Indoctrination, empowerment or emancipation? – The role of ELT in global society – *Steve Brown, Roy Bicknell*

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Steve Brown has considerable experience in the Scottish further education sector managing and teaching on ESOL programmes. Steve's main research interests lie in the application of critical pedagogy principles in English language teaching, particularly the impact of teacher education, programme design and materials development on the emancipatory potential of ELT.

In a wide-ranging talk Steve addresses the current state of English language teaching and what he sees as its increasing commodification. In his view, we are promoting an ideology that monetises learning which requires English and English language programmes to be itemised as marketable commodities. He also states that we are stifling any capacities that might exist within ELT to critically explore and challenge current power structures and processes within global society. Drawing on the work of critical pedagogues such as Paolo Freire and Henry Giroux, he invites the audience to explore alternatives that promote the emancipation of learners, as opposed to their indoctrination. We should allow learners to identify examples of social injustice and take steps to redress imbalances. This would eventually lead to a model of ELT that is socially responsible but also more congruent with widely accepted principles of language acquisition.

The stimulating and thought-provoking talk gave the audience much to reflect on regarding their own practices in teaching business English. Later we had the opportunity to discuss with Steve Brown some of the many points which were raised through his talk.

In conversation with Steve Brown

Q: At the beginning of your talk you paint a broad canvas of the world we live in. And it's not a pretty one. It's a world of half-truths and fake news but also one of climate change and financially motivated wars. And now there's the new reality of Covid-19. Do you think this will push teaching to face the challenges of finding a more critical approach to what we teach our students?

Steve: Do you mean Covid-19 specifically, or the generally terrible state of the planet right now? Either way, I find it difficult to be optimistic. The most obvious change to education since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic has been the move to online teaching. I think we're all preoccupied with the practicalities of this change right now, rather than looking at any long-term strategic shift. It's hard to see how an increase in online teaching will enable an increase in critical pedagogy in ELT though.

Q: You talk about hierarchical power structures and inequality. And the hegemony or single point of view that this represents in society: this is the way things are, this is the default or how things are perceived. If ELT does have a positive role to play in changing that view, could you say more about what those first steps might be?

Steve: This is where the Covid-19 crisis does have an impact; the mask of hegemony has slipped somewhat. Governments have somehow managed to find hundreds of billions of pounds to support individuals when they previously said there wasn't any. We're all realising that we normally spend a lot of our income on things we don't need. We don't need to fly hundreds of miles for a business meeting because it can be done online. A lot of what was "normal" a few months ago is no longer possible, and I think this has allowed people to realise

that those structures and norms – the ones that we all thought were fixed and permanent – are actually very fragile.

Regarding the role of ELT in challenging hegemony, perhaps the first thing we need to do is remove it from our materials. So much of the world is presented to our students as something that they have to uncritically accept. Materials published for a global market deliberately avoid topics that might be upsetting or controversial (David Block and John Gray have done some very useful research in this area). Rather than shying away from controversy or pretending to be "neutral" (there is no neutrality in education), we need a more transformative approach to materials design – one that encourages learners to explore issues such as social injustice, inequity, unequal distributions of power, that sort of thing. As long as these topics are left out of the curriculum, we're limited to pedagogies of conservatism and compliance.

Methodologically, the application of Freire's "problem-posing" approach is one strategy that we could bring into our teaching more. Rather than presenting reality as some kind of done deal that we have to accept (e.g. Jeff Bezos is a very rich and successful businessman), teachers can encourage the problematisation of issues (e.g. How is it possible for one man to make so much money when most people in the world live in poverty?)

Q: If there is commodification in language teaching – the reference to Scott Thornbury's criticism of the commodification of language is a good example of this – then this would be an integral part of our teaching today. This makes it difficult for teachers and learners to 'step back' and see the bigger picture. How do you see a way forward in this?

Steve: I think a lot of this comes down to the way we are trained as English language teachers. We are trained and conditioned to regard language as a series of individual items (grammatical structures, pieces of lexis, pronunciation features). Learning is also commodified and packaged for students in the form of "levels". But to assume that language is atomistic and can be acquired in a linear fashion is to ignore widely held principles and theories about SLA. Language is a holistic entity and learning is complex. Trying to present it otherwise is dishonest, frankly, but that's what tends to happen. Initial training courses encourage new teachers to focus on small items of language or specific sub-skills, and lead them to assume that if they can get their students to use this target language accurately during their lesson, this means they must have learnt it. We need to stop encouraging people to make these ridiculous assumptions.

Q: In talking about the monetisation of learning you also refer to precarity and precariousness, which is something that many see as being part of the ELT world. The (contractual) uncertainty that many teachers experience is just one example of this. Could you say more about how uncertainty affects our teaching?

