

## INTERVIEW

With Alan Waters, UK, on 'critical theory-based pedagogy'.

TW: I understand that critical pedagogy is a teaching approach that helps students to question and challenge domination and the beliefs and practices that reinforce that domination. Chris Lima educated us all too on critical literacy and global issues in her interview in the *Teacher Trainer*, Volume 23 Number 2, pp 10-11. But I know, Alan that you recently gave a talk in which you were quite critical of 'critical theory-based pedagogy' in ELT. So I am very grateful to be able to ask you some basic and maybe not so basic questions on how this issue has grown up and what implications it has for us. Can I ask you first,

TW: What do you mean by 'critical theory-based pedagogy' in ELT?

AW: Thank you. Basically, I am using the term to refer to certain teaching ideas and a general set of attitudes towards ELT pedagogy which are strongly influenced, consciously or otherwise, by 'critical theory'.

TW: For example?

AW: Well, 'critical pedagogy' is probably the most obvious example, along with its close relative 'critical language awareness', but I am also thinking of the overweening advocacy of teaching ideas such as 'the learner-centred approach', learner autonomy, 'authenticity', and so on, as well 'in principle' hostility towards textbooks, the 'direct' teaching of grammar, 'structure' in language teaching, cultural generalisations about learners, and the like. From this perspective, for example, even the most mundane and apparently benign of language teaching practices, such as the use of 'realia', are viewed with suspicion, because they are seen as being, e.g., manifestations of neo-colonialism, or worse (see Holliday 2005: 49-50).

TW: OK, but what is it that you think has led to this viewpoint?

AW: Ultimately, it stems from the body of thinking within the social sciences known as 'critical theory' (CT). This can be seen as boiling down to the application of Marxist principles of political analysis to social and cultural structures (Browne 2006). The main tenet of CT is that power imbalances in the 'life-world' occur because of the exercise of hegemony by more powerful groups over less powerful ones. So, from this angle, for example, 'big business' and governments are seen to be in an exploitative relationship with the ordinary citizen, men with respect to women, adults in relation to children, teachers vis-à-vis learners, and so on. And because of such perceived problems, new policies and practices aimed at solving them are advocated, e.g., ones aimed at strengthening the democratic rights of the perceived 'underdog'. This set of attitudes nowadays dominates socio-political thinking in many parts of the world, especially in academic circles (Waters 2009b) - it is in many ways the modern-day 'Zeitgeist'.

TW: And the ELT connection?

AW: The CT turn of mind can be seen as having first entered ELT in a formal way via Phillipson 1992, in relation to the perceived hegemony of English as an international language. Then, after that, a succession of other books, such as Pennycook 1994, Canagarajah 1999, McKay 2002, Holliday 2005 and Edge 2006 have all applied a similar perspective to the re-evaluation of language teaching pedagogy. As a result, there is now widespread disapproval, in much of the professional 'discourse', of long-standing forms of ELT pedagogy, because of the unhealthy power imbalances they are perceived to involve. In an attempt to solve the problem, there has been what is, in my view, an ever-increasing 'over-selling' of teaching ideas which are seen to be more acceptable in terms of the CT ideological perspective, such as 'critical language awareness' (i.e., attempting to increase students understanding of the way that language can be used to create and reinforce power

inequalities), the maximisation of 'authenticity', 'learner-centredness', and so on.

TW: But aren't such developments to be welcomed, as ways of making ELT pedagogy less unfair and exploitative?

AW: In theory, perhaps, but when you look at what happens in classroom terms, you often see a different picture. Much less is said about this side of the matter. Because of this one-sided approach, I think there is a danger of teachers and trainers being seriously misled about what is said to be wrong with well-established aspects of pedagogy, on the one hand, and the claims made for the effectiveness of critical theory-based alternatives on the other.

I should stress right away, though, that I am not saying that there is nothing wrong with current ELT pedagogy as it is practiced in the majority of language teaching situations, nor that there is nothing of value in alternative, CT-based teaching ideas - far from it, in fact. Rather, my point is that the CT critique tends to throw out the baby with the bathwater, i.e., it proscribes the good bits along with the bad, and very often fails to distinguish properly between the two.

TW: Can you give me some examples of how you think this occurs?

AW: Certainly - let's take the case of 'critical language awareness'. In a recent paper, James Simpson argues that 'a critical approach to language learning is helpful for all types of student; English language learners everywhere can engage with arguments about ... the hegemony of English as an international language, for instance' (Simpson 2009: 428). However if we look at actual examples of what this can involve, such as in Fabrício and Santos 2006, you get a rather different picture.

Their teaching situation was a class of 35 Brazilian state-sector secondary school learners, aged 10 - 11. As they explain, their intention was to replace the approach used by the regular class teacher - one of 'an emphasis on decontextualized language,

characterized primarily in terms of its structural components' - with one 'in which English was to be approached by, above all, its socio-cultural and political dimensions' (Fabrício & Santos 2006: 75).

The examples they provide of the kind of classroom interaction which their lessons produced show that they certainly did manage to get the learners to talk about the way that English is used in Brazil in terms of its socio-cultural and political dimensions (even if some of the conclusions they draw seem rather dubious). However, there is one 'small' problem, even though Fabrício & Santos themselves do not appear to be concerned by it, i.e., it is very difficult to see how the lessons helped the students to learn English in any normal sense of the term. This is because, as they say, '[our] approach necessarily involved the use of students' L1 as the medium of communication' (ibid: 75-76). In other words, no meaningful use of English of any kind occurred throughout the three weeks of their teaching!

