

From educational pragmatism to critical literacy pedagogy: Transformations in language teaching practices

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Abstract

In the period of postmodernity, a new form of educational pragmatism prevails which reduces educational issues to problems and solutions. Pragmatism in English Language Teaching (ELT) has often been associated with a view of ELT as a technical training which ignores sociocultural factors. This paper discusses the transformations which have taken place in English language teachers' perceptions of their work and in their teaching practices when they moved from a pragmatic to a critical pedagogy paradigm in the context of Second Chance Schools (SCS) in Greece. It then turns to a specific teaching practice, that of needs analysis, and discusses how it has developed within the framework of a critical literacy pedagogy. The paper draws its data from a systematic research conducted with English language teachers working at SCS.

Keywords: English literacy, critical pedagogy, multiliteracies, needs and rights analysis

1. Introduction

There is much discussion today about a new and pervasive form of educational pragmatism which is situated within the current macro-economic market and political contexts of neoliberalism (Beeson 2007: 47). Impelled by globalisation, this new educational pragmatism is claimed to be led by managerialist reformers “operating within a taken-for-granted worldview of economic crisis” (Blake *et al.* 2003: 8). The emphasis of this pragmatism, Freire (2006: x) argues, is on skills banking:

“The new educational pragmatism embraces a technical training without political analysis, because such analyses upset the smoothness of educational technicism. Simply put, we are witnessing the assertion of an educational technicism that urges us not to burden students with political thoughts and to leave them alone so that they can best focus on their technical training. To the educational pragmatist, other social and critical preoccupations represent not just a waste of time but a real obstacle in their process of skills banking”.

The problem with pragmatism, according to Chua (1983: 39), is that it reduces educational problems to the level of technical difficulties and solutions and that it is often viewed as the only rational choice. Distinctions have been drawn between different forms of educational pragmatism. For instance, Cherryholmes (1988) distinguishes between what she calls ‘vulgar’ and ‘critical’ pragmatism. On the one hand, ‘vulgar’ pragmatism values functional efficiency, accepts unquestionably explicit and implicit standards, conventions, rules and discourse practices that we find around us, and is thus socially reproductive, reproducing accepted meanings and conventional ways of doing things. It places emphasis on practice and separates it from theory for the sake of “making things work better”. It also promotes local ideologies as global, and past ideologies as present and future. On the other hand, ‘critical’ pragmatism starts from the premise that our standards, beliefs, values, guiding texts, and discourse practices themselves require evaluation and appraisal and is thus considered to bring a sense of crisis to our choices.

Pragmatism in English Language Teaching (ELT) has often been associated with a view of ELT as a technical training which ignores sociocultural factors and contextual understanding, which focuses on the training of students on specific language skills and which leads to fragmentation of knowledge (Allison 1996). As a result, students often have difficulty in making connections between the obtained fragmented knowledge and their lived experience. It has been repeatedly claimed that much of ELT operates on this pragmatist paradigm and has readily available a discourse of pragmatism (Pennycook 1997). However, several ELT scholars have demonstrated how the teachers’ day-to-day decisions in the English classroom both shape and are shaped by the broader sociopolitical orders outside the classroom (Auerbach 1995, Benesch 1993, Canagarajah 1993, Peirce and Stein 1995). Drawing on Cherryholmes (1988), Pennycook (1997: 266) comments:

“If we are to encourage research that is pragmatic in the sense of looking at the everyday contexts of teaching, I would argue that this should be a critical, rather than a vulgar pragmatism, and insist that while we do have to get on with our teaching, we also have to think very seriously about the broader implications of everything we do”.

Critical or emancipatory literacy pedagogy has been suggested as an alternative to pragmatism in language education with the following two broad aims: To enable students

become knowledgeable about their histories, their experiences, and the culture of their everyday environments; and to enable students discern the dominant culture's codes and signifiers in order to escape their own environments (Macedo 2006: xiii). Consequently, in an educational context shaped by a critical literacy pedagogy, teachers must constantly teach a dual curriculum: A curriculum that empowers students to make sense of their everyday life, and a curriculum which enables students to obtain the tools for mobility valued in the dominant culture (ibid.).

