

# Moral Imperatives and Dilemmas in our Agendas for Social Responsibility

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## ABSTRACT

Critical language pedagogy challenges teachers to engage students in critical thinking on potentially controversial issues. At the same time, teachers should not coerce students into simply adopting a teacher's viewpoint. For engaging in student-sensitive pedagogy, I offer three practical guidelines, six moral dilemmas, and corresponding moral imperatives, with illustrative activities from around the world.

In recent years the English-language-teaching profession has witnessed a stark increase in the number of articles, chapters, books, and presentations on the critical nature of language pedagogy. Language teachers and teacher educators are driven by convictions about what this world should look like, how its people should behave, how its governments should control that behavior, and how its inhabitants should be partners in the stewardship of the planet. Language teachers are told, for example, that we should “embody in our teaching a vision of a better and more humane life” (Giroux & McLaren, 1989, p. xiii). Or, as Pennycook (1994) stated it, “the crucial issue here is to turn classrooms into places where the accepted canons of knowledge can be challenged and questioned” (p. 298; see also Pennycook, 1999; Edge, 2003).

The call for teachers to act as agents for change is not a new one. Twenty-eight years ago, Postman and Weingartner (1969) shook some educational foundations with their best seller, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. In their stinging critique of the American educational establishment, they challenged teachers to enable their students to become crap detectors: (a) crap detectors who can change our social, economic, and political systems; (b) crap detectors who can cut through burgeoning bureaucracies (which, they note, are repositories of conventional assumptions and standard practices); and (c) crap detectors who can release us from the stranglehold of the communications media, which is creating its own version of censorship.

Those criticisms were printed in 1969. Now, 35 years later, isn't it ironic that social, political, and communications systems around the world are still by and large the voices of bureaucracy and of political and economic status quo? In Postman and Weingartner's terms, have worldwide educational systems been effectively subverting the attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions that foster chaos and uselessness?

Is this call for subversive teaching a challenge that English language teachers can and should take up in the present day? Do those of us who teach languages have a special responsibility to subvert attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions?

- To subvert the assumption that language teaching is neutral, sterile, and inorganic?
- To subvert the assumption that language teaching has nothing to do with politics and power?
- To subvert the assumption that we teachers should avoid sensitive topics or touchy issues in the classroom, touchy issues like global planetary stewardship, war, and violence, touchy issues like hate, prejudice, and discrimination?

## **SOME CAUTIONARY OBSERVATIONS**

Critical language pedagogy holds that learners of the English language must be free to be themselves, to think for themselves, to behave intellectually without coercion from a powerful elite (Clarke, 1990, 2003), and to cherish their beliefs, traditions, and cultures without the threat of forced change (Edge, 1996). However, for all its laudable goals of empowerment and liberation, in language classrooms, where “the dynamics of power and domination . . . permeate the fabric of classroom life,” (Auerbach, 1995, p. 9) critical pedagogy points to a possible “covert political agenda [beneath our] overt technical agenda” (Phillipson, 1992, p. 27).

What has come to be known as *liberation education*, among other terms (see Freire, 1970; Clarke, 1990, 2003), must no doubt be tempered with some cautionary observations. Some have recently argued that our ostensibly benign assumptions about teaching methodology (see, e.g., Holliday, 1994) have an element of controversy in them. Why, hardly a person in this profession would fail to stand up with your hand over your heart to salute communicative language teaching, or whole language education, or learner-centered teaching, or cooperative learning. But are all these warm and fuzzy, soft and tender approaches to the classroom universally accepted by all cultures and all educational traditions? Certainly not. In an article titled “Toward less humanist English teaching,” Gadd (1998) cautions against viewing ourselves as a “nurturer of souls” because this “inappropriate and oppressive role . . . does not encourage or permit the students’ intellectual and cognitive development.” (Arnold’s reply to Gadd is also worth careful reading.)

