

**CRITICAL APPLIED LINGUISTICS: KEEPING  
EXAMINING THE GIVENS AND LOOKING  
FOR ALTERNATIVES**

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**ABSTRACT**

Critical applied linguistics (CALx) is radically different from mainstream applied linguistics in that it not only incorporates social, historical and ideological factors in language education but also takes interest in improving existing situations. It espouses a dynamic model of society and keeps raising the awareness of inequalities and questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions. From a reflective perspective, this article described the historical connections of CALx, discussed its philosophies, aim, domains, and approaches to TESOL, and examined the relative strengths and weaknesses of CALx. The purpose of this article was to encourage language education practitioners to embrace a reflective and critical attitude towards the givens and keep looking for better alternatives. English education in Taiwan, under the policy of English as a mainstream language in globalization, especially needs input from CALx so that hasty policies can be avoided.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

With the accumulation of human knowledge and incessant enquiries about the value and ways of acquiring knowledge, different paradigms keep emerging to amend the weaknesses and

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undoings of the former ones. The burgeoning and development of the critical paradigm is one of such cases. This section will briefly deal with the origin of the critical paradigm, its emergence and popularity, and the formulation of critical applied linguistics (CALx).

### **1.1 The Historical Connections with the Critical Paradigm**

Within the framework of inquiry, the two mainstreams have been the scientific paradigm (also nature science paradigm, quantitative paradigm, or experimental paradigm) and the interpretive paradigm (also naturalistic paradigm, or qualitative paradigm). The former envisages the world as objective, observable and causal, aiming to achieve prediction and generalize deductive laws to control the world, while to the latter the world is laden with subjectivity, intentions, unpredictability and differences, so its purpose is to understand and make sense of the world. The desire to ameliorate social conditions then brings about the development of the critical paradigm. This paradigm attempts not simply to understand and describe but to engage in making change for the better through critical reflection. The critical paradigm is deeply rooted in many theories such as poststructuralism, neo-Marxism, post-colonialism and post-modernism, all of which, though variant in some respects, are similar in the stance that skepticism, pluralism and meaning indeterminism should be emphasized and that, as Apple (1979) notes, social, cultural factors and power relations should be taken into account in constituting knowledge. Knowledge is considered not static but dynamic and creative, able to generate power for improving or reforming the existing social situations.

### **1.2 The Resurgence of Critical Pedagogy and Its Impact on Language Teaching**

Emerging out of the social movements such as the civil rights movement and the women liberation movement, critical pedagogy came into being in the 1960's. Critical pedagogy is fluid, dynamic and innovative in essence. To meet the challenges from changing social and historical contexts, several types of

critical pedagogy have developed, from Paulo Freire's *pedagogy of the oppressed* to Giroux's *critical media pedagogy*.<sup>1</sup> Paulo Freire, some of whose notions are rooted in the Frankfurt school, has been regarded as one of the most renowned and influential educators in critical pedagogy. In his most famous book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), Freire disproves the *banking concept of education* in which students are positioned as receptacles to be filled with knowledge. To raise critical consciousness, he advocates a *liberatory, dialogical* pedagogy, which paves a way for *praxis*-actions involving transforming the oppressive, unjust structures in society.

Even though variation exists in different types of critical pedagogy, they are common in the fundamental assumption that all education is political (Freire 1982; Auerbach 1995) and as Apple (1979) observes, neutrality and objectivity is actually falsified because the educational institutions and knowledge transmission all reflects the selective perspectives, values and beliefs of the powerful segments in our society. Knowledge in critical pedagogy, as Berlin (1998) points out, is not presented as eternal and invariable phenomenon; political, social, cultural and contextual factors are tightly bound with the fabrication of knowledge. Foucault (1972) also clearly relates the intricacy among knowledge, power and truth.

