Chapter 13: Teaching Controversial Issues in the language education of adult migrants to the UK: a risk worth taking

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Introduction

Discussing controversial issues can be of real value in language teaching and learning and the language teacher education and therefore it very definitely is a risk worth taking. This is because debating controversial issues can help promote democratic citizenship (for ESOL teachers as well as learners) as well as developing language learning skills. This argument is urgent because, while the value of controversy in language learning is increasingly attested to in the research literature (e.g. Cooke and Roberts, 2007; Hepworth, 2015), some teachers (Hepworth, 2015) and most materials writers (Gray, 2002) choose to avoid the challenge.

In making this argument, I begin by establishing the context and theoretical background for my approach and go on to discuss the opportunities afforded by and the risks of making space for controversial issues in the language and language teacher education classroom. I illustrate and support my argument with data from Adult ESOL classrooms and voices from student and teacher interviews. In the interests of reflexivity, and in order to position myself within this research, it is necessary to state that the classroom-based data was sourced through exploratory practice, a form of practitioner-research (Hanks, 2017) in which I took up the role of teacher-researcher in my own classroom.

The nature and value of controversy

In order to illuminate something of the nature and value of controversy I offer the following vignette from the language education classroom. I do not offer any substantive analysis here, as I have written more extensively about it elsewhere (Hepworth, 2019). In brief, I was a non-participant observer in an advanced level general English class, in which the students had just found out about the new policy to introduce fees for their (previously free) language classes. It is the beginning of the class. In response to student demands for clarification, the teacher is forced to state the new policy:

Teacher: if you are on a low income you pay half price (.) but from next year it's not going to be available]

Student: good news]

The student interrupts the teacher and the response is ironic, indeed, mocking. Controversial issues 'arouse strong feelings' (Fiehn, 2005: 11). They emerge spontaneously, unexpectedly and the irony and interruption positions the teacher awkwardly, making them vulnerable in front of the students, and me, the observer, who felt uncomfortable on their behalf. Perhaps unexpectedly, this can also generate playfulness or creativity, visible here through irony, which also does politeness work by blunting the edge of the disagreement.

The vignette also tells us something about the value of controversy in terms of language learning and critical thinking. The irony is a sophisticated politeness strategy. The subsequent discussion generated productive language interaction, extended turns of talk and critical thinking around the right to free language provision. In some cases, this led to students and teachers getting involved an Action for ESOL campaign to defend the right to language provision.

This issue was controversial in line with the general characterisation below:

'problems or disputes which divide society and for which significant groups within society offer conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative values' (Stradling et al., 1984: 2).

Such issues are complex and cannot simply be settled by an appeal to evidence; instead they rest on belief and value judgment, in this case whether or not migrants should have the right to free language classes. The government, college authorities, and the students often had sharply differing views here. After all, a given issue is not intrinsically controversial but only becomes so from particular perspectives (Hess & Amery, 2008: 510). This is why they provide a fertile seedbed for developing both language and critical thinking skills. However, it is, of course, precisely these qualities that bring risk and potential vulnerability.

The neo-liberal context for controversy

Controversy, like everything else, is situated within a network of power relations and this implicates ideology. I understand ideology to refer to: 'the ways in which meaning (or signification) sustains relations of domination (Thompson, 1984: 198).' In economic and political terms, the currently dominant ideology of the world we live in is neo-liberal. Broadly speaking, this can be defined as:

a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. (Harvey, 2005:2)

Under neo-liberalism, education in the form of pedagogy and research (see Conama, this volume) is commodified and viewed as a source of profit. In order perhaps to maximise global reach and profit in the free market, controversial topics are sometimes avoided in pedagogy (Hepworth, 2015) and research (see Sauntson, this volume) with teachers and researchers sometimes reporting feeling vulnerable if topics such as religion, politics and sexuality are engaged with.

The dominant ideology around pedagogy within neo-liberalism is that it is: 'a set of strategies and skills to use in order to teach pre-specified subject matter' (Giroux, 2011: 3). According to this formulation, English is a commodity for sale in the marketplace. Most migrants are now expected to pay for their language classes (hence the new policy introducing fees discussed briefly earlier) and teaching and learning is viewed in terms of a 'banking' model, (Freire, 1970) with the teacher or teacher educator delivering relevant knowledge and skills to the student, whether this is connected to the language itself or to the set of skills required to teach it. In this way, teaching is also viewed as uncontroversial.

