in an ethics of social and material liberation” (Darder, 2018, pp. 2–3). This understanding can be at odds with the ways in which EAP departments, and, by extension, their instructors, are positioned in relation to the academy. Rarely credit bearing and often housed adjacent to the academy (rather than situated within it),

EAP practice is positioned as remedial and mere preparation for the “real work” of the academy (Murie & Fitzpatrick, 2009, p. 166). Rather than a professional field with opportunity for critical pedagogy, EAP is seen as “language training” in practice. The “practical orientation” is problematic in tertiary education, where EAP students are patronizingly seen as empty vessels “with a deficit of literacy skills which can be topped up in a few English classes. In this view, literacy can thus be taught to students as a set of discrete, value-free rules and technical skills usable in any situation” (Hyland & Shaw, 2016, p. 2). This view completely erases the agency of students. Further, educators should recognize that nothing is in fact value free and neutral, particularly in education. The EAP class is an opportunity to reify the power imbalances or engage with the greater potential of education, as “any position one takes in education is a political position, even the pretense of neutrality or maintaining the status quo means taking a side” (Nieto Ángel et al., 2020, p. 147). On one end of the spectrum is the role of teacher as deliverer of packaged curricula for standardized assessments, and at the other end is the teacher as mediator or “agent of empowerment” (Haque, 2007, p. 94). Recognizing EAP instructors are working with international students in a largely globalized world, there is the opportunity to create a “critical pedagogy of the global [that] must be able to reckon with the fundamental transformations of consciousness, experience, and identity that are central to the shift to the historical condition of globality” (De Lissovoy, 2020, p. 185). This condition of “globality” is “the organization of human life and meaning on a much vaster and more complex scale” (p. 184) and the world in which post-secondary education and students engage. By ignoring the potential of critical pedagogy, particularly with international students, the academy shirks the promise of more meaningful engagement and learning all around.

The flexibility and responsiveness required of critical pedagogy requires significant investment and agency on the instructors’ part; they cannot do this deep planning and preparation and delivery without significant support. Keeping in mind that “the starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people” (Freire, 2013, p. 161), EAP curricula need to be responsive and situated. This need for investment, agency, and support brings us to a particularly problematic aspect of the relationships required of critical pedagogy: the precarity of EAP instructors.

Despite the depth and breadth of knowledge required of EAP instructors (BALEAP, 2008), they typically occupy a “third space” (MacDonald, 2016) adjacent to the academy, rather than embedded (and protected) within it. This marginalization is due to both ideological and economic factors. Ideologically, English language instruction has long been positioned as a remedial “butler” service to the academy, rather than a full-fledged discipline (Raimes, 1991). EAP instructors are seen as “academic workers...hired to perform a specific, standardized teaching task” (McCartney & Metcalfe, 2018, p. 214) and part of “a service industry to provide students with access to a neutral body of knowledge” (Haque, 2007, p. 94). This characterization negates the linguistic, disciplinary, intercultural, and pedagogic expertise EAP instructors carry and deploy. Further, EAP instructors are marginalized by the conditions of their employment, with typically temporary contracts and placed out of view and concern of the academy at large (McCartney & Metcalfe, 2018). While it may be distasteful for educators to celebrate the economic impact of international education, there is an oppressive disparity between international student fees and the material wellbeing of EAP instructors. With fluctuations of

student enrolment, marketing initiatives, and study visa processing, few EAP instructors can rely on steady employment. Recognizing that “impermanence has remained a consistent feature” (Breshears, 2019, p. 42) throughout English instruction in general for several decades, this precarity undermines EAP instructors’ opportunity to engage with critical pedagogy in deep and meaningful ways.

Recalling that dialogue is central to critical pedagogy, Freire (2013) asked, “How can I dialogue if I am afraid of being displaced, the mere possibility causing me torment and weakness?” (p. 158). The chronic precarity of EAP employment, exacerbated by global crises such as COVID-19, undermines universities’ opportunity to realize the full potential of dialogue with international students and their academic English instructors. Post-secondary institutions cannot rely on precariously employed individuals to carry out the larger goals of higher education from the margins of institutions they “serve.” There is a greater opportunity for deeper dialogue, relations and learning. However, if post-secondary institutions want EAP departments to engage with EAP students in critical thinking and the bigger concepts of higher education, they need to engage in discussions with these departments and international students to see what insights they have to share. There needs to be greater recognition of the nuanced work that EAP instructors do and the professionalism required to straddle academic, service, and pedagogical demands, “For only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking” (Freire, 2013, p. 160). International education, EAP instruction, and higher education are in no way incompatible; they are as of yet not attaining their full potential to dialogue and realize the promise they hold for one another.

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