

## Promoting Critical Awareness in Spanish Pre-service ELT Training: A Chance to Change the World?

**Barros del Río M.A.**

Ph.D. in English

Affiliation: Department of English, University of Burgos, Spain

***Abstract:** The teaching of the English language is infused with veiled values and policies but at the same time, it offers great opportunities for raising critical awareness and for the implementation of critical pedagogical strategies. Through the design of language teaching projects, this paper investigates the combination of Freire and Giroux's critical pedagogy principles, and the study of linguistic productions that fall within Kachru's (1985) "outer circle" classification of English, represented by Malala Yousafzay's testimony. The main goal is to evaluate the suitability of this combination to foster critical awareness among a group of Spanish pre-service ELT teachers. A series of critical pedagogical strategies are displayed under the form of a classroom blog so that reflection and collaboration among the pre-service teachers are enhanced. Later, assessment of achievements and shortcomings is conducted according to evidence from the different teaching projects. Finally, proposals for a more effective and critical training and further research are also suggested.*

***Key Words:** EFL teaching, teacher training, critical pedagogy, collaborative blogging*

### Introduction and Review of Literature

To teach is to awaken curiosity, an attitude that makes us become active subjects of our own learning process. This dialogic analysis acquires a political essence when the implicit and explicit power relationships inherent in the teaching practice are exposed and the oppressed and the dispossessed are put in the centre (Freire, 1990). Hidden power relations are present in the uses of the English language worldwide and many scholars have denounced its collusion with a globalized system (Kachru, 1985; Pennycook, 1994). Also the teaching of the English language is infused with veiled values and policies but at the same time, it offers great opportunities for raising critical awareness and the implementation of critical pedagogical strategies (Agray Vargas, 2010; Barnawi, 2010; Barrantes-Montero, 2014; Ghaemi and Taherian, 2011; Pennycook, 1990; ). Applications of critical pedagogy in the English Language Teaching (ELT) and training fields, have been a growing issue in recent years (Agray Vargas, 2007; Barrantes-Montero, 2014; Cox and De Assis-Peterson, 1999; Graman, 1988; Lin, 2008; Norooziasiam and Soozandehfar, 2011).

The concept of English as a means of international communication has been gaining ground in the past few decades, a phenomenon intimately linked to globalization (Benesch, 2009; Crystal, 2012; Phillipson, 1992). Braj Kachru's (1985) model, the "Three circles of English", is probably the most influential classification of the spread of English and its multiple forms according to sociolinguistic and cultural factors. He distinguishes an "inner circle" that includes the countries where English is the native language, an "outer circle" that comprises the countries that were affected by British colonization, and an "expanding circle" that is comprised of those countries where English is widely used. His approach is a useful and comprehensive tool to address the enormous variety of English existing in a globalized world. It is precisely the growing complexity of this linguistic phenomenon that demands critical approaches to the teaching and learning of the English language in all its forms.

Through the design of language teaching projects, this paper investigates the combination of critical pedagogy principles and linguistic productions that fall within Kachru's "outer circle" classification of English, as well as its suitability to foster critical awareness among a group of Spanish pre-service ELT teachers. Due to opportunity criteria, this study used Malala Yousafzay's testimony as the guiding theory for reflection and teaching skills acquisition. In the six weeks that this project lasted, a series of critical pedagogical strategies were displayed to foster collaboration, student autonomy and meaningful learning at different levels under the form of a classroom blog (Cullen et al., 2013; DelliCarpini, 2009; Domalewska, 2014). Finally, qualitative data were extracted based upon the contributions to the blog, the reviews subsequently conducted, and the trainer's personal notes, to assess achievements and shortcomings in terms of critical awareness. Proposals for a more effective training for pre-service teachers of ETL and further research are also suggested.