Steve: Firstly I should say that I have been very privileged in my career and have not experienced the levels of precarity faced by many other ELT professionals – so I'm probably not the best person to talk about this. However I think we all know that ELT is not the most widely-respected profession in the world. In fact, many people don't regard it as a profession at all – it's often conceived as something backpackers do in order to make a bit of money while travelling, something people do in their 20s until they manage to get a "proper job". This in turn allows employers to claim that English language teachers don't want to take their jobs seriously or take on the responsibility that comes with a secure contract.

There are several discourses that feed into this conceptualisation of ELT as a non-professional industry and of teachers as casual workers. Firstly, the notion of the native speaker as the ideal teacher means that monolingual English speakers with no teaching qualifications or experience are regarded as more employable than multilingual, highly qualified and

experienced teachers. Then, there's this idea that you can become a competent English language teacher by doing a 4-week course. Not only that, but the content of this course focuses on very low-level procedural skills, leading to the assumption that ELT simply involves the application of a series of techniques.

I think, then, that ELT is constructed in such a way that allows it to be conceptualised on non-professional terms, and this low-status view of teaching and teachers allows employers to offer poor and precarious working conditions. If all that is required to be a very employable English language teacher is fluency in English plus a certificate from a 4-week course, little or no value is placed on experience or further qualifications. It also means that more experienced teachers are expendable – they can easily be replaced by someone new to the profession, who doesn't take it that seriously and who is prepared to accept relatively low pay, casual hours and a lack of security.

To answer your question then, I think precarity in ELT is deliberately constructed to discourage us from seeing ourselves as professionals. Lots of people become English teachers for a couple of years but relatively few decide to make a career out of it – I think this must have a negative impact on the overall quality of what goes on in ELT.

Q: In your critique of ELT you highlight the risk of over-emphasising aspects of learning: proceduralism with a focus on the 'what' instead of the 'why', and performativity and the (UK) obsession with league tables; while at the same time other aspects that are more difficult to measure are very important. Your reference to Stephen Ball and the need to make individuals 'responsive and flexible' seems in that respect relevant. Could you say more about this?

Steve: Stephen Ball has written quite extensively on what he calls "the terrors of performativity". Basically, he uses the term "performativity" to describe the obsession with evidencing everything that we do. He uses the English education system as an example context where the need to provide evidence of good practice in the form of key performance indicators such as test results means that people spend so much time making it look like they're doing a good job that they don't have time to actually do a good job. As long as the evidence is there, their managers don't really care what actually happens in reality. This of course leads to a certain amount of gamesmanship, where teachers regard the whole review and evaluation process as something they all have to go along with, just a box-ticking exercise rather than a genuine exercise in reflective practice. It also leads to fabrication, as teachers are effectively encouraged to produce data that looks good, irrespective of whether it reflects what really happened.

You're right that performativity is rife in the UK state education sector, and is particularly bad in England. However, it exists in the private sector too, where schools are constantly trying to prove that their courses allow people to learn English better, faster, more effectively, whatever – so they like to use general statements or stats in their publicity. The way we tend to evaluate teaching in observations can also be very performative, with observers maybe having a checklist of things that they want to see the teacher doing – if they do it once, they can tick the box, but no thought is given to whether they did that thing well, or when it was appropriate to do so. I wrote a blog post about performativity a few years ago in which I tried to exemplify its impact on the job I had at the time.

Q: You are critical of current teaching practices which seem to fit our profession in a neo-liberal mould. One key point for you is incongruence, more specifically the idea that much of what we teach doesn't fit what research on second language acquisition shows how learners actually learn. Isn't this something that also applies to ELT in general, as something that has more to do with the complexity of this area of learning?

Steve: Well, I suppose we have to consider why the ELT profession seems so hell-bent on commodification of language and learning, even though it requires us to go against what SLA research tells us. I think it's because a commodified approach to language learning works well in a neoliberal environment. Neoliberalism, after all, is about the commodification of *everything* – turning everything into a product that can be bought and sold. If you accept that language is far more than a set of rules that gets applied to a list of words, and if you accept that language learning doesn't happen incrementally – that people learn things and then forget them, get better and then get worse again – if you accept the fact that different people acquire language at different speeds, in different orders and with varying degrees of success, suddenly it all becomes a lot less marketable.

But you're right that we live in a world dominated by neoliberalism – the market is all-pervasive. So the neoliberal, highly commodified and marketised nature of ELT, to a large extent, reflects the wider world.

Q: ELT can empower our learners, and instrumental motivation, personalisation and learner autonomy in our teaching support that. But you also say that this empowerment is limited. But surely, learner autonomy and the critical independence of thought this requires goes beyond limited empowerment?

