

Literature Review

Critical education in an English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching context

The purpose of this literature review is to demonstrate the lack of analytical approaches to teaching in the higher education sphere and the importance of critical pedagogy in enhancing curriculum development, teacher training and classroom practice. When reviewing the literature, it soon becomes clear that research studies in the ESL field are dominated by language instruction techniques, with less attention given to ways teachers can adopt a more critical stance with their learners (Pennycook 1999; Saroub & Quadros 2015). The special edition of *TESOL Quarterly* edited by Pennycook in 1999 was a rich, if now dated, source of ideas and research in the field, possibly reflecting a more critical period in ESL education. Respected ESL and Adult Education journals, on-line publications, unpublished theses and academic books from the late 1980s to 2016 will be examined with a coverage of sources from Australia, the US, Asia, the Middle East and South America. Pennycook (1994, 1999), Giroux (1988) and Freire (1970) are commonly cited in these research studies. It is rare to find authors or research questioning the value of critical pedagogy; Ellsworth (1989) and Johnson (1999) are notable exceptions. They believe discussions of critical pedagogy and its political associations have led to very few practical changes in classrooms and do not address the unequal power relations which they believe are as strong as ever. This literature review covers two main areas. Firstly, research into what pre-service and existing teachers know and think about critical pedagogy is examined. The second area investigates teacher and student resistance to some critical teaching practices.

As it is a relatively accessible group, there have been many studies into pre-service teachers' attitudes and training towards their future students and critical pedagogy (Carrington et al. 2015; Fan 2014; Hollstein 2006; Orem 2000; Reis 2014). Findings showed that student teachers had an insufficient understanding of critical pedagogy across many disciplines, not

The following are general comments about the structure and content of an academic essay written for university – they are not prescriptive and intended as an educational guide only.

Commented [u1]: For general information on the structure of a literature review, go to:
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Commented [#2]: The purpose of this piece of writing is clearly articulated from the start.

Commented [UTS3]: Opens with a general comment about the topic under discussion. (In this case a general comment about the focus of much of the literature in this field.)

Commented [z4]: Student has used in-text referencing in the Harvard-UTS style throughout the literature review as per their lecturer's specific instructions. For more information, go to:
<http://www.lib.uts.edu.au/help/referencing/harvard-uts-referencing-guide>

Commented [z5]: When referring to the literature, you have to report what the authors say, think, argue or have found. For more information on **reporting verbs** go to:
<https://www.uts.edu.au/current-students/support/helps/self-help-resources/grammar/reporting-verbs>
or
https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/Grammar%20A%20Reporting%20Verbs_0.pdf

Commented [UTS6]: Student identifies the most important literature in the field and gives a historical overview of the literature.

Commented [u7]: This part of the introduction outlines the scope of the literature review. It also provides the reader with a preview of how this literature review will be structured into two major themes.

Commented [UTS8]: This is a topic sentence. It shows the reader what the topic is dealt with in this paragraph (i.e. literature about many studies using pre-service teachers)

just ESL. Contradictory findings about the long-term effect of training student teachers in particular areas were apparent. Orem (2000) **found** that, if exposed to a greater understanding of issues facing their likely learners, including being 'exposed to the political realities of their profession' (Orem 2000, p. 445), student teachers were more likely to adopt the desired teaching practices and values. However, other research **found** that when faced with challenges or new situations, new teachers tended to rely on their own educational experiences of teacher-centred education (Fan 2014; Reis 2014).

Commented [UTS9]: Starts by discussing similarities in the findings of different literature.

An influential study by Cox and De Assis–Peterson of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Brazil **claimed** the majority 'were unaware of critical pedagogy ... [which is] ... heard only as a foreign voice' (1999, p. 448); the authors **note** the irony of this in the land of Freire. The small number who did report practising critical pedagogy had varying views of what it meant in practice, ranging from critical thinking to reflection to evaluation. Cox and De Assis-Peterson's research **made a direct call for** research into what ESL teachers knew of critical pedagogy and this is likely to have sparked later studies in this area discussed below.

Commented [UTS10]: Discusses differences in the findings.

Commented [UTS11]: This topic sentence shows the reader that one particular study will be dealt with in this paragraph. The student has identified this study as 'influential' and this is why one whole paragraph has been devoted to it, rather than integrating it with other sources.

A group of recent, related Iranian university research studies (Aliakbari & Amoli 2014; Sahragard et al. 2014) found a similarly insufficient understanding of critical pedagogy among a wide group of primary, high school and EFL teachers in Iran; both studies **made recommendations** for better teacher training in this area. Aliakbari and Amoli **concluded** that part of the problem was the Iranian educational system. Its perceived distance from classroom needs and practices meant 'individual [teacher's] attempts to change this educational system or make improvements in its principles are limited' (p.159). Sahragard et al. (2014), who investigated the reasons behind teachers' low understanding of critical pedagogy, **found** that time constraints, a bureaucratic organisation, a lack of teaching materials and a lack of teacher training/professional development in critical pedagogy were reasons cited by teachers for not employing critical teaching practices.

Commented [UTS12]: The writer's voice is apparent - this is the student's idea, not just description. The writer has used cautious language ('is likely to have') which is appropriate for academic writing. This sentence also provides cohesion as it links to the next paragraph.

Commented [z13]: This topic sentence indicates that this paragraph deals with different research in the Iranian context. In this paragraph, the student first points out similarities in the studies and then discusses their points of difference.