But surely the primary reason such learners are in the EFL classroom in the first place is to increase their everyday knowledge of English. Also, while it's true that the more 'traditional' approach used by the class's regular teacher may have also had its drawbacks, at least it appears to have had face validity in its context of use. Indeed, as Fabrício & Santos acknowledge, the teacher felt that it 'worked' with that group' (ibid: 73). It is difficult to see how the same can be claimed, in terms of ordinary language learning purposes, for the alternative approach used by Fabrício & Santos, or how it can therefore always be the case, as Simpson claims, that 'a critical approach to language learning is helpful for all types of student' (op cit: 428). This is the kind of problem I am concerned with - the way in which, in such instances, existing pedagogy is simply being thrown out of the window on a wholesale basis, because of a pre-determined ideological perspective, and at the expense of learners' language learning needs.

TW: Have you perhaps just selected a 'straw man' from the literature to try to prove your point?

AW: No, I don't think so. I chose the Fabrício and Santos 2006 study because, first, it is set in the 'heartland', and not the periphery, of the ELT world, i.e., in a highly typical rather than unrepresentative setting. Secondly, it advocates an approach in which English is to be taught 'above all' in terms of its political dimensions, i.e., as an inversion of normal priorities. Thirdly, it provides empirical data concerning some of the actual classroom teaching and learning processes involved in such an approach, rather than just the more positive theoretical or idealised perspective that is found in much of the rest of the literature. Fourthly, it is published in a collection of papers (Edge 2006) which is presented as an authoritative guide to the overall direction in which it is claimed ELT should be moving. And finally, it is just one among many examples of the problem. As I have tried to show in, e.g., Waters 2007a and Waters 2009b, a number of other areas of pedagogy, such as those I mentioned earlier, i.e., 'learner-centredness', 'learner autonomy' and 'authenticity', frequently suffer from having the same one-sided predetermined ideological perspective imposed on them, without regard to the consequences for pedagogy.

TW: Perhaps we could say that all teaching ideas are ideological in one way or another?

AW: Yes, I very much agree that that is the case. But as I see it, we can make a distinction, first, between pedagogical beliefs of the kind which I personally think we should espouse as a profession - that is, ones that are bottom-up in their overall orientation, and which take into account the typical nature of classroom language teaching and its pragmatic realities and, secondly, others, of the critical theory kind, which are top-down and theoretical in nature, and which largely or wholly exclude the practitioner (and learner) perspective. It is pedagogical ideology in this second sense, and the attempt to impose it on teaching for its own sake, without considering its pedagogical viability that I'm concerned about - as, as I see it, in the example from Fabrício & Santos. What might be called a difference between 'political ideology' being

applied to pedagogy rather than the development of 'pedagogical ideology' derived from the 'chalk face'.

TW: OK. You said earlier that you don't see critical theory-based teaching ideas as being all bad. Can you expand on this a bit more?

AW: Yes, certainly. For example, in my view, critical language awareness can act as a useful means of challenging assumptions about the 'politically-neutral' focus of most language teaching pedagogy, by helping to expose its underlying ideological assumptions. In a similar way, a number of sound pedagogical goals can obviously be achieved via the use of 'authentic texts' - such as increasing confidence, boosting motivation and developing skimming and scanning skills. And the concept of 'learner-centredness' can help to foster an appreciation of the need for a more balanced role for the learner in the learning process than is often the case. In other words, the CT perspective can be seen as capable of providing a valuable *complement* to many prevailing pedagogical traditions.

But, unfortunately, this is not how the matter is usually presented. Rather, CT-based pedagogical ideas are typically proposed as straightforward replacements for existing practice, on the basis of purely political rather than pedagogical considerations, as I have tried to show in the Fabrício and Santos example. The basic stance of the CT perspective towards ELT pedagogy is thus typically not one of attempting to understand and appreciate established pedagogic traditions in their own right. Rather, they are viewed in preconceived, top-down terms, and therefore found wanting.

TW: How do you think the situation can be improved?

AW: Well, I think we need to base the development of new teaching ideas on an effort to properly take stock of the pragmatic value of much of what is involved in long-standing ELT pedagogical traditions. And then, and only then, and only if clearly appropriate, we might attempt to add on to them in a two-way, negotiated manner. In other words, we need

to adopt a 'building up' rather than a 'tearing down' or 'throwing away' approach.

I have tried to illustrate the application of this principle at the classroom level and more generally in teacher education terms in, respectively, Waters 2006 and Waters 2009a, and in Waters 2007b: 289-290, I have also summarised a number of other studies that are based on the same approach.

It seems to me that it is only in this kind of more 'integrated' way that the problems caused by the one-sided perspective that CT-based pedagogy adopts can be solved, and a sound foundation established for the further development of ELT pedagogy.

TW: Thank you - anything further you would like to add before we conclude?

AW: Yes - just to say that, for any fellow trainers who are concerned about the problems caused by the critical theory approach to ELT in the same way that I am, my overall 'message' is: 'English language trainers of the world, unite - you have nothing to lose but inappropriate theories!'. Thank you!

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