The goal of education in critical pedagogy is to develop critical thinking in social injustice and to take actions to create a more egalitarian, democratic social and institutional structure. In classroom practice, critical pedagogy promotes criticality in both learners and teachers, a stance against the traditional unidirectional, domesticating process. It endeavors to engender learners' criticality by raising their awareness, needs and intentions, by respecting their experience and by empowering them. In addition, it encourages teachers to become critical by

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<sup>1</sup> Henry A. Giroux is a contemporary critical pedagogue. Like Paulo Freire, Giroux emphasizes the need of understanding students and addressing their contexts. Seeing the powerful influence of media representations on youth, Giroux argues for a critical reexamination of media so that students can locate themselves in their own contexts and expand their possibilities to actively resist or transform the oppressive cultural patterns molded by media (see Giroux 1988).

constantly examining their current situations and practice and by keeping a dialogue with learners. In such ways, teachers can move away from just playing the role of ideological and cultural reproduction to, to quote Tripp (1993:22), “[questioning] their habits and the often self-imposed constraints upon their actions in their own classrooms.”

The coincidence of critical pedagogy and discourse analysis in the early 1980’s heralded the influence of critical pedagogy on language teaching. Language started to be seen, as Cox and Assis-Peterson (1999) note, value-bound with extrinsic factors, such as politics, class, economy and culture. However, English teachers in this era still stayed immovable by such an upheaval, since the main focus of discourse analysis was originally on the mother tongue and embraced many areas other than pure linguistics, such as ideology and socioculture. It was in the 1990’s that teachers of English began to examine the neutral and merely communicative positions of English language education and criticize the apolitical representation of English as nothing but a false reality.

The increasing call for taking critical pedagogy in English language education gives birth to critical applied linguistics (CALx). Major figures in this field, such as Auerbach (1991), Pennycook (1995), and Phillipson (1992), affirm the close ties between language education, especially in ESL and EFL education, and political, social and economic factors, and encourage English teachers to uncover the voice of the oppressed through a sensitive mind and critically evaluate the current elite status of English as a globalization language. In *Linguistic Imperialism*, for example, Phillipson (*ibid*) maintains that the dominance of English in the periphery (ESL) countries will not only exploit these countries’ economy but also undervalue and marginalize the indigenous countries.

## **2. METHODOLOGY UNDERLYING CALx**

CALx is a rather recent development, yet it is more inclusive, encompassing not only the finding and understanding of facts but also the implementation of actions. It is also interactive and

dynamic, encouraging the teacher and learners to collectively look for what is hidden and take critical attitudes toward the status quo. CALx critiques the transferability of methodologies, for it claims that methodological choices must be, according to Ellis (1996), culturally attuned and tied to contextual situations. Any direct imported methods, as Holliday (1997) describes, are disruptive.

### **2.1 Philosophies Underpinning CALx**

Inherent from the concentration of socially constructed knowledge in critical paradigm, one of the essential philosophical perspectives in CALx is that language education should be context-focused, *viz.* the contextual awareness in ideology, culture, society, economy, race and gender should be entailed. Therefore, *world* and *word* must go hand in hand in language education. It is through such contextual awareness that we can uncover the inequalities hidden behind. The process of English education, as Rogers (1982) observes, is neither neutral nor merely instrumental. Another philosophy undergirding CALx is that we live amid a world of pain and applied linguistics plays a crucial role in either intensifying or alleviating that pain (Pennycook 2001). Therefore, education should constantly encourage critical reflection and skepticism and learners should be empowered. Only through critical stances and power transfer can we get to the bottom of disturbance, pain and inequalities and then construct efficient actions for change.

The other philosophy in CALx is that language diversity should be supported and protected and that the elite status of English needs critical reexamination. Language policy positioning English as the sole official language in the ESL countries, in the viewpoint of Mutumba (1999), will restraint the economic, political and social participation of the majority of people. CALx also maintains that there should be no exclusively standardized English. English diversity exists even in the so-called inner circle countries like the U.S., the U.K., Australia and New Zealand. Other Englishes such as Indian English, Philippine English or Nigerian English, though disparaged for a

long time, should now be fairly regarded. With the ongoing of globalization, the variety of English is bound to multiply and English will not serve merely, to quote Brown (2001:118), “as a tool for understanding and teaching US or British cultural values.” To CALx, *world* and *word* are coexistent and complementary.