This paper focuses on the transformations which have taken place in the English language teachers' perceptions of their work and in their teaching practices when they moved to a critical pedagogy paradigm in the context of Second Chance Schools in Greece. It will be suggested that these transformations, which are to a great extent affected by the dual curriculum teachers are invited to teach, are integral constituents of an educational process which heads toward an emancipatory literacy of active citizenship, personal fulfillment and social inclusion.

2. The case of Second Chance Schools in Greece

Second Chance Schools (SCS) in Greece were established in 1999 by state and EU funds with the general aim to fight social exclusion and inequality by giving adults from sensitive social groups, such as unemployed or partially employed, former drug addicts, prisoners and adults with learning problems, a second chance to education (Αντωνιάδου 2008, Βεργίδης 2004). While SCS in different European contexts have taken up different forms (for instance, training adults in vocational skills), in Greece they have been directly related to general education, providing a second chance to adults who have not completed their basic education to do so by attending a two 9-month programme and obtain a *Gymnasium Apolytirion*. However, in order for the second chance to be different from the first one, SCS have turned to a different pedagogic perspective from the one employed in conventional Greek schools.

Their programme has drawn on innovative methods, progressive pedagogies, and a multiliteracies approach¹ (Cope and Kalantzis 2000, Kalantzis 2008, Μητσικοπούλου και

¹ As a result, the school subjects are called 'literacies': Greek Literacy, English Literacy, Mathematical Literacy, Social Literacy, Environmental Literacy, Computer Literacy, Scientific Literacy and Art Literacy.

Σακελλίου 2006, Unsworth 2001). The multiliteracies approach has been selected as an appropriate one for a number of reasons. First, it extends the idea and scope of literacy pedagogy to account for culturally and linguistically diverse educational contexts (a common situation in SCS) by exploring the plurality of texts that circulate in these contexts (Hodolidou 2003). Second, it accounts for changes in discursive practices brought about by the extensive use of information and communication technologies by exploring the multimodal nature of ICT texts (visual, audio, hyper in addition to written, spoken) and their interrelations. Moreover, innovative teaching methods (Κιουλάνης και Ματζανάρη 2008) based on projects (Σμυρνιωτάκη 2006), cross-thematic work (Νικολαΐδου και Τόμπρος 2004) and experiential learning, filtered also with progressive accounts of adult education (see, for instance, Rogers 1999), have been placed within a framework of a critical pedagogy which draws heavily on students' lived experience, their prior knowledge and their needs.

The adopted theoretical and methodological framework has brought about a number of changes in the educational process. For instance, from the beginning it became clear that students' profile varies significantly from school to school: as a result, schools in touristic places deal with different themes and develop different types of knowledge from schools in agricultural areas, schools in prisons or multicultural schools, as it is the case in northern Greece, and Thrace in particular. Flexible curricula and guidelines have been developed guiding teachers to produce their own educational materials on themes selected together with students (Βεκρής και Χοντολίδου 2003). Teachers are asked to abandon the security of the textbook and enter into an explorative learning experience for both their students and for themselves, a learning experience which draws on alternative pedagogic discourses and which assumes differently thinking teachers and pedagogic subjects. As an English teacher put it "*At SCS I feel I am a co-traveller in the learning process*". In the context of the Greek centralised education system, working in Second Chance Schools has become a unique experience for English language teachers, who are now officially called English literacy teachers, after the adopted model of multiliteracies.

3. English literacy at SCS

Within this broad framework of critical pedagogy, English literacy teachers at SCS have

been asked to teach a curriculum that empowers students to make sense of their everyday life. This, in practice, means, a curriculum which aims to:

- develop basic literacy in the English language (skills, knowledge, discourses) which “will be telling” in students’ lives in specific sociocultural contexts (e.g., local community: tourist, traditional in-land, multicultural areas, etc)
- bring students into contact with a variety of genres they are likely to come across in their everyday life (e.g., labels, signs, computer and internet instructions, advertisements, TV commercials etc.) in which English is used
- raise students’ critical language awareness
- develop a meta-cognitive awareness of learning how to learn – an important language skill throughout life.

