

The Political Dimensions of Language Teaching and the Participatory Approach

1. The Politics of Language

English is an international language and a language of power. People think that learning English will give them the opportunity to get a better job or it will empower them. There is a connection between the spread of English and globalisation. Graddol says the following about it: “[T]he availability of English as a global language is accelerating globalisation. On the other, the globalisation is accelerating the use of English” (qtd. in Larsen-Freeman and Anderson 165, my change). Whereas some people see the spread of English as a positive development, others consider it to be a threat. They fear that English leads to the extinction of languages (spoken by indigenous people or immigrants) and that it may cause the loss of personal identity.

2. Whose English Should be Taught?

There is a controversy about which variety of English should be taught because there are several World Englishes. Kachru divides these World Englishes into three circles. The ‘inner circle’ is represented by the English spoken in the United Kingdom, the United States, Anglophone Canada, Australia, Ireland, Malta, New Zealand, South Africa and certain countries in the Caribbean. The ‘outer circle’ comprises India, Nigeria and Singapore.

2.1. English as a Lingua Franca

Here comes the third circle, ‘the expanding circle’, into play. The norms of the other circles are controlled by native speakers, but here in the third circle we are confronted with millions of people speaking English as an International and Global Language, a Lingua Franca or contact language. The question arises who then is the possessor of the English language, is it just native speakers or is it anyone who is able to speak English for whatever purpose? Seidlhofer, Breitender and Pitzl’s (166) solution to this problem is that English should no longer be considered to be owned by native speakers only, but that it should be seen as a Lingua Franca whose norms

are determined by its users. In this way English becomes a communicative language not only spoken by native speakers but by outsiders who may make mistakes which native speakers would consider as inaccurate (for example the omission of 's' on the end of third person singular present tense verbs 'He walk to school every day'). English as a Lingua Franca is variable and this leads to the conclusion that there is no answer to which English should be taught because teachers themselves are unsure about which form of English is correct (if the 's' can be omitted).

2.2. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis is the study of how identity and power relations are constructed in language. The problem stated here is that language is not ideologically neutral. There is an example given in the book from a newspaper during the apartheid-era in South Africa. Another example is gender discrimination in texts describing women as subservient to men. Those problems can apply to other languages as well.

2.3. Critical Approaches to Pedagogy

Teachers need to be aware of the political dimensions of speech acts, that language is not neutral but may convey political issues. Critical pedagogy tries to make teachers aware of the need of an egalitarian society that gives all students the same opportunities and therefore promotes social justice. Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (1988) describe four methods of how to become a more critical teacher:

2.3.1. Literacies

Some educators think that participating in the English culture cannot be equated with being able to read this language. It is a whole concept which they see as a plural, as the concept called literacies. In this sense literate English culture is influenced by its politics, its education and business. It empowers people to be able to use and speak this language. Those teachers that consider English as empowering students will take into account how power is explicitly and implicitly expressed in English texts. They will exactly look at which words authors use and how the language (its grammar/aspects) works in those contexts.

2.3.2. Plurilingualism and Multicompetence

A lot of English learners are plurilingual which means that they are used to speak more than one language. This is the reason why teachers should motivate English learners to learn more languages and that English is not a non plus ultra language, that it is important to go beyond and have positive attitudes towards other languages. Therefore, teachers should teach their students that multicompetence, the knowledge of more than one language, and a successful use of language are the most important things to learn.

2.3.3. Non-native Speakers as Teachers

Many language education programs hire native speakers rather than non-native speakers because they believe them to have a better intuition when it comes to a correct language use. However, this is rather a political issue than an issue of competence, as non-native speakers are the best example of how one can become a successful language user and they know best what it takes to overcome problems when learning a new language. A good teacher is not determined by his/her origins.

2.3.4. Hidden Curriculum

It is important to be aware of the content that is being taught and how one teaches. Hidden curriculum refers to the student's backgrounds that come into play during lessons. It influences the way in which they behave and the meaning they attribute to the teacher's actions and what material he/she uses during lessons. Therefore, the teacher's lesson planning might include things like a discussion with students about life issues and problems they have to solve when learning English.

2.4. The Participatory Approach: One Response to the Politics of Language Teaching

The Participatory Approach was created by Paulo Freire in the late 1950's but it only came up in the language teaching literature 30 years later in the 1980's. The Participatory Approach is similar to the content-based approach which is described in chapter 10, and it is a version of the Communicative Approach. Freire, a Brazilian, tried to help very poor illiterate adults living in slums and rural areas by developing a

Portuguese literacy program. Members of Freire's literacy team started spending time with those adults and this is how they found out about their personal problems. Through these dialogues vocabularies could be established. In this way learners may be liberated from social oppression and improve their lives. It empowers people to be more active in their lives and gain control over their lives. Freire is a critic of the so-called **banking method** of teaching in which the teacher knows what the students need to learn. Freire then advocates a method in which learning emerges within the students and therefore it is the students who tell the teacher what they need to learn to be able to improve their lives. In addressing real-life issues the teacher and the students enter together a process of problem solving with an open end.

Lesson with Participatory Approach (171-75)

The participants of the lesson are adult students who recently immigrated to the United States from Central Europe. They work part-time during the day and study English at night. Their English has a starting level of low-intermediate. The teacher asks the students what they did the last week. This is when the students start explaining what is happening in their lives, with which problems they are confronted and so on. The teacher then finds out the reason why most female students do not attend her course at night. The reason is that they do not want to be alone in the city after dark. The teacher then shows the students a picture where they can see a building at night and they can see some men standing beside it. She goes on talking with the students about the problem of not wanting to be alone outside after dark and asks them specific questions about what they see on the picture. The teacher's solution is to let the students write a letter to the mayor's office to request better lightning. The students will send the letter out as soon as it has been written by them and corrected by the teacher.

Bibliography

Larsen-Freeman, Diane, and Marti Anderson, eds. *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching* (third edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.