Critical Thinking and Global Issues in the ESL Writing Classroom

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Abstract

This paper follows the author’s quest to develop the “perfect” English for Academic Purposes (EAP) writing class and her eventual decision to eliminate the textbook in favor of focusing on global issues in the classroom and using authentic materials gathered from Internet and print sources instead. The author first describes some available literature pertaining to second-language writing instruction and her survey of writing assignments in content-area courses at her university which went into a 2004 MITESOL presentation “Putting the ‘A’ in EAP Writing Courses.” The author also outlines a series of events which led to her advanced ESL writing course designed around the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals. This paper discusses the efficacy of teaching critical thinking skills by using global issues in the ESL writing classroom. The author describes the important debates concerning critical thinking and highlights the main contributors to scholarship in the field. Major objections to the method are also discussed, along with the author’s own experiences with teaching critical thinking skills using global issues to a group of advanced ESL writers. An appendix includes an extensive global education resource list.

Introduction

The most important issue that English as a Second Language (ESL) composition teachers confront is what to present in their lessons and how to present the material they have chosen. Thanks to (or despite) a plethora of second-language scholarship in recent years, and the field’s early reliance on first language (L1) composition theories, a multitude of approaches have been suggested to answer these questions of “what” and “how”. In an early summary of this dilemma, Silva (1990) refers to the veritable firestorm of approaches as a “merry-go-round” that “generates more heat than light” (p. 18), posing more problems than solutions for ESL composition teachers (not to mention
their students). Since the publication of Silva’s article, a myriad of second-language writing handbooks have appeared (some already in second editions), with recommendations for yet additional approaches or the fine-tuning of old ones (Ferris & Hedgecock, 2005; Hinkel, 2004; Hyland, 2003; and others).

However, the existence of so many available teaching methodologies should not be frowned upon for the confusion it may cause, for an eclectic approach might be useful. As Ferris (2002) states, “rigidity in embracing a particular paradigm and rejecting out of hand all elements of others may cause us to ignore who our students are and what they will do after we are done teaching them” (p. 7). Nevertheless, it is for that reason—“what they will do after we are done teaching them”—that many second-language writing instructors are adamant that their ESL courses involve students in a discussion of global issues, with the end result of increasing critical thinking skills in the students and producing concerned global citizens for the future, “after we are done teaching them” (Benesch, 1993, 2001; Davidson, 1998; Pennycook, 1994; Stapleton, 2002).

In the last decade, because our world has become increasingly inter-connected due to a myriad of factors, including globalization, lowering of intercultural barriers, and the explosion in Internet usage, the duty of L2 writing instructors to equip their students to respond critically to global issues (Benesch, 2001, after Freire, 1970) might be considered equal to, if not greater than, their mandate “to prepare students to become better academic writers” (Spack, 1988, p. 29).

**Discussion**

The value of developing critical thinking skills through presentation of important global issues or other topics in language classes, especially the L2 writing classroom, became especially apparent during the 1990s. In her overview of scholarship on this critical pedagogy, Santos (2001) describes this “approach [as one] that ties course content and materials to sociopolitical issues in the service of social change” (p. 178) and mentions such writers as Canagarajah (1993), Benesch (1993, 1995), and Vandrick (1995), as among those who wrote favorably about the concept. Similarly, Pennycook (1994) comments about the need to “turn classrooms into places where the accepted canons of knowledge can be challenged and questioned” (p. 298).
Benesch (1993) was particularly influenced by the writings of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970/2006) and his ideas about the rejection of the then-accepted “banking” system of education, in which all-knowing instructors poured their wisdom into the heads of their students, and its replacement with what he called a “problem-posing education” (p. 83). For Freire, and his followers, the purpose of education is transformation, in students’ lives, but even more so in their world beyond the classroom (Brown, 2004; Jacobs & Cates, 1999; Small, 2003). In this conceptualization of education,

men and women develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.

(Friere, 1970/2006)

Those who take a critical stance towards L2 writing use classroom discussions to talk about the students’ world as it is and what it could become. This stance is not without controversy, and it continues to this day to be one of the hot-button topics in ESL pedagogy (Casanave, 2004).