## **2.2 Aim of CALx**

Relating language education, through reflexive process and critical analysis, to ideology, society, economy, gender and social class, CALx intends to reveal things from different facets, to question what is commonly assumed, to reformulate power relations in the light of inequality and diversity, and finally to provide and enforce alternatives in the hope of emancipating or transforming the current situations.

## **2.3 Domains of CALx**

CALx emphasizes the belief that language education should be closely tied to the critical domains in pedagogy, language awareness, discourse analysis and other areas not purely linguistics. Therefore, domains involving CALx are much broader than those in conventional TESOL. Language education is interwoven with the concerns, as Pennycook (1999) maintains, beyond teaching techniques, methods and approaches. Even for those issues overlapping with the conventional ones, CALx deals with them from different perspectives. For example, the integrative goal in language teaching is not merely restricted to the four language skills, but extends to sociocultural awareness (Talib 1992). Based on its critical stances toward language education, the domains of CALx can be categorized into the following.

### **2.3.1 SLA (FLA) related areas**

Such areas might include curriculum and syllabus design, materials production and selection, needs analysis, teaching methods, and language testing. All of these themes are re-explored from critical stances and the focus extends, as

Pennycook (2000) defines, to the contextual concerns, involving a broader critical analysis of social relations, such as class, culture, race and gender. The process of language acquisition is not apolitical; rather, to make learning meaningful, as Grady (1997) claims, all knowledge can not be ideologically disinterested; political and social issues need embracing, and learners' lived experience should be respected. For example, in dealing with language testing, CALx advocates a democratic, multi-way relationship; that is to say knowledge, experience, intentions, and interest of test takers and even the agents around them, such as parents and community, should also be taken into account. Testing in CALx is not seen as inspection but evaluation, through which a meaningful dialogical between the evaluator and the evaluatee takes place. The purport of testing in CALx is not to highlight the psychometric power of testing results but to gather useful washback information to improve the existent teaching and learning situations.

### **2.3.2 Language position areas**

CALx asks for a reexamination of language position and claims that language position can not be detached from such factors as politics, economy, history, power structure, and culture. In addition, CALx adopts more flexible attitudes to the diversity of languages (linguistic rights), stands against the *standardized* and *hegemonic* language position and urges, in line with Skutnab-Kangass' (2001) assertion, to enact laws to achieve linguistic rights. In terms of the English language education, CALx might involve the domains of supporting different Englishes, and reevaluating the rightness of completely standardized English in class and of regarding native speakers as the sole ideal English teachers. For example, in investigating students' desirability of native speaker vs non-native speaker English teachers, Rampton (1999) and Prodromou (1992) arrive at the similar implication that the latter are not necessarily worse off than the former because they have the advantage of knowing the learners' mother tongue and being able to draw on local culture. Widdowson (1994) even sees native-speaker teachers as

outsiders in the contexts of EFL.

CALx critically views the spread of English not as natural or neutral but, as Phillipson (1992) and Skutnab-Kangass (2001) claim, *capitalist interests* or *linguistic imperialism* in which other languages are consciously or unconsciously subdued to facilitate the policy of English as a mainstream language in globalization. Such assumption of English superiority, however, has aroused increasing criticism. For example, Eoyang (2003:19) writes this, "Perhaps the most insidious form of language imperialism is the assumption that English encompasseth all things, and is in every way superior to other languages." Discussing the phenomenon of linguistic imperialism, Ansre (1979, quoted in Phillipson 1998:104) also makes the observation that linguistic imperialism has a subtle way of warping people's minds, attitudes and aspirations and of preventing them from appreciating and realizing the full potentialities of the indigenous languages and cultures.