The post-Brexit climate is risky for adult migrants to the UK with the issue of immigration dominating the debate. Many adult migrants move to the UK to seek employment. However, migrants are often represented in the British press as 'fleeing, sneaking or flooding' into the UK (Gabrielatos & Barker, 2008). When migrants are 'othered' (Said, 1978) in this way, and seen as outsiders, their very presence can be seen as a risk, and makes them vulnerable. Indeed, there is evidence that discrimination based on xenophobia and nationalism is increasing (Burnett, 2016; Forster, 2016).

Activist Citizenship

Mention of the nation state brings us to citizenship. Much UK policy discourse emphasizes citizenship as a matter of legal status along with the rights and, especially, responsibilities of the citizen in relation to the nation state (Peutrell, 2019). The Life in the UK test and the Citizenship materials (DfES, 2005) certainly focus on learning about the nation state.

In contrast, I understand citizenship as lived experience, something enacted through the: 'routines, rituals, customs, norms and habits of the everyday' (Isin 2008: 16). In these terms, it manifests itself through 'acts of citizenship' that have the potential to be transformative i.e. challenge the status quo and create new identity rights and identity positions (Isin, 2008).

Thus activist citizenship thus conceptualizes participation more radically and sees students or teachers as democratic actors across a range of sites e.g. the classroom, the workplace, the local and global community (Cooke et al., 2019). In the context of Adult ESOL, this might encompass the struggle for affordable language learning or workplace rights or community building. However, being an activist student or teacher brings risk with it and renders them more vulnerable to college authorities. Some teachers and students joined the Action for ESOL campaign to protest the cuts in the sector. This demonstrates that TESOL pedagogy can connect to social justice.

Critical Pedagogy and language teaching and learning

Like the activist citizenship just discussed, Critical Pedagogy aims to be transformative and to create a fairer world. Unlike the neo-liberal stance outlined earlier, Critical Pedagogy views teaching and learning as contextualized practice, tightly implicated in relations of power and inequality, and grounded in issues of ethics, value and the furtherance of social justice (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2011: 3).

The emphasis on the importance of dialogue and debate as a means of performing democratic citizenship also links into a view that dialogue and debate can be used to promote language learning. In making these connections, I draw upon Sociocultural Theory, which originates in the work of Lev Vygotsky and has been applied to second language learning by Lantolf (1994; 2000; 2007).

The main point to make is that language learning is developed in dialogue with others i.e. through 'collaborative dialogue' which is concerned with problem-solving and knowledge-building' (Swain, 2006: 102) and is internalized and through a process of what Swain refers to as languaging i.e. "the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language" (Swain, 2006: 89).

Dialogue and debate can also develop critical thinking-again in teachers as well as students. This is what Freire (1970) referred to as conscientizacao, where different points of view are explored and evaluated, with a view to educating informed citizens and promoting social justice and democracy. Sometimes this critical thinking can emerge humorously through what Bakhtin (1967) termed the carnivalesque, which is where strategies like irony and parody are used to for satirical purposes and served to subvert, forming a 'a counter-hegemonic tradition' (Caldas & Coulthard, 2003: 90).

Adult ESOL classrooms

Adult ESOL classrooms are often superdiverse places (Vertovec, 2007), reflecting broader patterns of global migration (Cooke & Simpson, 2008), both the economic migration of those seeking a better life and the forced migration of those fleeing persecution. The same diversity characterizes the language teacher education classroom as: 'ESOL teachers collectively are almost as diverse as their students' (Cooke & Simpson, 2008: 30). They are also dynamic places and the composition of ESOL classrooms may change further, as a result of diminishing migration from the European Union.

This diversity brings risk with it when controversy emerges in the multicultural classroom. Controversial issues present the risk of offence to individuals or communities. This can be understood in terms of face or the image of yourself that you present to others (Goffman, 1955). There are threats to positive face, to a person's need to be accepted, to belong or to be liked by

others, and threats to negative face, or a person's need to be free and independent (Brown & Levinson, 1978; 1987). Such threats can be mitigated by face-saving strategies. There may be conflict between notions of face, discussed above, in the learners' 'home' cultures, and those they might encounter with teachers and other learners in the multicultural classroom

However, it is precisely this superdiversity which makes Adult ESOL classrooms powerful sites in which to debate controversial issues. This is because they reflect the superdiversity of the wider world more closely than other community-based pressure groups, such as faith groups, or political parties. Moreover, adults, in theory at least, bring experience, maturity and adult sensibilities to controversial issues.