## Methodology

Critical pedagogy is far from being "a coherent body of thought" (Pennycook, 1990: 310), unlike other structured approaches such as Team Based Learning (Abd Samad, A. et al., 2015) or Cooperative Learning (DelliCarpini, 2009). It does not follow a set of defining features for implementation, on the contrary, it starts with responding to established codes and intervention beyond syllabi, so that previous statements are rethought, new dialogical relations develop and opportunities to overcome inequalities are fostered. A goal of justice and equality for all should be at the core of any critical pedagogy approach. In the pursuit of this goal, the perfect opportunity came in October 2014, when the Nobel Peace Prize for that year was awarded to Malala Yousafzay (to be shared with Kailash Satyarthi) for her struggle for the right of all children to an education. Her bravery rapidly became an international icon for human rights. Since then, her frequent media appearances speaking in English and her numerous awards have made her a well-known and admired person by all generations. But Malala's testimony is invaluable also for teaching purposes, as she embodies both the values of critical pedagogy and

Kachru's "outer circle" classification of the English language production. This young woman has been a victim of Taliban repression herself but, far from being silenced, she denounces the gender violence of the Taliban regime while demanding the universal right to education. Importantly, she raises her voice in English. She uses the language of Pakistani's former oppressors, knowing that by doing so, her scope of influence enlarges immensely. Through Malala, the "outer circle" productions find a place in the international arena and her speech makes the voiceless become the object of attention. Aided by her fame, Malala, and her struggle, became quite naturally the starting point of the training project and one of her demands, "A chance to change the world", was chosen as the title of the collaborative blog. On the homepage, a short and general presentation of the project was posted by the teacher, and a selected two-minute excerpt video of Malala's testimony (The story of Malala Yousafzai, CNN 2011) was embedded. The rest was left blank for pre-service teachers to fill in with their activities, comments, documents and other resources of interest.

Once the students were acquainted with the context of Malala's struggle, the teaching project's structure was displayed. Blogging was chosen as a useful means of instruction that could provide sufficient exchange and interaction opportunities (Domalewska, 2014). Through blogging, a feeling of community among the members of the class is nurtured and it shows the groups' awareness processes. To profit from the benefits of blogging applied to teaching and learning, the class was divided at random into three teams, each of which had to design a teaching project. To foster participation, the collaborative learning process was emphasized rather than writing accuracy.

All the teams shared a common working scheme which was divided into three distinct phases: motivation, practice and production. This basic formula was necessary to establish a coherent working pattern in all three language teaching projects. Each team designed all three phases of their project, a consensus that required internal negotiation among the members. Chronologically, every two weeks the teams had to publish their posts and deliver an oral and visual presentation to the class; then, a time for debate was allowed consisting of comments on the draft, suggestions for improvement and ideas to solve any questions or concerns that might have arisen regarding both methodology and content. Finally, pre-service teachers had to rewrite their projects incorporating the input received by their classmates, as well as any new ideas their contributions might have generated. This feedback system allowed the blog to become a collaborative and dynamic digital blackboard where each team could post, modify and enrich their collective work. This spiral approach for blogging construction gave the pre-service ELT teachers the chance to engage in reflective thinking. It was ensured that the team dynamics combined time for personal and collective work together with methodological and pedagogical assistance by the trainer whose main task was to provide teaching strategies and theoretical analysis that could help the pre-service teachers make their own choices. Far from playing a

dominant role, the trainer acted as a companion and guidance was to be provided upon request or need. Slowly but surely, each project took shape and showed its own distinct characteristics.

## Findings and Discussion

Departing from the same starting point, each team developed their project with a different perspective. Clearly influenced by the diversity of the people who formed each team, all projects were different in terms of topic development, teaching approach, grammar and vocabulary focus, degree of learning autonomy and learning process evaluations. For clarity purposes, this article presents all three stages of each project in an orderly way so that progress and coherence could be more easily noted. Debates and peer exchanges are subsequently summarized so that reflective and collaborative practices could be appreciated.

Team one consisted of only two participants. Thematically, they focused on activities about young people who had been famous for being brave. For the motivation phase, as the main objective was to grab the students' attention and interest in people who had made a difference, they used a quiz to learn more about Anne Frank, Hector Pieterse or Sophie Scholl, among others, followed by a composition. This team explicitly requested commentaries on the blog to evaluate which activity had been most successful. For their practice stage, they used Malala's speech at the United Nations and its transcript to talk about language uses, synonyms and verbal structures. The topic of the speech was the right to education, so they designed an activity on education rates in the world followed by contributions to the online journal that had been previously created. Finally, for the practice stage this team designed activities to foster identification with children from other countries. Further research was also mandatory and related links had to be posted on the blog with explanatory comments attached to them. To balance personal and group work, individual assignments were assigned and evaluated. To finish, group conclusions were recorded in a one minute video and posted on the blog.