The counterpoint to this rallying of teachers to change a world mired in bureaucracies is epitomized, as I see it, in what Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1994) have called “linguicism.” Phillipson (1992) argues that, historically at least, worldwide English language teaching has served to “legitimate . . . an unequal division of power and resources,” as “the dominant language [English] is glorified, [and] dominated languages are stigmatized” (p. 27). Now, while Holliday (1994) rightfully argues, I think, that Phillipson’s stance “implies a conspiracy view of English language teaching which is over-simplistic and naive” (p. 99), I think nevertheless that all English language teachers, if they have not done so already, must take heed to avoid inadvertently widening the gap between haves and have-nots. If language is power, then the unequal distribution of language programs across the world surely could contribute to the unequal distribution of power.

Is there a middle ground? A number of recent articles and books suggest that there is (e.g., Edge, 2003; Johnston, 2003; Clarke, 2003; Snow, 2001). Can English language teachers help to form classroom communities of learners who critically examine the moral, ethical, and political issues surrounding them, and can language teachers facilitate these communities sensitively,

without pushing a subversive agenda? I have three guidelines, along with some examples, for engaging in critical pedagogy while respecting students' values and beliefs.

## **GUIDELINES FOR DEALING WITH CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN THE CLASSROOM**

Critical pedagogy calls to mind a number of so-called hot topics that English language teachers can address in their classrooms. Topics like nonviolence, human rights, gender equality, racial and ethnic discrimination, sexual orientation, environmental action, religious fundamentalism, and political activism are controversial, sensitive to students' value systems, and demand critical thinking. Here are three guidelines for dealing with such topics:

1. Teachers are responsible for giving students opportunities to learn about important social, moral, and ethical issues and to analyze all sides of an issue. A language class is an ideal locus for offering information on topics of significance to students. English language curriculum objectives are not limited to linguistic factors but also include developing the art of critical thinking. Complex issues (say, religious fundamentalism or homosexuality, for example) can become the focus for intrinsically motivating, content-based language learning.
2. Teachers are responsible for creating an atmosphere of respect for each other's opinions, beliefs, and ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The classroom becomes a model of the world as a context for tolerance and appreciating diversity. Discourse structures such as "I see your point, but . . ." are explicitly taught and used in classroom discussions and debates. Students learn how to disagree without imposing their own beliefs or opinions on others. In all this, it is important that the teacher's personal opinions or beliefs remain sensitively covert to keep students from feeling coerced into agreeing with the teacher.
3. Teachers are responsible for maintaining a threshold of morality and ethics in the classroom climate. Occasionally, a teacher needs to exercise some discipline when students show disrespect or hatred based on, say, race, religion, ethnicity, or gender. Teachers should make certain that universal moral principles (love, equality, tolerance, freedom) are manifested in the classroom. This guideline is, in effect, a paradox because it presupposes that certain values are beyond reproach. Such a presupposition violates the very principle of respect captured in Guideline 2; nevertheless, it is here that the teacher's pedagogy becomes critical because the teacher predicates his or her vision of a better and more humane life on these basic values.

## **EXAMPLES FROM AROUND THE WORLD**

Consider the following examples of classroom activities. Do they abide by the above guidelines? Can your classroom re-create any of them?

In Brazil, a curriculum for children takes them on an adventure searching for magic glasses that, they discover, will enable them to see the world as it could be if everyone respected it. The

program teaches appreciation for Native Indians of Brazil, their culture, stories, and music; it teaches gender roles, animal rights, and environmental stewardship. (Maria Rita Vieira)

In Japan, a classroom research project called Dreams and Dream Makers had students choose a person who worked to make the world a more peaceful place. (Donna McInnis)

In Singapore, an activity called stamping out insults focused on why people insult others and helped students to learn and use kind, affirming words when they disagreed with one another. (George Jacobs)

From China, a teacher had students study the suppression of free speech in the former Soviet Union, asking them to critically analyze the roots and remedies for that denial of freedom. Without espousing any particular point of view himself, and under the guise of offering criticism of another country's practices, the teacher led students to comprehend alternative points of view. (Anonymous by request)

In Armenia, a teacher had students share their grandparents' experiences during the 1915 Armenian genocide when the Turks killed more than 1.5 million Armenians in Turkey. Nearly every student had family members who had been killed. Discussions focused on how ethnic groups could overcome such catastrophes and learn to live together as cooperative, peaceful neighbors. (Nick Dimmitt)