There is a debate around the extent to which the TESOL classroom should be seen as a 'safe haven' (Baynham et al., 2007) or a classical agora (Hepworth, 2019) in which open and robust civic debate should take place. In reality, there is no reason why it should not be both. If the classroom is an agora, then it is important that students and teachers are equal. Just as slaves and women were silenced and excluded from debate, we need to recognize that the classroom, too, has its hierarchies, as has the world beyond.

Adult ESOL students are vulnerable in that they often lack audibility (Block, 2007), defined in terms of the linguistic, economic and social capital needed to succeed in wider society. For example, how much riskier must it be to debate controversial issues if English is not your first language? One teacher put it thus: 'the trouble with language is that it reduces your ability to be articulate' with the concomitant risk that: 'people have got all these thoughts in their head and they just can't articulate it' and 'it's good when people have complex ideas in their head and they can articulate them' (Hepworth, 2015). Furthermore, many are also vulnerable in that they work in low-paid, part-time unskilled and semi-skilled employment, often in the service sector. Those who teach them often lack audibility too, largely due to insecure employment conditions, with many on part-time or hourly-paid contracts (Cooke & Simpson, 2008).

Controversial issues in the language classroom

A controversial curriculum

I have written elsewhere (Hepworth, 2015; 2019) about how controversial issues are largely avoided in government –produced Skills for Life materials (DfES, 2003) and the Citizenship materials (DfES, 2005) and how, in ethnically diverse classrooms, teachers are less likely to introduce controversial issues (Campbell, 2007) for fear offending communities (Philips, 1997) or individuals within them (Gray & Cooke, 2019). This concern about offence coupled with the desire to promote cohesive classrooms is common amongst teachers (Baynham et al., 2007; Hepworth, 2015) with some reporting how debates around controversial issues had the potential to create division in the classroom, with the risk that it might 'fragment,' creating a damaging 'them and us' situation.

In contrast, Critical Pedagogy emphasizes that the curriculum should be emergent (Auerbach, 1992: 62) and not prescribed, thus empowering students. Making decisions on which issues are likely to cause offence to students is not only undemocratic; students are more likely to be offended by having decisions taken on their behalf than by the controversial issues themselves (Wallace, 1992). This is because the students are adults who can make up their own minds about what they find controversial and what they are (and are not) prepared to discuss.

To illustrate how all this might play out in the Adult ESOL classroom, I now discuss the benefits, risks and vulnerabilities at play in the language and language teacher education classroom. I take issues

around religion and politics as my starting points as these are amongst the most commonly-cited controversial issues to avoid. In the extracts that follow the students are debating what they would do, if they could do one thing, in order to make the world a better, happier place. This was preparation for a discussion task in a Level 2 Speaking and Listening examination. However, this task also encouraged a more participatory curriculum in that, rather than imposing topics, the students could raise issues for debate, drawing upon what was important to them in their own lives (Freire, 1970). Moreover, this task positioned the students as citizens of the world, not just the nation state, and as activist citizens (Isin, 2008) who have the power to transform the world by imagining how it might be different.

Religion

In the extract that follows, the students are debating the proposal that religion should be deleted; not abolished but imagined as something that never existed:

M=A Polish student

J=A Polish student

B=A Polish student

1 M I think religion is some kind of manipulation people and what I mean by that is that for many years I've been training to attend to the church because it's just the way what must to be taken and er people in Poland they just before not now maybe not now when I was a kid I just had to because I'll go with the parents then everything was great to meet on Sunday see that kids are that's great but the grandmothers think they have some kind of brainwashing like the radio that is some kind of(laughter)

2 J I think brainwashing is starting from few years

3 M because I think my grandmother she don't really pray for everything better in our country she just pray for erm

4 J the church

5 M for the erm prest priest

6 J church

7 M actually they don't really church they just think it's they think it's in the name of god but in the next moment we can found that the priest has slept with a very young boy the priest buy new car he just go to the holiday so you know I don't know where is that money going to but it's some kind of sabotage in Poland with the catholic religion maybe not now not all people but just adults of my age turn against