As team one presented this project to the class, the members of the team explained how their personal interests and common discussions had led them to focus on "difference" as a pivotal topic. For them, the English language could be a means for change or at least a weapon of international scope against silenced inequalities. Although that was quite encouraging, they also admitted their project allowed little freedom for the students. Even though they had tried to combine personal and group work, oral and written assignments, all activities had been closely defined with little margin for innovation and autonomy on the students' side. Nevertheless, the team received positive remarks about having used digital tools for interaction purposes. These pre-service teachers had also put a lot of effort into grabbing their students' interest, but little in encouraging them to choose their own learning path.

Formed by two female and one male pre-service teachers, team two began their motivation phase addressing their students' lives and feelings by asking “What would you change about your life? This warm up strategy was followed by Malala's testimony and a subsequent open debate comparing her arguments with the students' daily lives. To conclude this phase, students were asked to find another person or organization working for gender equality and they had to write a short composition on the matter. For the practice stage, Malala's speech video at the UN was also used and its transcript handed out and read aloud. The students' attention was drawn to the use of prefixes in English. To finish this phase, four pictures denouncing discrimination against women were shown and the students were asked to select one and express their reasoning about the topic, applying the linguistic features previously seen. The last stage fostered group production of posts for the blog about different aspects of women's discrimination, i.e. housework distribution, games, advertising, organizations that work against discrimination and women's rights history. The class voted on the most creative, the most striking and the best structured posts.

During the presentation of their project, team two tried to denounce the gender inequalities women have to face worldwide using language teaching strategies. The whole class agreed that this proposal had been willfully designed to awaken both personal and collective consciousness about gender inequalities among teenage students, something that fit very well within a critical design of a language teaching project. However, it was also noticed that despite their effort to denounce injustice, these pre-service teachers had failed to design strategies that would expand the scope of these contents outside the classroom and make the students take the lead in that transformation process. The activities designed in their project had constrained their scope to the physical limits of the classroom, leaving the rest of the students' lives out of reach.

Finally, team three was made of only one male and one female pre-service teacher. They concentrated on disseminating information about children and young people who had made a difference and worked for peace. This phase sought engagement among the students and all activities were devoted to oral skills in order to promote reflection and debates. As the previous teams had done, they also used Malala's speech as a text to work on, this time focusing on modal verbs, conditionals and reported speech. Additionally, they devoted attention to Malala's linguistic strategies on how to create a coherent speech. Their production stage combined creativity and group work as posters had to be made on the topic and then displayed in the classroom. After this activity, a photo contest was proposed under the title “What is Peace for you?”. Participation was open to all students in the school so that awareness-raising expanded beyond classroom walls.

As they debated during their presentation, democratic rules were at stake and they found the classroom blog a very suitable tool for online discussions, voting and posting. These aspects were very positively assessed by the rest of the pre-service students. As their peers acknowledged, it was remarkable how they tried to step aside and encourage class' involvement

and students' autonomy. Also the idea of breaking down the walls of the classroom and involving the whole school in a photo contest was very appealing. It was a shift of responsibility from teacher to students who had to face the design, process and outcome of the contest.

On the trainer's side, after each training session, notes had been taken to record the students' most significant comments and attitudes. These informal and personal notes helped document the trajectory of the groups' advances.

Once all three phases of the projects had been accomplished, an open and free questionnaire was passed around for evaluation and improvement purposes. The pre-service teachers were asked to contribute freely and anonymously and though one person declined to answer the questions, the rest were generally positive about the experience: they all acknowledged having learnt something about autonomous, collaborative and project-centred teaching/learning. They also found a three-phase project structure very useful and practical for teaching. They also found the chosen topic to be engaging as it addressed matters of general interest. However, they were not so positive about using a blog. Some students also complained about the effort they had to put into learning how to post contents and also into commenting on their classmates' ideas. Certainly, all these answers matched their delay in posting the activities they had designed and their very few interventions and comments on the blog.