Moreover, in an attempt to combat the social exclusion of the individuals who lack the needed typical qualifications to meet the contemporary challenges in their working, public (citizenship) and personal (lifework) lives – three realms of our existence in which meaning making and discourse practices have changed radically, according to Cope and Kalantzis (2000: 10) –, SCS need to deal with a pragmatic purpose: to teach a curriculum that enables students to obtain the tools, knowledge and discourses valued in the dominant culture. However, there are several elements of the employed critical pedagogy which distinguish it from a pragmatic approach. The most important one is its emphasis on creating new knowledge from ‘reading the world’ instead of transmitting knowledge (Αργυροπούλου 2008, Θεοδωροπούλου 2008). The concern to respond to students’ needs and wants rather than to teach a pre-specified curriculum is another important element of this pedagogy. Respect of the students’ beliefs, values and views is a third element (Καγκαλίδου και Μιμιλίδου 2004, Σακελλάρη, Τζουμάκα και Φρυδάκη 2004). In addition, contrary to a pragmatic approach which accepts the current parameters that define worthwhile knowledge and which excludes those who do not have access to these channels, critical English literacy aims at equipping disadvantaged adults with this worthwhile knowledge, to give them the necessary tools to critically unpack the role of the English language today, and to raise their language awareness (Μητσικοπούλου και Σακελλίου 2006).

4. Researching English literacy teachers' views

Since February 2007 an on-going study has started to explore the impact of the innovative literacy-based critical pedagogy developed in SCS (a) on how English language teachers view their role as English literacy educators and (b) on their teaching practices. This paper draws on systematic data collected in November 2007 during two in-service seminars for SCS English language teachers working in various parts of Greece. The data include teachers' responses in 7 in-depth semi-structured interviews and 15 questionnaires. The questions in both the questionnaire and the interview explored teachers' views on the following themes:

- (1) changes in their classroom practices
- (2) reasons for these changes
- (3) their role as English literacy teachers in SCS
- (4) aims of English literacy at SCS.

Teachers' responses were collected and analysed qualitatively. The main findings are presented below in descriptive rather than statistical terms, since at this stage of the research the focus was on recording noted changes rather than on providing statistically valid points. A frequency criterion though, when relevant, has been employed in the presentation of findings with the most frequent responses presented first.

It should also be mentioned that the findings presented below have been inevitably filtered by my own observations and interpretations as a thematic consultant of English literacy in SCS since January 2004.

5. Towards a critical English literacy pedagogy

During the first few months at SCS, teachers struggled with the new pedagogic paradigm, in an attempt to understand how they should function within it and what is expected of them as English literacy teachers. The use of the new metalanguage was an important issue during discussions in the in-service seminars for newcomer teachers. The concepts of literacy, literacy education and multiliteracies were analyzed both theoretically and methodologically and were often juxtaposed with EFL language teaching. This section presents some of the main changes noted by teachers themselves after they moved from a conventional school to a SCS. When asked to describe their working experience in SCS,

the teachers almost always turned to a comparison with conventional schools. The Table below presents the main identified differences thematically organised:

