



CRITICAL LITERACY, FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND THE EDUCATION ABOUT RACE RELATIONS IN BRAZIL

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As TESOL practitioners, we should engage in daily critical reflections of how our ideas of race influence what we teach, how we teach it, and how we understand our student (Kubota, 2009)

Introduction

This article explores how language education can align with education about race relations in order to challenge the race-based beliefs that permeate Brazilian society. It focuses on facts about language teaching that can help us answer questions such as: does race matter in language teaching? If so, why does it matter? What role does race play in learning/teaching dynamics? Reflecting on these questions can be a starting point for creating learning opportunities that focus on race relations in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom. I will examine some possible answers or thoughts that can contribute to the conversation about education on race relations in Brazil.

Teaching and learning EFL involve direct or indirect interactions between groups of speakers who are culturally, racially and linguistically distinct (Kubota; Lin, 2009). In this way, language teaching, one way or another, conveys racialized images of students, teachers, and characters that inhabit language teaching textbooks (Kubota; Lin, 2009). Although race is widely studied in different knowledge areas, such as education, anthropology, history and sociology, studies that focus on race and English Language Teaching (ELT) are still rare. The ones available, according to Kubota and Lin (2009), usually align studies of race with those of gender and class. These studies also address power, identity, subjectivity, social (in)justice, and other themes that are vital for all aspects of second language education. Even though Brazil is the cradle of Critical Pedagogy¹, the situation there is not different than other parts of the world where English is taught as a foreign language. Although some scholars defend critical approaches to language education, very few of them connect issues of race to EFL teaching, such as Moita Lopes (1996, 2002, 2006), who defends an (un)discipline(ed) Applied Linguistics, and Ferreira (2006), who emphasizes the social responsibility for ELT to address themes that are able to promote ethnic-racial equality in this field.

The Brazilian guidelines for English Teaching in High Schools (OCEM)² presume that EFL teachers use a critical literacy approach to lesson



planning, materials development, and all methodological choices involved in the teaching of writing, reading, and oral communication in EFL classes. This is supposed to be done through the exploration of relevant themes, such as citizenship, diversity, equality, social justice, dependence/interdependence, conflicts, values, and regional and national difference. Reconceptualizing the approaches for EFL teaching in Brazil is a significant political shift in language education in “regular” schools³, as it considers that teaching a language needs to be seen as much more than simply providing students with a tool for communication. English is also seen as a tool for promoting criticality and reflection. Anchored in these guidelines as well as in the Law of Directives and Guidelines for National Education (LDB)’’⁴, this work aims at relating the education about race relations in Brazilian schools to the educational outcomes of learning a foreign language. Thus, it starts by briefly introducing the Brazilian Guidelines for the Implementation of Law 10.639/03, that has made the teaching of African and Afro- Brazilian history and culture⁵ mandatory in Brazilian Basic Education, by modifying the LDB. This paper will also define critical literacy and establish roles to be played by critical EFL educators in Brazilian schools. Finally, a link is established between principles of critical applied linguistics, critical literacy and the need for racializing EFL teaching in Brazilian schools as a way of implementing the law 10.639/03 in EFL classrooms as well as a way of promoting learning opportunities that take into consideration the learners’ identities and cultures.

African history and Afro-Brazilian cultures in schools

In 2003 Law 10.639/03 (subsequently referred to as the Law) was passed, which alters the core legislation that regulates education in Brazil, the LDB. Since then, African history and Afro-Brazilian culture are mandatory subjects in basic education, both in public and private schools. In 2004, in order to regulate the implementation of the Law, the National Council of Education instituted the National Guidelines for the Education of Ethnic and Racial Relations and for the Teaching of History and Afro-Brazilian and African Culture⁶, which outlines a series of pedagogical actions to be taken by school personnel.

The following guidelines provide appropriate contextualization for the Law, and present important values and actions that need to be put into practice in schools:

- The critique (and rectification when needed) of the representations of Blacks and other minorities in texts and teaching materials by school coordinators, advisors, and teachers;
- The creation of conditions for teachers and students to think, act, make decisions, and take responsibility for positive ethnic-racial relations, by facing and overcoming disagreements, conflicts, and contestations as well as valuing racial-ethnic contrasts and differences;

- The promotion of heritage education through the learning of Afro-Brazilian culture, aiming at its preservation and diffusion;
- The establishment of positive meanings for the participation of different social, ethnic and racial groups in the construction of the Brazilian nation;
- Attention to cultural and historical links between different ethnic-racial groups and to social alliances;
- The importance of the participation, under the coordination of teachers, the Brazilian Black Movement organization, Black cultural movements, and the community where the schools are located in the planning of political-pedagogical projects that focus on ethnic-racial identities.