Resistance to change is another area that was found to restrict the adoption of critical teaching practices in the ESL area. Canh and Barnard's small case study (2009) of Vietnamese teachers' capacity to take on a national curriculum change directed by the Vietnamese government **found** implementation was different from the 'idealised world of

Commented [RS14]: This topic sentence introduces the second major theme of the literature review (i.e. resistance to change).

innovation designers' (p. 30). While also **recommending** better teacher training, they **cited** the need for an adjustment of teachers' belief systems to make change happen, since an individual's practice 'behind the closed doors of their classroom' (p. 21) is a largely unobserved space, despite mandated curriculum changes. Resistance and avoidance among EFL teachers **was noted** too by Cox & De Assis–Peterson's Brazilian study (1999). They found that teachers often avoided political language questions from students, for example, 'Why should we learn English if we're Brazilian?'. This suggests that any uptake of critical practices may be more dependent on teacher attitudes, reflecting their internal reality, than on external factors.

Learners can also be reluctant to change and many of them come from countries with a strong tradition of teacher-centred educational practices (Canh & Barnard 2009) where passing a test, rather than engaging in a discussion, dominates. Overseas studies **report** that Thai students resisted moves towards greater 'student autonomy' (Sanprasert 2010) and Japanese students complained that native English speaking teachers employed 'uncomfortable practices such as soliciting original ideas through active verbal participation in class' (Saito & Mirian 2004, p.34). Therefore, even if ESL teachers adopt a more critical practice, this could be met with resistance from some students. In contrast, Crookes (2013) **contests the claim** that 'critical pedagogy is culturally inappropriate' (p. 139) by **citing** examples of where critical pedagogy has operated in some East Asian countries. However, these examples cited by Crookes are somewhat limited and more extensive research needs to be carried out to validate such claims.

Finally, an important part of the literature that must be examined is the published ESL learning material. Some material does take a critical approach, including critical activities for beginning English learners (Burns & Hood 1998). Crookes (2013) has a chapter on critical materials/methods which can be used by teachers to develop material and exercises. Auberbach & Wallerstein's idea of 'problem-posing' **demonstrated**, however, that in critical pedagogy 'curriculum is not a product ... but a process' in which students are heavily involved (1987, p. v). It can be argued that simply having learning material available which takes a critical stance is not sufficient as teachers need to take a different approach to what education can achieve through adopting a more critical stance.

Commented [z15]: This paragraph continues with the theme of resistance/reluctance to change but this topic sentence shows the reader that this time the topic of this paragraph is the literature concerning the learners' reluctance.

Commented [z16]: The student brings in some contrasting findings to other literature discussed and then evaluates it critically, so the writer's voice is apparent here.

Commented [#17]: Demonstration of critical thinking on the part of the student.

Commented [z18]: The transitional signal *Finally* indicates that this is the last paragraph in the body. Other transitional signals used in this literature review include: *in contrast, for example, however, since, therefore, despite, and while*
For more information go to:
<https://www.uts.edu.au/current-students/support/helps/self-help-resources/grammar/transition-signals>

Commented [z19]: This topic sentence indicates that this paragraph will deal with published learning materials.

Commented [z20]: This mini-conclusion to this paragraph brings the topic back to teachers' resistance to using critical pedagogy.

This review of relevant literature has quite clearly shown a lack of understanding of critical pedagogy among a range of teachers, despite the strong likelihood of it being included in their training. It also demonstrated that many teachers used avoidance when faced with difficult topics or situations related to critical language education. Calls for curriculum changes, better training and more teaching materials were common in research recommendations, and it may be that teachers' personal attitudes also play an important role in changing classroom practice.

Commented [z21]: Academic writing often takes on a cautious tone. Words such as *perhaps, likely, sometimes, may, can, appears to, seems to suggests, and considers* can help the writer achieve a more cautious tone.

Commented [z22]: This conclusion summarises the findings and follows the structure set out in the introduction.

Verb Tenses in Literature Reviews

Commented [#23]: Always consider the verb tense when presenting a review of previously published work:

1. **Past tense:** If your focus is on the study itself or the researchers who studied it, then it is preferable to use the past tense. In this case, the study would be the subject of your sentence, e.g. 'Brown (2018) *reported* that ...'. The past tense is most commonly used in this instance and is also known as 'the reporting tense'.

2. **Present tense:** If you are sharing your own views about a previous study, or conveying the views of other experts or academics in the field then the present tense may be more appropriate, e.g. 'Smith (2018) *argues*.'

3. **Present perfect tense:** Occasionally, the present perfect tense is used if the research you are referring to is fairly recent, e.g. 'Recent studies *have demonstrated* that... (Jones 2017; Smith 2018)'. It is also used to make generalisations about past research in an area, e.g., 'Several researchers *have studied* these stimuli....'

The above recommendations are intended to assist in choosing the right tense when referring to other studies – they are not rules. The tense you use will depend on the field of study, what you want to convey and focus on, and what is grammatically correct in the context.

Commented [u24]: A good literature review will bring together and demonstrate the skills of summarising, paraphrasing, synthesis, critical analysis, comparing and contrasting, citing and in-text referencing, a reference list, appropriate writing structure, and evidence of the writer's proofreading and editing before submission.

Commented [u25]: A literature review is often part of a research project, used to identify a gap in the research and provide a context for your own research. However, in this case this is a stand-alone literature review assignment where the student is only expected to evaluate and synthesise what past researchers have presented or written.

General Comments

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Commented [#26]: The reference list conforms to Harvard UTS referencing conventions. For a guide to this style of referencing go to: <http://www.lib.uts.edu.au/help/referencing/harvard-uts-referencing-guide>

Always check with your course/subject coordinator, lecturer or tutor exactly which referencing style you should use. Generally, assessments specify that the reference list should appear on a separate page at the end.

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