Table 1. Teachers' responses to changes they have noted in SCS

<i>Conventional school</i>	<i>Second Chance School</i>
<i>Student profile</i>	
Teach children and teenagers mainly; sometimes indifferent students; competitive class atmosphere. English not generally a popular school subject.	Teach adults; some unwilling students: tired coming to school after work; low self-esteem; serious memory problems; problems with basic literacy skills. Classroom atmosphere: team spirit. English the most popular school subject.
<i>Methodological Framework</i>	
Teach the English language so that students develop their overall language proficiency. <i>Emphasis on both reception and production skills.</i>	Teach English literacy in the context of a critical pedagogy of multiliteracies. <i>Emphasis on:</i> - <i>learning how to learn</i> - <i>oral production and reception language skills (not on written production)</i> - <i>language awareness</i>
<i>Pedagogy</i>	
Operate within a teacher-centered pedagogy: traditional face to face teaching; students sitting in rows watching the teacher; pedagogy employed most often the one suggested by the selected coursebook; knowledge obtained in class and at home (through homework).	Operate within a learner-centered pedagogy: experience learning; course work primarily conducted through projects; systematic work in groups and pairs; students seating in circle; knowledge developed in class (little or no homework).
<i>Course aims</i>	
Follow national, pre-specified course aims and objectives according to student age (e.g., primary-school level, secondary-school level); assumed relatively homogenous level of language competence.	Negotiate course aims and objectives with students at the beginning of the programme. Redefine them, if necessary, during the school year. Not pre-defined course aims but general guidelines upon which to build flexible syllabi.
<i>Curriculum</i>	
Follow closely a specific curriculum with specific content; restrictions as to what to teach; time pressure to cover curriculum content.	Design a curriculum by selecting content and themes taking into account what students need and want. Have flexibility to move freely with content; not pressed to cover specific content.
Expect students in a class to reach the same minimum level of language competence	Focus on each one of the students separately and follow his/her progress taking into account his/her starting point.
<i>Materials</i>	
Select a textbook from the market and follow it closely; exploit students' experience of the world mainly when required in textbook	Develop language materials from scratch; use authentic texts from a variety of genres; use multimodal texts. Do not follow a specific

activities. Have a relatively small portfolio with teaching materials.	textbook; choose materials from several different sources. Systematically draw upon the students' experience and knowledge of the world. Have a rich teacher portfolio with developed materials.
<i>Work with colleagues</i>	
Work alone in class with students; although officially introduced in the curriculum, cross-thematic teaching limited, if any; lack of counseling and psychological support for students.	Work with colleagues systematically for project and lab work; cross-thematic teaching: often teach together with another colleague of a different literacy to explore a cross-thematic project; help provided by the school psychologist and the career consultant.
<i>Teacher Education</i>	
Attend occasional in-service thematic seminars.	Attend frequent two-day in-service seminars especially designed for SCS introducing teachers to the philosophy of SCS and to related teaching methodology.
<i>Student evaluation</i>	
Evaluate students with grades (1-10, 1-20 scales); periodical written exams.	Descriptive evaluation; Portfolio

Quite interestingly, most teacher responses have been contextualised within a broader discussion concerning the position of English as a school subject in the Greek schools. For instance, the fact that English is not generally a popular subject in conventional schools – in the sense that most students attend evening language schools – has, for the majority of the teachers who participated in the study, a negative impact on both the ways students view the school subject of English and quite often on the ways teachers view their work at school. On the other hand, the role of the English literacy teacher working at SCS is upgraded since English literacy is one of the two most popular subjects (together with computer literacy). This perhaps accounts for the finding in Karavas' (2008) study in which teachers working at SCS report to have higher motivation and higher job satisfaction level than other categories of English language teachers. This high job satisfaction is closely related to the new pedagogic framework within which teachers are invited to function. Here is how two language teachers describe their experience at SCS:

"I am free to design, to invent, to experiment and as a result my approach to teaching has become more experiential. My teaching is livelier and more expressive. I've stopped using coursebooks, I rely exclusively on communicative methods. The thematic units are chosen along with the students and this is really exciting as this is a one-off teaching experience. The most

important thing of all is that the challenge of working with adults has activated strategic skills I never imagined I had” (SCS Kalamatas).

“This teaching experience has transformed me from simply transferring knowledge of the English language to being an inspirer and negotiator. The influence the students have had on me has made me a better educator through constructive dialogue and groupwork. I keep on learning something new every day about the process of teaching. I enjoy the flexibility of being able to work with the students planning, organising activities, lessons, visits etc. according to their real needs. This makes me feel that I am making a constructive contribution to the formation of behaviours and attitudes which will help them respond effectively to various communicative situations in the English language in an ever-changing multicultural environment” (SCS Alexandroupolis).²

Other important changes recorded in teachers’ responses regarding the way they perceive their work as English language educators are cited below, with the most frequent responses presented first:

“I feel that my students respect me and what I offer them. At the end of each hour they thank me”.

“I feel that part of my job is how to enhance their self-esteem”.

“I feel that I address the personal needs of each student separately”.

“I need to use my imagination more”.