8 J I think maybe

9 M they say my friend he is from he was for really long time with his girlfriend and they were engaged the priest just asked whether they slept with each other and they said ok yes we have

10 J too late

11 M so it's not allowed to be married like countries like England and Poland they asked why and he said because you not clean

12 J and give him a sum (laughter)

13 M and after a while the parents arrived give it like 500 I'll do that once

14 J I cleaned you are clean now my son

15 M they went for some lessons after they paid and the priest said now you ready which was silly and insane

16 B yeah I'm agree and I think I know what you mean when I been I'm not religion but it's a kind of difficulty in our country because 99% is religions so I always struggling the troubles when I met the girl and the parents and I had to let to know the parents that I so they've been treating me like a devil sometimes

17 M like my grandma(laughter)

(Hepworth, 2015)

The extract contains much potentially controversial content about religion in general, and, specifically, the church and the priesthood. Thus, we have religion as: 'some kind of manipulation' or 'brainwashing,' hardly inoffensive terms. More specifically, we have paedophile priests, exploiting and profiting from the contributions of believers in Turn 7, corrupt priests absolving believers for financial incentives in cases of sex before marriage in Turn 9 and last, but by no means least, B's declaration of atheism. This contrasts starkly with the avoidance or, at best, the rather bland focus on learning about other religions as part of a more general focus on culture (especially religious festivals) in more conventional Adult ESOL materials (DfES, 2003).

The extract provides clear evidence of learning in the form of dialogic critical thinking as the students expose the manipulative power of religion (sustained through the family, the media, here 'the radio') and the corruption of the Catholic Church and the priesthood in Poland. Their general claims and critique are authorized by narrative evidence in the form of small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2007) or anecdotes, a powerful strategy in argumentation as disputing the claim involves disputing the veracity of the personal experience itself (Baynham, 1995). Thus, for example, we have the narrative of M's friend in Turn 9 or B's treatment at the hands of the girl's parents in Turn 16.

This critical thinking, seen in the light of Freire's (1970) concept of conscientizacao, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for changing the world. Here, the critical awareness of the manipulative power of religious ideology is valuable not simply in itself but as a step towards social transformation. To cite Marx (1845): 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.' J's interesting, though utopian, proposal is to 'delete religion' or make it as though it never happened. Perhaps more realistically, later on, M suggests separating religion and the institution of the priesthood and the church, with the implication that religion be a private matter rather than the business of the state. This sentiment is echoed by other students and amounts to a claim for a more secular role for religion. This locates the debate within a wider one about the role of religion in society.

This critical awareness connects closely with the benefits for language learning. The fluency of the contributions, attested to by the lack of significant pauses, the production of extended turns of talk, and the way in which the students complete each other's utterances (see Turns 11 and 12) all suggest the topic has motivated lots of language and this something which has increasingly been shown to be characteristic of debates around controversial issues (Cooke & Roberts, 2007; Hepworth, 2015). Moreover, this is 'collaborative dialogue' (Swain, 2006) in that the students are

responding to, and building upon the arguments of, each other and in so doing developing new knowledge. So it is, for example, that in Turn 1 and 2, M claims that religious belief is a matter of 'brainwashing' and 'manipulation' and J builds upon this by asserting that this 'brainwashing' process begins at a very early age.

The role of playfulness in the dialogue, especially given the gravity of the topics being debated, is interesting and serves a number of purposes. The first one is critique in the form of the carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1967) and, more specifically, through parody. Parody is, in effect, a dialogue within a dialogue, and one that is: 'directed towards the referential object of speech, as in ordinary discourse, and towards another's discourse, towards someone else's speech.' (Bakhtin, 1994: 105). Thus, in Turn 14, J takes on and simultaneously mocks the priest's voice and identity. The less powerful voice mocks the more powerful priestly one.

The humour and personalisation in evidence in the extract –and elsewhere- also serve to mitigate the potential threat to face presented when debating controversial topics. The second function of the playfulness is interpersonal. The laughter and personalisation, in the form of anecdote, helps to develop cohesive classes through building rapport and solidarity between these students as they draw upon their life experiences in Catholic Poland to co-construct their critique of the priesthood and the church. There is the laughter of recognition here perhaps, as, for example, M recognizes the prejudicial treatment B receives as something his 'grandma' would mete out. In order to save B's positive face, M offers solidarity and empathy by attesting to knowledge of similar treatment in the person of his grandma.