**Opposition**

Undoubtedly, one of the most significant arguments against critical ESL pedagogy is found in an article by Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996), where the authors suggest that it might be better for L2 writing instructors not to try to encourage critical thinking in their classes because ESL students may not be equipped by their cultural backgrounds to be able to think critically. Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996) held that critical thinking was a Western construct and, therefore, attempting to teach it to ESL students would be yet another instance of the cultural imperialism imposed by English language instructors. The words that caused the most controversy are when Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996) state:

L2 student-writers, given their respective sociocultural and linguistic socialization practices, are more likely than native English speaking (NES) students to encounter difficulty when being inducted into CT [critical thinking] courses in freshman composition classes. They are not “ready” for CT courses in either L1 or L2 writing classrooms. (p. 232)
This assertion and similar ones in an article by Atkinson (1997), in which he maintains that critical thinking skills should not be taught in general ESL classes but only when attached to work in specific disciplines, brought the debate on critical thinking skills in ESL to a fever pitch. In general, rebuttals seemed to state that if U.S. students could be expected to learn how to think critically, then ESL students should (and could) be as well. Davidson (1998), in responding to Atkinson (1997), made the point that one of the purposes of an ESL program is to prepare L2 students to perform on par, or nearly so, with their NES counterparts; therefore, instruction in critical thinking is necessary, considering that NES students are coached in critical thinking throughout their school years. In other words, critical thinking skills should be included along with any other skill, such as paragraph formation or sentence structure, as necessary content in the classroom.

Yet another opposing viewpoint on the issue of critical thinking came from Santos (2001), who disagrees especially with those, including Pennycook (1989) and Benesch (1993, 1995), who take the idea of critical language to the “extreme” (p. 180). Explaining this further, Santos (2001) remarks, “A prime example of what I consider extreme in critical theory and pedagogy is the premise that everything is political and ideological” (p 180). Instead of providing ESL students what they need to know to be successful in their academic writing, she feels that this focus on deconstructing every minute detail brought up in the class—even to the point of challenging the academic discourses students were struggling to learn—would surely interfere with their academic success.

Some also express concern that a teacher who chooses a global issues focus in the language classroom will indoctrinate students in “approved” Western values when discussing such topics as gender equality and societal stratification. Instructors are cautioned, as when any controversial topic is discussed among reasonable adults, to present issues in a responsible and balanced manner. As Peaty (2004) suggests, it should be made clear to students that their opinions on any of the topics discussed in class will not influence their grades, one way or another. In addition, Peaty (2004) advises instructors to keep their material on the issues up-to-date to avoid presenting something as true when new information or research has changed current viewpoints on the subject.

While these objections may be valid, teachers interested in inculcating their students with critical thinking skills would do well to consider the words of H. D. Brown, well-known developer of teacher-
training materials for ESL instructors, when he observes, “We must subvert the assumptions that teaching languages is sterile or neutral, that it contains no political content, [and] that we should steer clear of touchy global issues” (as cited in Anderson, 1996, n. p.). In fact, Brown (2004) traces what he calls “critical language pedagogy” back to a best-selling book from the 1960s called, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (Postman & Weingartner, 1969) and suggests that language teachers may be just the ones to subvert the status quo when it comes to choosing content and deciding how to present that content in the language classroom.