“I have different expectations from each one of the students depending on their potential”.

“I feel that what is taking place in the English literacy classroom is part of social interaction”.

“I realise the importance of mutual trust among students and teachers”.

“I feel that learning is a kind of experiential process”.

From the above accounts it is made clear that working at SCS has had an impact on

² Teachers’ comments have been translated by the author.

teachers' practices: teachers now become more self-reflective; they develop a critical awareness of their own work and adopt a perspective which allows them to abandon an authoritative role and enter the teaching process as equal partners who may also learn from their students; they activate their imagination and try to bring the outside world into the classroom.

6. From needs to rights analysis: An educational practice of critical English literacy

This section focuses on one of the educational practices employed by English literacy teachers, that of needs analysis, in order to illustrate how this practice has been modified in the context of critical literacy pedagogy. Needs analysis, as a method of collecting information about what students know and do not know (a basis for designing curricula and materials), is suggested to be used at the beginning of every school year at SCS. During the in-service seminars, English literacy teachers are familiarised with different models for conducting needs analysis in the English classroom (see Benesch 1996, Brown 1995, Jordan 1997 among others). The findings of the present study indicate that all teachers are involved in some kind of needs analysis with their classes. Some teachers are more systematic in the approach they use (e.g., through structured questionnaires, individual interviews with students), while others use more empirical methods. However, a survey into different methods of conducting a needs analysis reveals that all methods are necessarily limited to particular questions or issues, which, in turn, affect the conclusions to be drawn. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) suggest that what we ask and how we interpret it are dependent on a particular view of the world, on attitudes and values, while Hyland (2006) reminds us that decisions about what and how to teach are not neutral professional questions but involve issues of authority in decision making with effects on the students.

Arguing that the continued uncritical use of needs analysis must be problematised, Benesch (1999, 2001) suggests that needs analysis be complemented with a *rights analysis*. In practical terms, a *rights analysis* evaluates the findings of needs analysis, recognises the challenges that the particular students face and interrogates the results in an attempt to create more democratic and participatory involvement by students in decision making. The notion of *rights*, therefore, does not assume a set of pre-existing demands, but a conceptual framework which encourages students to assess their options and prioritise what they need

for themselves. It supports students in taking active responsibility for their learning and offers them a possibility for engagement by viewing them as active participants rather than compliant subjects. As such, *rights analysis* is a complex discovery of what is possible, desirable and beneficial at a certain moment with a particular group of students (Benesch 1993).

What is quite interesting in the case of SCS is that although English literacy teachers have not been asked to get involved in a *rights analysis*, they quite often do so, informally, and I would add somehow intuitively, by actively engaging their students in decision making. I would thereby suggest that the combined use of needs and *rights analysis* can be seen as a step towards critical English pedagogy. Benesch (1999) argues that *rights analysis* has to do with how power is exercised in the employed pedagogy and the curriculum, by exploring how teachers and students negotiate control in the classroom. Three key areas which she investigated in relation to negotiation of control, and which are also relevant in the case of SCS, are the following:

- (1) how institutional and professional authority are established through practices such as classroom architecture, course syllabus and the lesson format,
- (2) how students respond to teacher's authority, and
- (3) how coverage of materials controls both teachers and students, urging them to keep pace with an official curriculum.

In fact, English literacy teachers' responses to the questionnaires and interviews revealed that in few cases power (in the Foucauldian understanding of the concept in which social actors negotiate actions within particular contexts) was overtly exercised by English language teachers, especially newcomers to SCS and new in the profession. These teachers felt strongly that they should first teach students what they consider to be the 'basics' and then take into account students' preferences as identified in the conducted needs analysis. As a teacher put it: "*I first teach them some things I consider important, things they will need to learn, and then ask them what they want to do*". At the same time, these teachers report students' reluctance to suggest things about the English language they would like to learn, acknowledging in this way teacher's authority and their own ignorance through a 'you know better' rhetoric.