However, there is clearly risk and vulnerability in this dialogue. The mockery of the priesthood just discussed and visible in Turns 12-14 risks causing offence given the wrong audience but this was a group of young economic migrants from the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland and no obvious offence was taken at the time, a state of affairs that might indeed provide evidence for M's claim of a 'turn against' the Catholic religion amongst the younger generation in Turn 7. Indeed, both J and B state they are without religion, something that, as B's anecdote about being treated 'like a devil sometimes,' a threat to their positive face, was clearly risky outside, if not inside, the classroom in late 20th century Poland.

Indeed, the students seem conscious of the face-threatening nature of the topic. M says: Can I say something about the Vatican? And B replies 'Yes you can' (laughter.) Here, M's request for the right to speak is directed at me as the teacher, but it is B who grants speaking rights, thus usurping traditional classroom roles and identities. In the same move, he also subverts religious authority and there is a suggestion of a Papal dispensation in the granting of speaking rights. The laughter generated saves negative face, a matter of a person's –here M's-right to freedom of expression.

Perhaps even more controversially, the debate moves on to Islam:

M: for example the Muslim people are very happy when they die let's say the attackers and the terrorists exactly Muslim they so happy because they think they will get 90.

J: 100

B: 67 virgins something like that

(Hepworth, 2015)

This raises an interesting point about controversy and risk. This contribution emerges spontaneously as a response to previous contributions about the role of religion is justifying conflict and thus

reflects the dialogic nature of talk (Bakhtin, 1991). This spontaneity, a feature of spoken utterance more generally, means that, even if not planned for pedagogically, controversy will emerge and present risk, for the teacher as well as the student.

There is a clear risk of offence to the teacher and other learners here. This is a parody of a theological debate, of what Bakhtin (1994) termed a speech genre, as the students –parodying fundamentalist believers-interrupt and correct each other on a point of information, speculating on the number of virgins who might be available to the male martyr on arrival in the after-life. This is an example of what Bakhtin (1968) termed the carnivalesque, a parodic performance that serves to satirize the powerful, or, more precisely here, a powerful ideology.

Offence is not the only risk here. There is the danger of political and religious stereotyping, of conflating terrorism motivated by fundamentalist Islam with 'Muslim people' more generally. This was particularly controversial in the context of a wider public debate about the role of Islamic fundamentalism in motivating acts of terrorism and the so-called "war on terror" that followed 9/11 and 7/7 and, more recently, the murderous assaults on the offices of Charlie Hebdo and the Bataclan Theatre in Paris (2015).

However, as observed earlier, controversy is always positioned and there were no Muslim students in the class, and therefore no direct threat to positive or negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1977). However, this does not of course absolve the teacher of the responsibility to challenge the student or mitigate potential offence caused to non-Muslim students in the class.

Discrimination in the workplace

I now move on to politics, another locus classicus for controversial issues. I focus on workplace discrimination because it was an issue that the students clearly wanted to talk about. More than one of them raised it explicitly and the others contributed to a rich, sustained discussion through a host of examples rooted in their own experience as economic migrants. Thus, the students generated their own curriculum (Freire, 1970). This proved more in terms of language learning and citizenship than existing government-generated Skills for Life materials (DfES, 2003) which often focus on rather dry functional matters such as how to use a photocopier or the (slightly more controversial) matter of how to deal with customer complaints.

In the following extract, the same students are discussing the issue of discrimination in the workplace. Building dialogically on a previous contribution identifying bullying and harassment from bosses in the workplace, one of the students begins to talk about workplace discrimination saying; 'I think it's more in common here if you are for example foreigner.' She cites as evidence an anecdote about a colleague who was forced to quit after suffering harassment at the hands of her boss. Another student continues:

M: with my opinion what B say and D there's a lot of truth and many people are obviously being discriminated just sometimes because of the place where they from or they just sometimes ignore it because they don't know exactly how to use the English so sometimes the big boss just laugh because of they didn't know what they would like to tell what they would like to (.) how they could explain it as well