Students in Israel were assigned to create an ethical marketing and advertising campaign for a product. Colgate's widening the mouth of toothpaste tubes and Revlon's making the glass on nail polish bottles a little thicker led students to debate ethical business issues. (Stuart Carroll)

In Egypt, equal opportunities and rights of women are abridged. A teacher there whose class had both male and female students used an activity that culminated in the students' collaboratively writing a bill of rights for women in Egypt. (Mona Grant Nashed)

In the United States, following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, a student asked the teacher what *Middle East* meant; when the teacher defined the term, the student responded with, "Oh, you mean 'terrorists.'" The teacher used the next 10 minutes to sensitively guide students through a discussion of stereotypes and the misinformation that they often convey.

## **MORAL DILEMMAS AND MORAL IMPERATIVES**

Engaging in critical pedagogy in which teachers become agents for change brings with it some moral dilemmas. How far should teachers push their own personal beliefs and agendas in their zeal for realizing visions of a better world and for creating critically thinking future leaders? At least six moral dilemmas present themselves, but each dilemma carries with it what I claim is a moral imperative. Consider the following dilemmas, and their corollaries in the form of imperatives, that call socially responsible teachers to action:

*Moral Dilemma 1*

The widely accepted communicative approach to language teaching (CLT), which aims to empower and value students, may itself reflect a cultural bias that is not universally embraced.

*Moral Imperative*

Respect the diversity of cultural patterns and expectations among students, while utilizing the best methodological approaches available to accomplish course goals and objectives.

*Moral Dilemma 2*

Our altruistic agendas for bringing English to the world can legitimize an unequal division of power and resources.

*Moral Imperative*

Help students to claim their own power and resources, and to bridge the gaps that separate countries, political structures, religions, and values through a unifying language, but also help them to celebrate indigenous heritage languages and cultures.

*Moral Dilemma 3*

Our language—English—is itself so imbued with metaphor, covert messages, and other pragmatic conventions that it can hardly be taught without also teaching a set of values.

*Moral Imperative*

Without judgment on students' native languages or cultures, help them to understand and produce the sociolinguistic and pragmatic conventions of English, in full awareness of the cultural (and covert) messages inherent in any language.

*Moral Dilemma 4*

In curricular materials, teachers' choices of topics and issues provide opportunities not only to stimulate students' critical thinking but also to offend and polarize them.

*Moral Imperative*

Sensitively approach critical, relevant, and informative issues in appropriate pedagogical contexts with as balanced a perspective as possible.

*Moral Dilemma 5*

Discussions, debates, group work activities, essays, and other classroom techniques offer opportunities for teachers to be agents for change, but does teachers' zeal for realizing their own vision of a better world obstruct the truly equal, balanced treatment of controversial issues?

*Moral Imperative*

Guided by a clear vision of your own mission as a teacher, promote critical thinking on complex issues while remaining as neutral as possible and being fully aware that you are promoting a set of values in your classroom, even if somewhat covertly.

*Moral Dilemma 6*

Large-scale standardized tests are widely embraced by a budget-conscious establishment, but are they all free of cultural and socioeconomic bias?

*Moral Imperative*

Carry out research to improve the authenticity and predictive validity of standardized testing, lobby for funding for more performance-based assessment, and in your classroom assessments, model principles of authenticity, biased-for-best performance, and beneficial washback to students.

I think teachers around the world commonly experience all these dilemmas. However, if teachers find these dilemmas too daunting and shrink from their responsibility as change agents, surely they will have lost the opportunity to act on the imperatives that can drive them as teachers.

Can you engage in sensitive critical pedagogy in your classrooms? Can you take a bold step forward and at the same time respect students' beliefs and attitudes? What are some activities you can do that would respect students' points of view yet stir them to a higher consciousness of their own role as agents of change? How would you respond to statements from students that reflect hate or intolerance? The little differences here and there that you make can add up to fulfilling visions of a better and more humane world.

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