However, the majority of the English language teachers described in their responses

practices in which they negotiate control with the students, involving them in decision making concerning aspects of their learning, the preparation of the curriculum and their active involvement in the development of their assessment criteria and their participation in the assessment procedure. One such recorded practice refers to students' involvement in decision making concerning the English language curriculum. For example, in her attempt to implement the principles of a negotiated syllabus (Breen and Littlejohn 2000) in her teaching, a teacher applied *rights analysis*, by involving students in decision making at different stages of the teaching/learning process (Βαλαβάνη 2006). In another occasion, the same teacher used students' evaluation as an opportunity for project work in which all students actively participated. For example, students themselves decided on the language areas they wished to be evaluated, choosing from a list of covered materials prepared by the teacher. Next, they formed groups and revised the selected language areas with the help of group members. Finally, they took turns forming groups of evaluators who would evaluate students, with the teacher being an equal member in the group. Until the end of the process, all students took up the role of both the evaluator and the student. In this case *rights analysis* was not at all about what students wanted to learn or about their needs and desires; instead, it was an all-encompassing process which created opportunities for greater engagement and negotiation of control, by actively involving students in their evaluation process and by making them more aware of the role of power in their lives.

Another recorded practice of *rights analysis* in teachers' responses refers to the issue of 'coverage' of materials. Benesch (1999: 322) argues that "coverage *is* control; it controls both teachers and students" (emphasis original). She raises issues such as who controls classroom discourse and why and how much teachers are preoccupied with coverage of instructional materials. Teaching and learning in the EFL classroom have been greatly regulated by the tradition of the EFL textbooks, which for Benesch is considered to be a manifestation of institutional power (cf. Dendrinou 1992). However, unlike other EFL educational environments in Greece in which the teaching process is regulated by fixed syllabi, complete reliance on textbooks and attainment of aims related to language certification, English literacy teachers at SCS operate on the basis of general guidelines which they are free to develop on the basis of their students' needs and choices. In the context of rights analysis the concept of 'choice' becomes focal for Benesch (1999) who

argues that unless teachers make students aware of choices, they are choosing compliance for them.

The adoption of *rights analysis* by English language teachers in SCS has been found to take on distinct forms. Although for Benesch (personal communication, April 3, 2008) *rights analysis* is more conceptual than methodological, a counter-discourse to needs analysis, I would suggest that inevitably its materialisation varies considerably with context. In the case of the SCS, the educational philosophy which has been adopted by the schools has allowed and encouraged alternative practices of this type which provide opportunities for negotiation of classroom control.

7. Resistances to critical pedagogy and transformation at work

The changes described above may have led, as we have seen, to transformations of language teaching practices. However, processes of change have not always been smooth and without resistance (see, for instance, Tsafos 2008, Χατζησαββίδης 2007). Deeply rooted common-sense assumptions about institutional requirements have given voice to arguments of the type: *“Don’t we need a final exam to see what these students have learned? Since we are called a school, we should have proper formal ways of evaluating students”*; or *“When we spend a lot of our time working through projects, we may not be able to cover all content the students will need”*. In other cases, it has been difficult, especially for new teachers at SCS, to abandon the authoritative role of the teacher who knows what students need.

Transformation does take time to achieve, and in a few cases it may never be achieved. Teachers need some time to adjust to the new situation, to understand that *“Introducing formal exams would be like taking a practice from a conventional school and placing it in an alternative school, such as SCS. It simply doesn’t belong here”*. They need time to get used to alternative evaluation practices, such as student portfolio and descriptive evaluation and they need time to unlearn operating within a framework that transmits knowledge. As a teacher put it: *“I don’t want to tell them things; I want to ask them to try to guess drawing on their experience as adults”*.

The critical pedagogy employed by SCS entails a ‘reading of the world’ (Freire and Macedo 1987) which includes:

- the creation of an environment where students can transcend the emotional and intellectual stagnation that often results from negative educational experiences and the fear of learning a foreign language;
- an inward-looking for both the teacher and the students to reveal the constellation of beliefs and values that shape their personal interpretations of the world and common sense assumptions;
- an outward-looking to include an engagement with the wider context that connects school information with lived worlds and experiences.

Here is how an English literacy teacher has experienced transformation in her own practices: “*Before I came to SCS I spent a lot of hours reading. Now I spend a lot of hours thinking*”.

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