

CHAPTER 1

A Short Introduction to Social Justice and ELT

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I believe that education is the civil rights issue of our generation. And if you care about promoting opportunity and reducing inequality, the classroom is the place to start. Great teaching is about so much more than education; it is a daily fight for social justice.

—U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, October 9, 2009

If you are reading this book, there is a high probability that you agree with the quote above, though you may not share Duncan's approach to educational reform. You might have become an educator to help bring about social justice and to reduce inequality. Oddly, the fact that the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to two champions of education reveals how far we have yet to go just to achieve basic universal education for all humans, whether boys or girls, men or women, rich or poor, Buddhist or Muslim.

As is often the case in our hyperliterate world, many might believe that the link between education and social justice is a modern development. However, in this chapter we will see that the tension, sometimes overt but more often insidious, between views that education should maintain the status quo and that it should challenge the status quo are almost as old as formal education itself. Nonetheless, we might ask why a volume on social justice and English Language Teaching (ELT) is needed at this time. The answer is simple: Using English in some manner is no longer a luxury; it must be part of that basic universal education we wish for all. Keeping English from anyone, whether actively or indirectly, must now be seen as a social injustice.

As English has become the first truly global lingua franca, appropriate knowledge of English is as essential a tool as basic literacy and numeracy (Hall, 2015; Hall, Arrol, & Diaz, 2013). ELT is just as important as reading, math, and history, and ELT is just as open as the other essential subjects are to uses and abuses in any educational system or even lack of one. The urgency of social justice for all education is clear in the justification by the Nobel Peace Prize Committee for jointly awarding Kailash

Satyarthi from India and Malala Yousafzai from Pakistan the prize: *“for their struggle against the suppression of children and young people and for the right of all children to education”* (“The Nobel Peace Prize 2014,” para. 1).

As we briefly explore the history of social justice and English Language Teaching, it is important to remember that many people disagree with the social justice education movement. For some, so-called modern education should teach only narrowly defined “basics.” Indeed, there are those who would dismiss social justice as a code word for progressive politics (Leo, 2010) that they see as undesirable, while others see the concept as nebulous (Sowell, 2012). Others sincerely believe that social justice in education amounts to partisan indoctrination. For example, the Texas Republican Party made an explicit attack on “critical thinking,” a (fortunately) controversial part of their election platform in 2012:

Knowledge-Based Education—We oppose the teaching of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) (values clarification), critical thinking skills . . . which focus on behavior modification and have the purpose of challenging the student’s fixed beliefs and undermining parental authority. (Whittaker, 2012, para. 3)

For our part, we do understand that it is indeed possible to entertain the notion that education and social justice should be separated. We also assume that most readers of this chapter would assume that social change is a positive, democratizing term, but it is possible for education to bring about social change that entrenches social/ethnic/racial/gender/economic differences even further, sometimes in the name of social justice. We need only remember Kipling’s famous 19th-century phrase “the White Man’s Burden,” which described what was seen (and by some still is) as the need for white Europeans and Americans to bring civilization (i.e., social justice?) to the “savages” through, among other vehicles, education (Cody, n.d., para. 2). Since the author of this chapter is from the United States, let’s look at two examples from that country’s history that show us how misguided the term *social justice* can be.

As an extension of U.S. efforts to assimilate First Americans (Amerindians) to European-American culture in the 19th century, “Indian boarding schools were founded to eliminate traditional American Indian ways of life and replace them with mainstream American culture” (Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, 2007). Students in these schools were prohibited from speaking their native languages, in alignment with educational policies that endeavored to decrease the use of indigenous American languages (Spring, 2007). While these policies were part of a larger “civilizing movement” (what some might call a land grab) by white, brown, and later black Americans, the goal of these schools was what then was perceived as social justice and social change. The founders and administrators of these schools firmly believed they were helping the Indian children by giving them access to mainstream (dominant) U.S. culture, since many believed that “Indians would ultimately confront a fateful choice: civilization or extinction” (Adams, 1995, p. 6). Of course, today most of us believe that this approach was misguided and hurtful. However, we must remember that for many missionary teachers at the time, the goal was “social justice.”

On the other hand, the efforts of early 20th-century white Hawaiians to exclude non-white Hawaiians from the patently superior white schools (there was no attempt at “separate but equal” here) were clearly and overtly racist, yet also done in a very different spirit of “social justice.” To meet the “needs” of the influx of middle-class white immigrants from the mainland, Hawaii established “English Standard” schools in 1924. Admission to these public schools was based on an oral exam in English. If the Filipino, Portuguese, Japanese, or Chinese child used any creole forms, s/he failed the test and was sent to the inferior schools (Okiihiro, 1992). This action is clearly not part of our definition of social justice, yet we can imagine that the white immigrants thought their actions completely socially “just” at the time as they attempted to protect their white children from the influence of the inferior “others.”

