

The politics of EAP: a new criticality?

Or can we go beyond Benesch?

By Chris Macallister

Durham University English Language Centre

This 'Espresso' session...

1. From EAP to Critical EAP
2. Critical EAP in action; a political project?
3. Questioning Critical Pedagogy, Questioning Critical EAP?
4. What has this got to do with my classroom? Foucault, Rorty, Pennycook and a 'new criticality'

1. From EAP to Critical EAP

The politics of EAP: a very brief history

Until the 1980s The dominant position...

- ❑ EAP an apolitical neutral enterprise
- ❑ L2 composition primarily descriptive and quantitative
- ❑ Preparing students for higher education is a non political exercise (Santos, 1992).

The dominant position challenged

EAP not a neutral enterprise – it supports a liberal capitalist status quo

- ❑ Benesch accused mainstream EAP of an ‘accommodationist ideology’ (1993)
- ❑ Pennycook: neither universities nor the English language are neutral (1997)
- *Were EAP practitioners guilty of a false neutrality?*

The response: Critical EAP: resistance and liberation

- ❑ EAP classrooms can be places of “social change inside and outside the academy” (Benesch, 1996, p. 736)
- ❑ Critical EAP advocates social justice and the reform of “institutions, workplaces and the community “ (Benesch, 2001, xviii)

Critical EAP an extension of Freire’ s “Pedagogy of Hope”

And the Practitioner's role?

- ❑ The EAP practitioner should NOT be locked into a “subservient” “support” role
 - ❑ The goals of the EAP practitioner go beyond “propping up course content”
 - ❑ Thus the EAP practitioner is an “active intellectual” working to bring about change and social justice (Benesch, 2001, p. 84).
-
- *Do EAP practitioners want to be active intellectuals working for social justice?*
 - *Do they/should they have a choice?*

2. Critical EAP in action; a political project?

Benesch puts EAP into practice

- ❑ 1994 – engaging with the New York State gubernatorial elections
- ❑ 1996 – shaping a psychology course rather than shaping psychology students
- ❑ 2008 – Countering US military recruitment on a college campus
- ❑ 2010 – Globalisation is the rationale for critical EAP

Is Critical EAP a political project?

- ❑ McLaren (2009 p. 62) argues critical pedagogy “must be partisan” if it is to achieve its goals

- *Does it follow that the critical EAP practitioner “must be partisan”?*

- ❑ However, advocates of Critical EAP say they do not engage in indoctrination...

- ❑ The student is empowered by critical EAP

Yes: Critical EAP seems to be political

- ❑ The critical EAP position is invariably centre left, social democratic
- ❑ Critical EAP has clear stated goals
- *Must the practitioner share these goals and this position if they are to be critical?*

3. Questioning Critical Pedagogy? Questioning Critical EAP?

The problem with Critical EAP

- I. The status quo (Neo-liberal capitalism) is a modernist project with its own beliefs and goals
- II. Critical EAP is another modernist project with its own beliefs and goals
- III. Both are, in Foucault's terms "Regimes of Truth"
- IV. Do critical EAP, and the critical practitioner risk imposing their own goals and values upon students?
- V. Has Critical EAP accumulated its own symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2002)

Critical Pedagogy questioned...

- ❑ Freedman (2007) argues critical pedagogy risks being undemocratic:
“the teacher’s voice will always have a special kind of authority”
(p. 240)
- ❑ Ellsworth (1989) argued critical approaches imposed but did not empower
- ❑ Native American educators have argued that critical pedagogy is just another ‘white man’s’ ideology (Grande, 2004)
- ❑ Critical pedagogy has been accused of marginalising indigenous and local beliefs (Bowers & Apffel-Marglin, 2007)

Does this apply to Critical EAP?

- I. What if students wanted to support the other candidate for governor of New York?
 - II. What if students supported US military recruitment on campus?
 - III. What if the students don't want to be liberated or emancipated?
 - IV. What if the critical approach clashes with the students' culture values and beliefs?
- *What does an EAP practitioner do in these situations?*

4. What has this got to do with my classroom?

Foucault, Rorty, Pennycook, and a
'new criticality'

The practitioner's dilemma

Acceptance of the status quo may leave students lacking in the criticality they need in the academy...

- But... Benesch's 'traditional' criticality may simply replace one status quo with another
- It may marginalise and devalue the student's own local context, experiences, and beliefs

Are we back where we started?

A way out: criticality without a final destination

- ❑ **Foucault:** hyper activism – constantly questioning and challenging positions to avoid imposing a regime of truth
- ❑ everything is contingent – the local context is key

- ❑ **Rorty's 'anti philosophy'** : no “final vocabulary” possible. We are always “re-describing”
- ❑ everything is contingent – the local context is key

Pennycook's (2010) language as a local practice

Relevance for the practitioner?

Leave behind top down goals of emancipation and liberation

Work with our own institutions' particular contexts

Acknowledge and work with students' local needs and contexts

So...

- A reaffirmation of the importance of Dogme/teaching unplugged
- A refocus on in-house bespoke materials

And...

- Questioning, critique, and debate are ends in themselves when it comes to the EAP classroom

The ‘New’ critical EAP practitioner perhaps:

- Believes in the value of in-house, bespoke, ESAP over pre-published EGAP
- Is an inherently ‘curious sceptic’ with regard to academic debate and argument; everything is always open for debate
- Is an active intellectual who is not in search of a “final vocabulary”