Additionally, the guidelines challenge the idea that only the Black population is affected by racism, the myth of a racial democracy and the ideology of whitening. According to this document, these ideas are constituent of Brazil's historical and social formation and are deeply ingrained in the Brazilian social imaginary so that they affect Whites, Blacks, and other ethnic-racial groups (Brasil, 2004).

The guidelines also unveil the concept of race as a social construction built upon tense race relations between Blacks and Whites. In that context, race is used to inform how some phenotypical characteristics of the individual, such as skin color and hair texture, influence, interfere with, and even determine the social places and fortunes of individuals within the Brazilian society. Another key concept addressed in these guidelines relates to the term "ethnic," as in the expression "ethnic-racial relations." Ethnic, in this expression, emphasizes that the tensions caused by differences in phenotypic traits are also associated with the cultural roots of African ancestry, whose world views, values, and principles differ from those found in Indigenous, European, and Asian cultures (Brasil, 2004).

To conclude this section, it can be said that the Law and its guidelines altogether represent an important affirmative action that values the identity, and the memory of African descendants in Brazil (Gomes, 2010). Moreover, according to Gomes (2010), the sanctioning of the Law means the acknowledgment of racial inequalities in Brazil, inasmuch as it is a consequence of international pressures and the long-standing demands of the Black Movement. The Law has brought Brazil a variety of initiatives for fighting racism and changes in political actions that needed to take place (Gomes, 2010).

Critical Literacy and Foreign Language Education

Understanding the basic principles of Critical Literacy is vital for establishing a viable relationship between EFL teaching and the general (critical) education of the individual. Menezes de Souza (2007) defines literacy as a cultural practice that involves the ongoing negotiation of meaning in "continuously contested sites of meaning construction." Critical literacy



supporters conceive literacy in broader socio-cultural and political terms. Critical literacy (Cervetti, Pardales and Damico, 2001) is mainly derived from post-structuralism, critical social theory and critical pedagogy. From post-structuralism, critical literacy has borrowed its methods of critique and the understanding of texts as ideological constructions embedded within discursive systems. Based on critical social theory, critical literacy sees texts as continually subjected to methods of social critique. Finally, because of the influence of critical pedagogy, critical literacy practices need to draw on social justice, freedom, and equity as central concerns.

As I am discussing critical literacy and language education in Brazilian contexts, I will highlight the contributions of Paulo Freire's *Critical Pedagogy* (1970, 1992, 1996). Freire's contributions to the conceptualization of critical literacy are fundamental, as critical literacy essentially determines a different attitude toward reading. Reading the word is not enough. As stated in Freire's work, reading the word and reading the world should be intrinsically related, as any text is embedded in comprehensive contexts of social, historical, and power relations that generate it. Moreover, the critical reading of the word within the world, and vice-versa, is a tool for social transformation. Consequently, critical pedagogies to literacy centralize issues of social justice and emancipation (Freire, 1970, 1992, 1996; Giroux, 1998; Giroux, McLaren, 1989).

How does critical pedagogy enlighten the roles to be played by EFL teaching in the education about race relations? A major concern of Freire's critical pedagogy as well as for other educators committed to critical forms of education is the development of "critical consciousness." *Through critical consciousness, students should come to recognize and feel disposed to remake their own identities and sociopolitical realities through their own meaning-making processes and through their actions in the world* (Cervetti, Pardales, Damico, 2001). If an objective is help learners develop positive Black identities, and suppress racism as well as the diverse consequences of the belief in the "myth of racial democracy" that permeates the Brazilian social imaginary, EFL can and should be used for that purpose. Knowing a foreign language fosters the inherent idea of otherness that is a "rich point" to be more intensively explored.

In spite of potentially being a favorable field for critically reading the word and the world, EFL teaching is sometimes criticized for its constant effort to be dissociated from sociopolitical matters. Such critique includes reflections on linguistic imperialism (Rajagopalan, 1999; Caranagajah, 1999), the communicative approach to language teaching, conceptions of native speakers, and so forth. English is the most globally taught language today (Block, 2010), and the most taught foreign language in Brazilian schools. For Brazil to embrace critical approaches to EFL and (re)define principles for language education in our schools, it is necessary to review the basis of the critique often associated with colonized approaches to language teaching. Understanding the methodology used in teaching English is an adequate starting point for this review.