Keeping in mind that not everyone believes the role of education is social change or justice or shares our definition of that term, we begin our discussion with a brief mention of Paulo Freire. Freire is actively cited by researchers in social justice and critical education as the inspiration and parent of the modern movement, although the priest Luigi Taparelli is credited with first using the term *social justice* in 1840, shortly before the crucial revolutions of 1848 (Zajda, Majhanovich, Rust, & Sabina, 2006, p. 1). Before further discussion of Freire, however, we would like to go back a little further, to consider the traditionally Western use of education. Let us look back at Socrates, whose life and death highlights the rewards and dangers of social empowerment. He was executed, not for being a radical, but for helping students to reflect on their own beliefs. The destruction of one of the most brilliant minds ever shows us in a dramatic fashion that education can be dangerous to the status quo. Millennia later, the Texas Republican Party echoes the beliefs of Socrates’s executioners that the goal of those who promote critical thinking is “challenging the student’s fixed beliefs and undermining parental authority” (Whittaker, 2012, para. 3). Socrates must die for Texas to live.

Although there were moments of educational brilliance in the next two millennia, we choose to turn now to John Amos Comenius (1592–1670 CE), a Czech academic who is now largely unknown outside Europe. Why has this man, who was asked to be president of Harvard University in 1654 (John Amos Comenius, 1892, para. 2), disappeared from our literature? When we read what was said about him on the 300th anniversary of his birth in an 1892 article in the *Harvard Crimson*, it almost seems as though we were reading a synopsis of the most advanced ESP (English for Specific Purpose) methodology from 2015:

The principles which Comenius represented are embodied in his various writings, the most important of which are the “Great Didactic,” the “Gate of Languages” and the “World Illustrated.” The object of the first of these was, as expressed in the subtitle, “to teach everybody everything” and “to search out a rule in accordance with which the teachers teach less and the learners learn more”. . . . To educate humanity so as to give it an adequate consciousness of itself and to make it useful and happy are the aims which Comenius had always in view. The system of teaching he recommended was by a proper consideration of the learner and the

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subject-matter. This method will always be successful since it is in sympathy with nature. Individual tastes and capacities were to be kept in mind and correlation and coordination were indispensable. (John Amos Comenius, 1892, para. 2)

A brief introduction to his body of work presents some common underlying principals, which include

- learning foreign languages through the vernacular;
- obtaining ideas through objects rather than words;
- starting with objects most familiar to the child to introduce him to both the new language and the more remote world of objects;
- giving the child a comprehensive knowledge of his environment, physical and social, as well as instruction in religious, moral, and classical subjects;
- making this acquisition of a compendium of knowledge a pleasure rather than a task; and
- making instruction universal (Johann Amos Comenius, n.d.).

Looking at that list, we must ask ourselves why we don't know more about him today. Indeed, much of his work could be compared to the movement toward student-centered, or the more appropriately labeled "learning-centered," classroom we strive for today:

Craftsmen do not hold their apprentices down to theories; they put them, to work without delay so that they may learn to forge metal by forging, to carve by carving, to paint by painting, to leap by leaping. Therefore in schools let the pupils learn to write by writing, to speak by speaking, to sing by singing, to reason by reasoning, etc., so that schools may simply be workshops in which work is done eagerly. Thus, by good practice, all will feel at last the truth of the proverb: *Fabricando fabricamur*. (as quoted in Piaget, 1993, p. 177)

Nonetheless, few ELT professionals have ever heard of Comenius or of his ideas, nor is he cited in the literature. We purposefully highlight Comenius to disprove the assertion that ELT, social justice, and social change are somehow new trends or that developments in language instruction are all modern. To quote an even older text, "There is nothing new under the sun."

Likewise, we are hardly vanguards in the belief that education should be used as an agent of social change. From John Dewey, whose work in the first half of the 20th century highlighted the role of education in democracy, to Jane Addams, who founded Chicago's Hull House in the 19th century to help immigrants and the poor, we easily find major figures who believed that education can and indeed should be an agent of social change and justice as we understand it today.

Now with a bit of historical awareness, we can return to the late 20th century, to Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Although he did not explicitly work with language instruction, we can see that his work empowering communities to challenge systems

of oppression by encouraging students to co-create knowledge easily relates to the push toward learning-centered and learner-centered classrooms and education that language educators will readily identify. This drive to use education to challenge systems of oppression is intrinsically and explicitly political and ideological. Yet, as we have seen, these notions are not new to education, nor are they limited to social justice contexts.