But such arguments do not mean that the spread of English is nefarious. Rather, they make us accentuate, as writers like Rajagopalan (1999) and Canagarajah (1999) contend, the tendency to date of increasing cultural intermixing and growing multilingualism. Put simply, what such arguments have been concerned about is not the English language itself but the spread of hegemonic superiority of English in every aspect held by English users.

### **2.3.3 Areas related to critical discourse analysis (CDA)**

CDA is considered as an indispensable domain in CALx, as it is an efficient and powerful approach to uncover different forms of disturbance and inequality, articulated or unarticulated. CDA involves critical and multi-directional engagement, aiming to analyze discourse from macro contexts. Writers such as Fairclough (1989) and Kress (1990) clearly illustrate the indispensable imbrication between texts, discursive practices and the wider socio-political structures. Through critical analysis of discourse, we can unearth the participants' ideologies, expectations, voices, identities, and cultures underlying the

surface of programs, textbooks, teaching methods, power structure and interaction modes. CDA is not limited merely to classrooms but also extends to other work place settings such as medical, legal or business settings.

What CDA is concerned with is the political, historical and social issues (macro discourse) hidden behind the apolitical language form (micro discourse). It also believes that in a discourse setting there often exist different forms of resistance and mismatches between intentions and interpretations (Kumaravadivelu 1999). CDA believes that only through touching on the ideological world can issues really be revealed. Only when the truths of issues are spotted can effective solutions be constructed for emancipation and improving the current situations.

#### **2.4 Critical Approaches to TESOL**

Based on the premise that the real truth resides in what is hidden behind, CALx adopts reflexive and critical stances to question the commonly held assumptions, trying to identify the false phenomena. The purpose of such stances is not just to understand, relate or describe but further to come up with transformative pedagogy to transfer power structure to make the existent situations better. Habermas' (1998) four stages give us a thorough picture for taking such an approach, from describing the existing situations, exploring the reasons behind, presenting actions for emancipation, to evaluating the efficacy of the actions in practice. Such an approach is also centered on learners' world, attending to their lived experience, concerns and needs. This is a participatory approach, as developed by educators like Friere (1972) and Auerbach (1989), aiming to empower the learners and invite them to provide active contributions in the milieu of *classrooms without walls*.

In terms of TESOL, such an approach problematizes the givens such as monolingual English teaching, authentic Western perspective materials or apolitical language ability. For example, Phillipson (1992) examined five predominant tenets in English

teaching worldwide and downplayed them as five fallacies.<sup>2</sup> With regard to literary texts chosen for ELT, Talib (1992:51) stresses the need of adopting works written in non-native varieties of English since this helps to enhance “the students’ sociocultural awareness, sense of self-identity, and communicative competence within the community they live in.” In dealing with the fashionable rhetoric *authenticity*, Widdowson (1994) strongly describes it as nontransferable because it is real only to native speakers but not EFL learners. Critical approaches underpinning TESOL, in a nutshell, creates more options and show respect to the participants and local contexts in curriculum development, material selection and ways of evaluation.

### **3. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF CALx**

By questioning the commonly held legitimacies, CALx has the advantage of stimulating creativity and the desire for improvement. Without such stimulation, the situations in language education will remain stagnant. The issues of inequality in power structure and distortions in ideologies will hang on. Another advantage is that CALx will specify its goal for improvement and bring up constructive methods for enforcement. It does not merely involve investigating the situations, but go further to make some change. The power of action makes such a critical approach different from others. The greatest advantage of CALx is that it listens to the voice of the participants and attends to the social, cultural and ideological contexts. Therefore, what CALx uncovers is closer to the real truths, which are often ignored or suppressed by the taken-for-granted beliefs. If educational plans are to be successful, as Freire (1972) asserts, the plans should be bottom up, involving a free, multi-faceted dialogue between the planners and the oppressed.