Since the early 1990s in Brazil, teacher education programs advocate the Communicative Approach to Language Teaching (CLT) as the approach to be used in schools. CLT was developed as a reaction of those dissatisfied with the audiolingual method and its excessive manipulation of the linguistic structures of the language. It embraces the goals and the processes of classroom learning (Savignon, 1991) and seeks the development of the learner's communicative competence as the main goal of language education. However, in spite of being quite innovative for the field of language teaching due to its focus on language as a tool for communication, CLT lacked an attempt to see language use as rooted in complex social relations. Authors such as Pennycook (1994) and Canagarajah (1999) call attention to the fact that CLT and other approaches derived from it are ideologically loaded, in that they are related to sets of values, beliefs, and feelings about the best way to conceptualize language, communication, and language teaching and learning (Block, 2010). Such an ideological framework serves the interests of specific groups and can be considered a producer of larger discourses about language education as well as a justification for pedagogical practices.

If compared with critical literacy, CLT is found to share similar principles such as learner centeredness, the need for including some heterogeneity in the representation of speakers, and the use of authentic language. What distinguishes the approaches is the lack of politicization of CLT, as Mattos and Valério (2010) point out:

Em outras palavras, na abordagem comunicativa o aluno aprende a língua estrangeira para a interpretação, expressão e negociação de significado (SAVIGNON, 2001); já no letramento crítico, ele aprende língua (materna e / ou estrangeira) para transformar a si mesmo e a sociedade, se assim lhe convier. Para o ensino comunicativo (EC), a língua é um instrumento de socialização; e para o letramento crítico (LC), ela é, em última análise, um instrumento de poder e de transformação social.⁷

Teacher education programs tend to advocate for CLT as the ideal approach to be used in Brazilian schools, chiefly because it supports the teaching of oral and written language integrated with grammar and vocabulary instruction. However, classrooms all over Brazil often use grammar-translation and structure-centered methods of teaching. The reasons for that are large classroom sizes, deficiency of appropriate teaching materials, and lack of continuing education programs for teachers. Discussing critical literacy as a viable way of teaching EFL entails reflection on what counts as critical in language education and what are the possible ways of implementing critical literacy in public schools. Critical EFL educators have to deal with a threefold challenge. First, there is the challenge of teaching the language itself under unfavorable conditions. Second, teachers need to include in their practices the enormous contributions of Linguistics,



such as language acquisition theories, concepts of language and communication, learning styles and approaches and so forth. Third, there is the challenge of maximizing education through EFL teaching, which requires that all agents involved in language planning, such as teachers, administrators, policy makers, teacher educators, and materials developers, get engaged with the same project of recreating the reality of EFL classes in schools.

Discussing the approaches to language education leads to another discussion, one that focuses on teaching materials, primarily textbooks, as they are both “curriculum shapers” and the materialization of pedagogical principles that guide classroom practices. Textbooks can be used as examples of this detachment of CLT from the “real world.” Considering the status of English as a lingua franca, materials, especially those designed by publishers in the US and UK,⁸ are used for organizing lessons around topics that can be included in classroom activities without causing discomfort, so that the same textbook series can be sold to different parts of the world. As Gray (2002) points out, some publishers even have lists of banned topics or rely informally on the acronym PARSNIP (politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, isms, and pork) as a *rule of thumb*:

One publisher’s list I saw contained some thirty items to be avoided or handled only with extreme care. This included alcohol, anarchy, Aids, Israel and six pointed stars, politics, religion, racism, sex, science when it involves altering nature, e.g. genetic engineering, terrorism, and violence. (Gray 2002: 159)

The convention of avoidance, then, is related to problems that tend to be purposefully neglected and are those that customarily are the most meaningful issues in real world students’ lives. The avoided topics are also close to the ones suggested by OCEM as topics that should be present in Brazilian schools to promote critical literacy.

Teachers of English, as well as any other teacher, face, in their daily teaching, educational challenges that go beyond the imagined protected spaces of schools and the imagined worlds portrayed in textbooks. What seems to be relevant in students’ lives are not necessarily common topics included in EFL textbooks, such as Mr. Smith’s weekend or global warming, although these can be considered valid topics to be discussed in classrooms.⁹

Considering all these challenges, it is necessary to define the role of teacher education in this process. Teachers should be seen as transformative agents and their education should be focused upon this perspective. This encompasses the traditional contents of sociology of education, psychology of education, educational legislation and other subjects. But, the specific weight on ELT needs to entail criticism of current practices and suggestions for creating new ones. This is mostly necessary when it comes to the discussion of race, racism, and race relations.