**EAP Writing Instructor as Global Educator**

Wondering if including critical thinking skills in my own advanced EAP writing course would produce any noticeable change, I chose a Czech-produced English-language teachers’ manual, *Global Issues in the ELT Classroom* (Thomas, 2008), to augment material that I had gathered from various Internet and print sources and previously constructed handouts. The book includes lesson plans based on the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These eight goals represent eight world issues that attendees to the 2000 Millennium Summit agreed were the world’s most pressing problems and those on which effort should be made to eliminate by 2015. The Millennium Development Goals include bringing an end to poverty and hunger, gender equality, and environmental sustainability. In the text, instead of attaching English-language learning to one culture, language learning takes place in discussion of topics related to the MDGs, including slums, child soldiers, and early marriage. In the book’s preface, Thomas explains some of the features of the lessons, writing, “In preparing the students to deal with the issues, relevant knowledge of the world is imparted via maps, info boxes, websites, and problem solving activities such as true/false prediction statements. The students are challenged to reflect on their own attitudes, feelings and sensibilities” (p. 5). In this reflection, students were able to bring their own experiences, or lack of experiences, on these issues to the classroom to discuss and/or learn about in an academic atmosphere. These topics were far from “household chores” (seen in an EAP textbook) or even “the importance of American football” (a topic used in a U.S. culture-based EAP course) and represented possible issues of relevance to students who would be responsible global citizens in the future.
My students (a group of seven students, from Korean, India, and Romania) benefited greatly from the inclusion of these global issues in the classroom. I noticed three distinct differences between the class that semester and the times I had previously taught the same course. First, I noticed an increase in the length of student discussions of the topics presented. Unlike before when some topics ("my first pet") would elicit minimal responses from my students, these global issues seemed to open up stores of knowledge that they had never had the opportunity to express before. Students wanted to tell me and the rest of the class how the issue under discussion impacted people in their own country, and they wanted to ask each other questions to find out what was going on in other countries. I had students remark that they had never had the opportunity to talk about such issues before. Second, unlike before, when students seemed a bit blasé about the topics suggested by the textbooks, the students in this class seemed somewhat shocked about the information I shared. For example, after a class in which I presented a lesson about the socially-accepted marriages of young girls in some countries, I had one young man from Korean approach me to tell me he was going to look for more information on the subject because he could not believe it could be actually happening. He had never heard of such a thing before. Finally, I discovered that covering global issues in the classroom with ESL students encouraged them to tell parts of their personal stories that had remained hidden up to that point. A woman from India told the class during one session about her own attempts to get out of an arranged child marriage. She also wrote a four-page narrative on the subject in which she was able to express her fears and outrage. She told me how thankful she was for having had the opportunity to talk about that episode in her life.

These are merely my observations, while others will be able to give facts and figures about what they have observed. What I observed in the classroom seemed to echo the thoughts of Mansilla and Gardner (2007) who note that using global issues with youth who have been personally affected by the issues, either because of background or previous study, brings them to "exhibit greater global sensitivity, more informed understanding, and a more nuanced sense of a global self" (p. 63). Using global concerns as a focus for a NES writing course may not be as successful because of the isolation of many, but not all, U.S. college-students. In fact, an attempt on my part to conduct such a course led to much frustration over students’ lack of global awareness and their inability to get beyond a "we should go help those people" mentality.
Conclusion

Teaching critical thinking skills by using global issues in the classroom is not a new idea (the Japan Association for Language Teaching-JALT, for example, has had a Global Issues in Language Education Special Interest Group since 1990) (“Global Issues,” 2007), but it is one that represents a perfect fit with those students who have grown up in an ever-shrinking world, so different from that in which so many pedagogical principles were developed. In today’s world, in which English-language teachers no longer “ha[ve] to be the ambassadors of the ‘English culture’ in the classroom” (Llurda, 2004, p. 319), those same instructors can instead offer students authentic discussion points on matters that students may have seen splashed across the screens of their computers on a 24/7 cycle. Focusing on critical issues in the classroom offers felicitous “alternatives to the views that the purpose of learning English is success in the business world…, being a tourist, and having fun” (Small, 2003, n.p.). The topics are of high interest to students, and in order to talk and write about them, the students must learn academic vocabulary that will serve them well, either in future academic courses or informed discussions back home with international speakers for whom English is a lingua franca. Interest is high because, as Dupuy (2000) points out, students feel that, maybe for the first time, they are “learning something valuable and challenging that justifies the effort” (p. 207).

The myriad of approaches to answer the questions “what” and “how” as instructors prepare their ESL courses are still there. ESL instructors have to consider the debate about critical thinking skills in the ESL classroom and decide for themselves if these skills are important enough to teach to their students. Critical ESL classes, in which students are taught to question the world around them, while learning to manipulate the English language, provide educational opportunities “that are neither anachronistic nor irrelevant [and] will … teach today’s youth to thrive in the complexity and diversity that defines the global era” (Suarez-Orozco & Sattin, 2007). Focusing on critical thinking skills while using global issues in the ESL classroom can spark debate, offer an endless supply of topics and material, and maybe be that first step that concerned ESL instructors can make towards teaching for a better world.
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Appendix A


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