Given what we have just written, we can hardly disagree with Pennycook (1989) who said all education is political. Understanding that this statement is now almost a truism, language teachers can recognize the importance of the assertion that “differential power relations and political interests are crucial in understanding the global spread of English teaching” (Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1992; Tollefson, 1995, cited in Johnston, 1999). The result of this is that language (or any) teachers, whether they care to be or not, are political entities. So, when we think of critical pedagogy, as Freire (1970) and Giroux (1988) would refer to it, we are considering a critical view of educational practices that will transform both the classroom and society. Although methods and approaches are political in nature and critical pedagogy has a stated political goal of transforming society, the means to this end are not prescribed, as each individual context determines its path. Myles Horton (1990) and Paulo Freire’s conversations on critical pedagogy capture this with the title of their book *We Make the Road by Walking*. In our context of language teaching, language is “a practice that constructs, and is constructed by, the ways learners understand themselves, their social surroundings, their histories, and their possibilities for the future” (Norton & Toohey, 2004, p. 1). As language teachers, we continue to expand our understanding of our learners’ needs and contexts; however, to achieve that understanding, we, in turn, find it essential to examine our own roles in the equation.

Perhaps it is no accident that the goals of social justice and critical pedagogy seem to have evolved along a path similar to that of language education perspectives. We can see this development in Long and Robinson (1998), who emphasize the importance of the learner-centered classroom, where the teacher’s first focus and concern is with understanding their student population, rather than simply focusing on the skills to be covered, an approach that they note the majority of the world’s schools put first in curriculum design (as quoted in Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 235). Nonetheless, Freire might correlate this criticism of the standard model of the curriculum to his analysis of traditional teaching as the Banking Concept, which sees the teacher’s role as a dispenser of knowledge to be received and repeated back at a later date. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire asks us instead to look to dialogue and problem solving in the classroom as an emancipatory practice. His goal of liberation for students is not intended to be accomplished in a teacher-centric model, where teachers “free” students; rather it is to organically arise from the population,

a pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that

reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation. And in the struggle this pedagogy will be made and remade. (as quoted in Piaget, 1993, p. 33)

By empowering students and communities, Freire's goal for teachers in education was that of a facilitator who helps learning to happen, rather than by dictating what knowledge will be shared. We maintain, however, that even Freire had not gone far enough toward embracing learning-centered education in which the teacher is just as much a learner as the students are (Hall, 2015).

There are relations to other major themes in TESOL. Gardner's (1983) call to respect the Multiple Intelligences (MI) of their students is an example of how teachers are advised to take a multifaceted approach to teaching. In spite of recent criticism of MI (Armstrong, 2009), it is easy to see how MI ties in to the position of critical pedagogy (CP) by helping teachers meet learners/communities at a level or in a fashion that allows them to use their specific strengths and needs. Similarly, in Second Language Pedagogy, this move toward learner-centered education has meant a shift from exclusive use of Grammar Translation and Audio-lingual Language teaching methods to incorporating communicative strategies as proposed by Brumfit and Johnson in *The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching* (1979). In seeing the learner's real use of the language as a goal, the Communicative Approach (CA) conforms to CP. Of course, we also must remember that for certain groups, the appropriate use of Grammar Translation and Audio-lingual Language methods are more desirable than the CA. For example, we want our air traffic controllers to be accurate rather than "fluent" (Hall, 2013). Yes, some proponents of CA can be ideologically inflexible and therefore completely anti-CP!

Likewise, the growth of ESP can be seen as an outgrowth of social justice, since it has, as one part of its approach, a focus on the needs and the wants of all stakeholders, not just the students. Indeed, we can see ESP projects throughout the world that try to work with the "poorest of the poor" to help them have access to English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (Hall, Arrol, & Diaz, 2013). Without ELF, social progress is almost impossible today. In fact, the author of this chapter uses ESP to also mean "English for Social Progress" to reflect the explicit goals of projects in which he has personally been involved in countries such as Peru, Bolivia, Indonesia, and East Timor (Hall, 2015).

We are not going to try to define or delimit what social justice in education is. For example, many might think that mathematics would hardly be a nexus for social change, but many math educators work for social justice. Indeed, as an outgrowth of his interest in using applied linguistics to promote social justice, the author of this chapter co-authored a book chapter on using technology to reduce the racial gap in college math courses (Hu, Xu, Hall, Walker, & Okwumabua, 2013).

In education, social justice can be interpreted and applied countless ways. It is determined by each group, in each individual culture and context. Thus, there can be no explicit, definitive list of social justice topics to cover, because each culture creates its own injustices that must be addressed. In Nobel laureate Malala's Pakistan, girls

must struggle to retain their right to education. On the other hand, girls in Canada, for example, are not subject to attacks by adult terrorists for wanting to learn, but there we find other types or degrees of social injustice that must be dismantled. There can be no end to possible social injustices because our “most egregious” social injustices are culturally defined and perceived through our experiences. As a result, this chapter is only illustrative, not comprehensive; likewise, we will be examining only a limited number of topics in this volume and we would ask you, the reader, to consider the social injustices or justices you have encountered, experienced, ignored, or worked against. Perhaps we can learn from your experiences and share with you from ours as we explore language teaching and social justice.

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