The discussion so far can be summarized by the indispensable need for critical approaches to EFL. This point should not neglect the critical issues usually avoided by CLT materials, as argued by Pennycook (2001) when defining his Critical Applied Linguistics:

Critical applied linguistics, then, is more than just a critical dimension added onto applied linguistics: It involves a constant skepticism, a constant questioning of the normative assumptions of applied linguistics. It demands a restive problematization of the givens of applied linguistics and presents a way of doing applied linguistics that seeks to connect it to questions of gender, class, sexuality, race, ethnicity, culture, identity, politics, ideology, and discourse.

Therefore, race and race relations are to be considered a concern anywhere EFL is taught, but, in Brazil, these are topics whose teaching is mandatory, as explained in the previous section of this text.

A critical Perspective on Language Education and Race Relations

Applied linguistics (AL) is generally understood as the field of investigation that encompasses research about language teaching, language learning, and language acquisition. However, in the last decades, the field has expanded its scope to other research topics. The definition adopted by the International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA), reflects this expansion:

Applied Linguistics is an interdisciplinary field of research and practice dealing with practical problems of language and communication that can be identified, analyzed or solved by applying available theories, methods and results of Linguistics or by developing new theoretical and methodological frameworks in Linguistics to work on these problems. (...) The problems Applied Linguistics deals with range from aspects of the linguistic and communicative competence of the individual such as first or second language acquisition, literacy, language disorders, etc. to language and communication related problems in and between societies such as e.g. language variation and linguistic discrimination, multilingualism, language conflict, language policy and language planning.¹⁰ (AILA website)

AILA's definition is a broad concept that does not define real life in terms of the social, political, economical, and other aspects that affect it. AL is criticized for not placing emphasis on the importance of connecting these so called "real problems" to ideological aspects that permeate language and language use. Alastair Pennycook (2001), one of the most vocal critics of this lack of commitment of AL, proposes that a foundation of critical applied linguistics is necessary. For Pennycook, applied linguistics tends to be an area totally untouched by critical pedagogy,



critical discourse analysis, and critical literacy, the latter emphasizing the relation between language and social transformation, diversity, and citizenship. Another focus of critical applied linguistics is students' identity construction and the construction of positionality presented for students in language classrooms. To summarize, the central fundamentals of this critical approach to working with language education are the needs and interests of students in promoting transformation and change.

This new approach to the scope of problems addressed by traditional applied linguistics sets the scene for my argument in favor of using EFL as one of the school subjects that can and should promote education about race relations within the Brazilian context. Critical literacy means that EFL lessons need to return to the principle of learner-centeredness, and cast light on learners' identity development as part of the general concerns to be addressed by EFL education. In the context of Law 10.639/03, the focus is on the ethnic and racial identities.

Several authors criticize the "homogenization" of cultures and speakers in EFL textbooks, for presenting an idealized native speaker, represented, generally, through the idea of *whiteness* (Liggett, 2009, 2008; Mackie, 2003). The consequence is that the EFL students are not given enough opportunities to understand the racial realities of countries traditionally associated with EFL, with the purpose of reflecting upon the realities that surround their own local contexts.

In addition to textbooks, other cultural artifacts that affect EFL learning, such as movies, music videos and lyrics, TV shows, books, newspapers and so forth, need to be explored from a critical perspective. This means that the use of these artifacts should cause reflection about what and who is represented (or not), how they are represented, by whom, with which purpose, who is empowered (or not), and so forth. The materials used in teaching seldom allow for a critical reading of a racialized world. The consequences of this lack of criticism and even the actual invisibility, especially of Blacks (and native nations) in textbooks and other EFL teaching materials affect, more or less directly, the formation of racial identities of students and teachers of that language. In the Brazilian context, for example, considering that more than 50% of the country's population is Black, Brazilian students need to have opportunities to associate their *racial belonging* with what is generally attributed as positive values of foreign cultures. As Mackie (2003) asserts, being color blind in classrooms, where different colors are present, disregards the opportunities of learning who we are, how we got there, and how new positions can be built.