Significantly enough, none of them mentioned having undergone a critical awareness process. Whether they kept that evolution to themselves or they did not find it significant enough to express, this aspect of their experience remained unsaid. All in all, their answers were indicative of their satisfaction with the experience which had proved positive for all respondents, despite the enormous effort the use of digital tools for teaching purposes had required. Regarding attitude, regular attendance and participation in the classroom translated into collaboration and engagement.

The purpose of this study was to raise critical awareness among a group of Spanish pre-service ELT teachers combining a critical pedagogy approach and Kachru's linguistic classification of the expansion of the English language (Kachru, 1985) in the form of language teaching projects. An appealing thematic selection was essential for the success of this project, that is why Malala's testimony, as a representative of Kachru's "outer circle" classification, was chosen. The ultimate goal was to transform the pre-service ELT teachers into active agents of change (Jay and Johnson, 2002). Aligned with critical pedagogy criteria (Freire, 1970) and Kachru's (1985) linguistic classification, the focus of study was initially narrowed to Malala Yousafzay's testimony. This topic embodied a world-acclaimed human rights defender whose testimony in the English language falls within the "outer circle" of Kachru's classification. For critical awareness infusion, this thematic choice challenged the homogeneity of the English language production. Instead, marginal territories were included and re-examination of legitimate knowledge was prompted. Furthermore, the combination of critical pedagogy and "outer circle"

productions for teacher training was essential to unveil the highly political nature of language (Pennycook, 1990) and its alleged neutrality to the inequalities and abuses caused by globalization (Phillipson, 2000). This combination also stimulated the construction of individual and collective awareness processes through exposure to non-dominant discourses and enhanced motivation and engagement among the pre-service teachers. If reflection requires a problematic situation, “a dilemma” (Giroux, 1990), Malala's testimony was certainly troublesome in two ways: not only were the “outer circle” colonial and post-colonial issues brought forward to the detriment of monolithic and univocal dominant discourses, but also a poor young girl's testimony was accepted as a valuable working topic for ELT purposes. This double shift to the margins meant that an option for the oppressed was implicitly traced in the subsequent teaching projects the students designed. Heavily influenced by that initial topic, the themes most frequently used in the three projects were gender violence, child labour and conflict versus peace. These choices were significant because the students felt free to link Malala's speech with sociocultural and political issues. The explicit presence of the oppressed, as required in critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), led to the development of a range of critical materials that focused on injustice and explored ways to transform inequalities through the use of the English language.

Analysis of the three teaching projects shed light on successful reflective personal and collective processes as all the projects explicitly included activities for consideration of different forms of injustice as well as possible solutions to overcome it. In this sense, empathy with the oppressed was achieved among all pre-service teachers by the end of this study. Team three, in particular, explored ways of spreading democratic attitudes among the students, a topic that was not previously addressed in the classroom. This team was able to propose activities with a high degree of democratic and autonomous functioning in the classroom. Multidisciplinary and meaningful learning were addressed in all proposals in various forms: critical reflection about personal lifestyle in team one's project, organisation of photo and poster contests in teams two and three.

More problematic was the inclusion of proposals to take action against injustice. Although the contents of the collaborative blog showed the prevalence of the oppressed in multiple forms as well as engagement with texts and society (Norooziasiam and Soozandehfar, 2011), the study was insufficient in its attempt to foster a consciousness as “agents of change” (Jay and Johnson, 2002: 80) among the pre-service teachers. The move to action was generally absent among the pre-service teachers and the contents of their projects. In this sense, we can speak of a lack of action. One explanation for this might be the focus on a topic alien to the pre-service teachers' personal lives and experiences. Malala's struggle did bring the oppressed to the classroom and empathy was soon achieved, however it did not involve the pre-service teachers as actors, but rather as affronted spectators. English is a foreign language to the Spanish pre-service ELT teachers, and so are their productions in that language, independent of their context. Due to cultural differences and geographical distance, the pre-service teachers were not able to connect Malala's struggles to

their own experiences of oppression. Even though they addressed universally complex issues in their projects such as gender inequalities for instance, they did not feel oppressed themselves, nor were they able to take a step towards action. They were not able to foster action through the activities they had designed in their projects either. Despite all of these limitations, selection of real discourses from the “outer circle” and the “expanding cricle” is an act of resistance in itself and denouncement.