Steve: In my talk I made a distinction between individual empowerment and emancipation, with empowerment being about developing knowledge, skills and understanding in individuals so that they can function and flourish more effectively within society. That's all very well, but there is no explicit focus here on the transformation of society. The only transformation is in that individual's capacities for success, which is great for that individual. But if society is unequal (it is), if power is distributed unevenly (it is), and if current social structures are designed in such a way that they favour some people over others (they are), then an approach to education that focuses only on individual empowerment is unlikely to change any of this. Emancipation, on the other hand, is a social phenomenon. Rather than simply giving people the skills to be successful within existing social structures, an emancipatory approach to education seeks to give people the skills to challenge and transform those structures.

Q: Critical pedagogy would in your view provide a viable alternative for ELT. Paulo Freire's idea of participatory methodologies is an example of changing our teaching approach in this way. Do you see significant developments in this direction within ELT?

Steve: Not yet, but there are some small steps being taken. The problem is that people assume that any alternative to the current model has to fit within current (capitalist) constructs, and of course that's not going to solve anything. If, for example, you replace highly sanitised/censored global coursebooks with a global coursebook that encourages the exploration of topics related to social justice, that solves one problem but you've still got the problem of a centrally-produced curriculum that the students had no input in designing, with predetermined outcomes that are (somehow) supposed to be equally useful, irrespective of the learning context. Critical pedagogy requires the eschewing of externally-imposed content and outcomes. We can't all just start using the same alternative methods and materials, because the whole point is that the methods and materials should be informed by the preferences, needs, interests and contexts of our learners. If we look at Dogme as an example, this is an approach that is, to a large extent, compatible with critical pedagogy. It's been around for 20 years now, and most people have heard of it as a thing. However, despite all of this, and the huge amount of respect that Scott Thornbury has in the ELT profession, Dogme has never taken off. Why? Because it's not commercially viable. You can't make money selling coursebooks if everyone does Dogme. You're unlikely to attract students if you refuse to

guarantee what level they will be at by the end of the course – or even what content they will cover while they're studying. Critical pedagogy isn't commercially viable either – it's not supposed to be. But as long as capitalist principles are applied to education, people are likely to reject critical pedagogy for this very reason.

I noticed that TESOL Africa recently focused on the theme of De-centring TESOL. That's encouraging, but I think we're still a long way from being in a position to claim that critical pedagogy is widely used in ELT.

Q: You suggest the language teaching is inherently political in the choices we make. That would seem to be an inevitable part of becoming a critically conscious learner. But doesn't this also entail risks? (I'm thinking here of the dangers of over-politicisation…)

Steve: I don't think it's about over- or under-politicisation. Of course, I think there's always a danger that teachers will try to push their own political agendas in the classroom, and I think that some people assume that critical pedagogy is simply an excuse to allow them to do this. However, the current model is one of faux neutrality: we're encouraged to avoid politics in the classroom on the premise that this allows us to be neutral, but of course that isn't the case. Removing opportunities to critically examine current dominant power structures is a very political act, as it allows those structures to remain intact. This is not political neutrality, it is reinforcement of the status quo.

I think though that many teachers feel that they can't bring politics into the classroom without pushing a certain message, and they worry that this can be construed as a form of indoctrination. This implies a failure to understand what critical pedagogy all is about though. In critical pedagogy, the teacher is not expected to be the one that provides all the answers – it is up to the students to engage with the issues and explore possible solutions from their perspectives. The teacher is not (should not) be expected to tell students what is right or wrong, or what political views they should have. This requires an approach to teaching that many of us struggle to get our heads around – we're used to our role being to provide answers.

Q: One of the alternatives from critical pedagogy that you provide is challenging expectations as part of the learning process. Could you say more about how this might work?

Steve: I suppose this relates to what Freire described as the raising of critical consciousness, as well as what was said earlier about hegemony. An important part of education is helping people to understand how the world works, why it works that way, who benefits from it working that way and what role do they as individuals play in the whole process. This can require learners to become aware of their own privilege, as well as ways in which they are oppressed. This can be an uncomfortable thing to do, but it allows them to see social relationships differently, and may lead to them questioning or challenging authority rather than simply accepting what is offered to them.

Q: In your post-plenary Q&A session were there new insights from the audience about the responsibility that educators have, and how they can develop students' capacities to transform society?

Steve: To be honest, I wasn't very sure how my talk would go down with an audience of people who mostly work in the corporate world, but I was very encouraged by what people had to say in the Q&A afterwards. It was interesting to hear teachers describing things that they already do in their classes to encourage their learners to question or challenge existing structures of power, and also to hear that their learners tend to respond positively. However, there was a general acknowledgement this this approach to teaching is a kind of subversion of what teachers are expected to do and what their clients expect of them.

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