

Critical Pedagogy in ESL Classrooms

Critical English language teaching is a pedagogical approach to engaging English language students in discussions of discriminatory practices, social inequality, identity negotiation and issues of power (Chun, 2015; López-Gopar, 2014; Motha, 2014). From this perspective, talking and teaching about controversial issues is an unavoidable aspect of English language teaching (Kubota, 2014). One way to enroll students in the project of discussing contentious issues in ESL classrooms is by connecting the “everyday concerns of students” to broader societal issues of social justice (Fleming & Morgan, 2011, p. 39). Simone Hengen, an ESL instructor at the University of Regina, and I recently contributed a chapter to a forthcoming book on the topic of critical pedagogies in English-language teaching (Sterzuk & Hengen, under review). Drawing on findings from a research project initiated and conducted by Hengen, the chapter presents responsive pedagogy which illustrates how everyday concerns of students can provide an entry points to discussions of controversial topics in ESL classroom.

In Hengen’s research, ESL students in Saskatchewan describe encounters with stereotypical messages about Indigenous peoples in Canada. What quickly emerged in this study was that the learners had many ideas about Indigenous peoples; some encounters that left them confused, curious, and with partial understandings of colonialism; and many unanswered questions. As a response to the study results, the chapter also presents a pedagogical activity designed to introduce alternative discourses around Indigenous peoples in Canada. Through inquiry-based activities, students confront, interrogate and negotiate societal messages about Indigenous peoples, non-Indigenous peoples and Canada’s past and present. Because ESL classrooms are often a first stop for many Canadian newcomers, ESL teachers have a role to play in helping language learners recognize and critically examine these stereotypical representations of Indigenous peoples. Left unexamined, these messages have the potential to shape learners’ dispositions towards and relationships with Indigenous peoples. This local pedagogical example illustrates language teachers’ responsibility to give students tools to recognize and critically examine societal inequity.

References

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