In sum, the combination of critical pedagogy and Kachru's linguistic classification of English did raise critical awareness processes among the pre-service teachers but connection between oppression in the outer circle and the power forces that constrain the fulfilment of their aims as ELT teachers was missed due to lack of identification. To enhance the involvement of the pre-service teachers, further research and praxis should be done in the design of courses that combine academia and local activism, as Aguilar Ródenas has suggested (2013: 179). That would require academia to break down the walls that isolate knowledge from praxis. Especially in teacher training, social movements and education can inform each other and so a dialogue is urgently needed for their mutual benefit. It would also be interesting to encourage the involvement of the whole learning community in their own critical awareness process. Participatory Action Research (PAR), for instance, might be a suitable approach to enhance commitment among participants. Its application to ESL teacher training still has a long way to go (Bergold and Thomas, 2012). These may be innovative ways to address “how pedagogy, knowledge, resistance and power can be analyzed within and across a variety of cultural spheres, including, but not limited, to schools” (Giroux, 2003: 13).

Formally, Malala's struggle was explored through a class blog project. Blogging was enriched with a comprehensive methodology that fostered both personal reflection and collaboration among the pre-service ELT teachers so that their learning processes were meaningful and critical awareness was awakened. The use of this tool was also replicated in all three projects and teams one and three also suggested other digital tools for teaching purposes, such as online journals, video recordings and photo contests. However, despite acknowledging the benefits of blogging according to the observations in their evaluations, the pre-service teachers needed to be encouraged by the trainer to comment on each other's posts. This low frequency of posting may be indicative of a lack of motivation on the part of the pre-service teachers, or an inadequacy of this device for teacher training, especially when working with small samples of students, as other studies conclude (Domalewska, 2014).

Structurally, the issue of how to combine a theoretical introduction of critical thinking and pedagogy with a corresponding teaching praxis deserves further research as well. Although some studies confirm the relationship between EFL teachers' critical thinking and their teaching success (Ghaemi and Taherian, 2011), the scope of the present research could not cover the period of time that pre-service teachers spend in schools, a mandatory phase necessary for the



completion of their Master's degree. The disruption between these two phases in the course structure leads to a sense of fragmentation between theoretical concepts and teaching praxis, both among students and trainers.

In summary, conclusions indicate that in terms of structural organization of pre-service teacher training schemes in Spanish academia, there is still a lot of room for improvement. Today, more than ever, universities must make the effort to strengthen pre-service teachers' call to teach and help them work to make the world a better place. For that, internal coordination, critical review and a turn towards more effective and rewarding existing models must be developed. Undeniably, trainers and universities play a significant role in this transformation process. The question is whether we are ready to take on our responsibilities.

### **Conclusion**

This research project aimed at fostering critical awareness among a group of Spanish pre-service ELT teachers through the design of teaching projects that combined critical pedagogy approaches and the inclusion of the oppressed as discourse performers in the English language. Positive assessment was given to the orientation and development of the teaching projects where reflection and collaboration were enhanced in the form of a classroom blog. The trainer's role was oriented to assistance upon request, thus subverting the "banking concept of education" (Freire, 1970), and autonomy was achieved by the working groups who combined personal and collective work. Evidence from the teaching projects developed by the pre-service teachers showed that the fusion of critical pedagogy and "outer circle" productions, i.e. Malala's story, did nurture critical awareness and a process of awareness among them, according to the activities designed in the teaching projects. However, that combination did not suffice to awaken an urgency to take action, a step that would have required a more integrated structure of the master's modules, in addition to more permeability in academia. This would have allowed meaningful learning to be grounded in personal and local experiences that might have developed into transformative action. All in all, this study demonstrates that pre-service ELT training can benefit from the combination of critical pedagogy praxis and non-native productions in the English language. By merging both approaches, global diversity is explored in the classroom, the voiceless are acknowledged, and new paths in the ELT training are explored from a critical perspective.

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