In spite of such advantages, CALx also has its limitations. Due to its attempt to challenge the mainstream assumptions, it

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<sup>2</sup> The five ELT tenets that Phillipson questions include (1) English is best taught monolingually, (2) the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker, (3) the earlier English is taught the better the results, (4) the more English is taught the better the results, and (5) if other languages are used much, standards will drop.

might easily incur skepticism and resistance from many sources, such as the participants' ideologies and the institutional power structure. Reforming or changing the deeply rooted ideologies or power structure is considerably hard and time-consuming. However, if such skepticism or resistance is not removed, there will be little progress for such an approach and the outcome will be far from desired. Another difficulty resides in the deeply ingrained cultural, social and political contexts. Usually, it is not the participants or institutions in a smaller context such as schools that resist change. Rather, it is under the restraints of the broader cultural, social and political considerations that make reformation very hard or almost impossible. Change takes place, as Kumaravadivelu (1999:460) claims, "only when an entire community, not just an individual, changes its ways of thinking and knowing, speaking and doing."

#### **4. HOW CALx TOUCHES ON MY PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE**

As a TESOL practitioner, I think CALx is a fascinating field and deserves our devotion to it even though a lot of time and energy will be invested. The critical reflexive spirit of CALx makes me adopt an expectant attitude towards different alternatives in English language education and approach the EFL phenomena from multi-faceted perspectives. Problems arising from language education will persist if we stick to the same ideologies. Problems, differences and conflict, as Fullan (2000) believes, are great friends in change forces and can lead to creative breakthrough if positively explored. CALx also expands my horizon as a language teacher, *viz.* language education is not simply a language matter but also involves the domains in culture, history, society and politics. *Word* is meaningless if separated from *world*. From CALx, it is inspiring to realize the danger of teaching English utterly through a Western lens, which, in Pennycook's (1998) viewpoint, will contribute to the continuity of colonialism constructs; rather, learners' sociocultural contexts should also be encompassed. English education should be more comprehensive and pluralistic, western and native cultures

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included, able to enrich, as Bisong (1995) observes, a multilingual repertoire and expand consciousness.

In addition, CALx motivates me to value the hidden truths and keep, in the words of Pennycook (1999:243), “the restive problematization of the given” of TESOL. Usually, what is observed may not be truths but false phenomena. For example, in a junior high ESL class, is learning really more effective when the main focus is on oral practice? Is it really true that writing should be suspended at this stage? Does a learner’s silence imply that s/he is not learning? In the elementary school of an EFL country, is it well-grounded that the earlier the pupils start English learning, the better the results are? The closer we get to the hidden truths, the more alternatives we will find. Language education should allow considerable flexibility so that more effective options can be sought out.

The greatest influence from CALx is that it lets me realize the importance and value of attending to language learners’ voice. Learners’ voice is often hidden or ignored in an EFL class. To motivate active involvement in learning, learners should not be disempowered or marginalized. Their voice, needs and intentions should be respected. Such respect can lead to effective interaction and cooperation between teachers and learners. It is through such an interactive process that an EFL class can be reformulated for the better.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

As a teacher researcher in TESOL, I believe that CALx provides me with a new dimension to value the significance of different Englishes, to examine language education in a pluralistic and critical attitude and to keep seeking alternatives based on learners’ voice and context. English education in Taiwan, under the policy of English as a mainstream language in globalization, especially needs input from CALx so that hasty policies can be avoided. I am especially impressed by the sensitive attitudes that CALx holds towards minor languages. It would be a big misfortune to human civilization if the lack of linguistic diversity becomes increasingly significant just because of the spread of a

certain deliberately dominant language. Despite the seemingly inevitable trend of English internationalization, it is reasonable to anticipate the advent of, in the words of Canagarajah (1999:207), “linguistic hybridity” because of the increasingly frequent contact and fluidity in languages and cultures.

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