Another important area to emphasize is the whole context of teacher education, which is often exempted from the discussion about roles played by race in EFL teaching. As a teacher educator, for example, I have observed a student teacher of French refer to a Black male puppet by asking "how is he going to speak French, if he is Black?" This student teacher probably did not have access to a representation of a diverse France and the French-speaking world that was not marked by whiteness. This

association of native speaker to whiteness is considered oppressive in relation to non-native language teachers, a consequence of the colonialism that affects hegemonic languages commonly taught in schools. In the international labor market, for example, recruitment and hiring of English teachers is affected by assessment of the proficiency of a native speaker based on his race. This culminates in the preference for hiring White teachers, while native speakers of Asian origin, for example, are considered eternal foreigners, regardless of their ability to speak English (Kubota, 2009). This is due mainly to the whiteness associated with a native speaker of English and other languages, such as French and Italian, commonly taught in Brazil. In the case of Brazilian teachers, although there is little research about how the labor market behaves in relation to the EFL teacher's race, one can infer that language professionals are affected by the myth of the native speaker. Black teachers are also affected by the impossibility of identification with whiteness that is expected of native speakers (especially of European Languages) under this myth. The expectations of students are also based on this idea. I remember another situation that demonstrates this point. An eleven-year-old student commented about his Black teacher of Italian: "Italian? . . . But you are Black!" Based on these experiences and quoted research, I argue that the issue of race should be a component in language teacher education. The interactions quoted show the importance of including the discussion of race and race relations in teacher education programs. The absence of such discussion is reflected in the inability of language teachers to see how the culture of African descendants can be valued positively and effectively in the context of foreign language teaching, as defined by the guidelines for the implementation of Law 10.639/03.

A racialized approach to teacher education has a direct connection with the use of teaching materials in the classroom, especially in Brazil, where teaching is frequently centralized in the use of textbooks, which are, in most cases, the only source of linguistic and cultural information available for students and teachers. As foreign language teachers assume the role of selecting, adapting and creating materials for classroom use, it is important to highlight that textbooks and other resources are not neutral media, since textbooks represent cultural values, beliefs, attitudes, and social constructions imposed on teachers and students, who, incidentally, build their images of other cultures as well as of their own culture. The critical analysis of the cultural values that are implicit and explicit in teaching materials is a prerequisite for ensuring the cultural relevance of language teaching.

Conclusion

The main argument of this text is that there is a major need for EFL teaching in Brazil to consider the issue of race. This proposal is justified mainly by considering that learning and teaching foreign languages allow teachers and students to distance themselves from their local realities to understand foreign (strange, unknown) realities. Therefore, language



education allows discussions from points of view based in global and local diversities, which are always marked by all kinds of differences. Racial identities need to be in focus, so that activities designed to develop the skills of reading, listening, speaking and writing in a foreign language come to be activities that use written texts, movies, music videos, and other resources to promote awareness and critique of ethnic-racial relations in Brazil, building, above all, culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1997).

The ideas of race, racialization, and racism are factors that shape social, cultural, and political dimensions of language teaching and learning. English language teaching entails complex relations of power fueled by differences created by racialization. The silence in applied linguistics on issues related to race and racism has to be overcome, especially in times when other knowledge fields are deepening their approaches to these concerns. It is essential that language education advances from its persistent color-blind vision and instead recreate itself to be inherently filled with understanding and thoughtfulness towards different cultures and people (Kubota, 2004).

In this paper, I did not aim to provide practical examples of the implementation of Law 10.639/03. My goal was to provide a theoretical basis that can relate the field of language teaching to the education about race relations in Brazil. It is time now to create a critical Brazilian approach to language education that draws on the contemporary demands of a socially just education that fights racism.

Endnotes

¹ Developed by Paulo Freire, Critical Pedagogy is a philosophy or approach to education that considers how education can empower individuals with the tools to understand and criticize the world aiming at the promotion of social justice.

² Orientações Curriculares para o Ensino Médio (OCEM).

³ Regular schools are private or public schools that are not exclusive language schools, known as “cursinhos” in Portuguese. Generally, the government does not intervene in what should or should not be taught in these institutions. These “cursinhos” are also considered to be more efficient than schools when it comes to language teaching.

⁴ Lei de Diretrizes da Educação Nacional (LDB).

⁵ This means that teaching African history and the legacies of the African diaspora in Brazil, from colonial times until today – i.e. Afro-Brazilian history is now part of every Brazilian student’s education.

⁶ This law, since 2011, included similar criteria for indigenous education (educação indígena).

⁷ In other words, according to the communicative approach the student learns a foreign language through interpretation, expression and negotiation of meaning (Savignon, 2001), whereas in critical literacy, they learn the language (mother and / or foreign) to transform themselves and society,

if it interests him/her. For communicative teaching (EC), the language is an instrument of socialization, and for critical literacy (CL), it is ultimately an instrument of power and social transformation.

⁸ Most of the textbook series adopted by Brazilian language schools tend to be imported. Brazilian authors aiming at writing books with similar popularity tend to design materials highly influenced by these imported materials.

⁹ Studies on youth can contribute a lot to depict what are meaningful and relevant topics for conscientization as advised by critical pedagogy.

¹⁰ <http://www.aila.info/about.html>

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