J: so they treat you like you stupid because you no understand

M: but sometimes they just try to persuade you that you're stupid and after while some people just (.) actually start believe it and even like D said they try to make the perfect job they are as well inside the mind feeling disappointed of themselves because they struggle to just (.) really say straight away

that look I am not kind of thick I'm the human and then sometimes for example if the boss is English then he's got more rights with his employee because he could just let him off his work without reason sometimes might just explain that it's because of the difficulty in language

The lack of visible pauses within these extended utterances show this to be a fluent performance, exemplifying the following comment made by a teacher in interview: 'when you're using argument as a teaching tool it motivates a lot of language' (Hepworth, 2015). Despite some disagreement, there is a consensus around some of the forms the discrimination takes, and some of the reasons for it, with, for example, M asserting that migrants can be discriminated against because of their country of origin or because of the level of their English, or in Block's (2007) terms, their lack of audibility. This might even, it is suggested, be used as a reason to get rid of an employee. J builds on this in Turn 6 by suggesting this leads to migrants being treated as if they were stupid. M builds further by suggesting this might be a deliberate strategy by the bosses to inculcate feelings of inferiority.

The dialogues, here, and elsewhere, show cognitive activity, or thinking, mediated by speech, where: 'their saying becomes what I said, providing an object for reflection' (Swain, 2000: 113). They are engaging in verbalization and languaging as they explain the concept to themselves and others (Swain, 2006). This languaging is the precursor to internalisation in Sociocultural Theory.

There were even acts of citizenship where migrants intervened on behalf of others. In the following extract describes how they intervened to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace:

M: 'I help for example to find job for one girl after few days she start crying she said that it's so hard to work and co-operate with the boss I said why where's the problem and then she said cos he's calling me that I am cute and well maybe they should make a date but after when she said no then he start to abuse her so I went to the guy and I explained look she's here for work not for pleasure and then everything I think sometimes girls come and they like machines many girls in the warehouse they just machines and they controlled by Iraqis because they make easy relationships.'

Despite the fact that he hints the intervention was successful in stopping the harassment in its tracks, this more collaborative process is not without controversy, as the reference to Iraqis attests to. His narrative coda generalizes to the point of stereotyping. Shortly after this contribution another student prefaces her own contribution with:

'My boss he's Muslim as I have found out they think about white people that we have to do everything for them' (Hepworth, 2015).

The remarks went unchallenged by both students and teacher in the classroom, probably again because there were no Muslim students/Iraqis present, and would have provided a good opportunity for the further development of critical thinking in terms of the issues, both of them being rooted in stereotyping, here around sex as well as religion. Discrimination cuts both ways.

What about the role of the teacher in this debate? I ask them to focus on the task of suggesting steps that could be taken to promote social justice in the workplace. They then collaborate to suggest concrete proposals to improve workplace conditions e.g. more 'co-operation between employees', 'more training courses', and parity of treatment and pay for employees, providing evidence of discrimination to a higher boss or even the police.

More conventionally, I elicit key vocabulary: 'does anyone know the phrase to stand up to anybody'? Immediately, one of the students provides the key phrase: 'stand up for your rights.' The debate

then moves in the direction of the law and one student controversially suggests that the law is ineffective in protecting workers against discrimination:

B: what about the law it doesn't work of course we have that kind of situation that someone has been claiming or wanting to do something with that or …has given your boss or stuff but boss can ignore that if he's clever so (.) it doesn't work of course

M: racism and just abusing not always but law could work when our company or boss doesn't want to pay that then we fight for our rights as well we can fight for human rights because we shouldn't be abusive discriminate just we all the same so why we have to give up feel weak and just be always crushing down?

M suggests that it does work in terms of demands for equal pay and goes on to make an eloquent plea for the need to fight for human rights in the workplace. We have moved towards considering the role of the language teacher in debate. What, then, of the language teacher education classroom?

Debating grammar: controversies in the language teacher education classroom

I now shift focus and consider the role of controversy in the language teacher education classroom. I make the same claim i.e. that the language teacher education classroom, just like language education classroom, should make use of controversy in order to educate teachers as what Giroux refers to as: 'transformative intellectuals' i.e. teachers who:

develop counterhegemonic pedagogies that not only empower students by giving them the knowledge and social skills they will need to be able to function in the larger society as critical agents, but also educate them for transformative action. That means educating them to take risks, to struggle for institutional change, and to fight both against oppression and for democracy outside of schools in other oppositional public spheres and the wider social arena.

(Giroux, 1988: xxxiii).

The emphasis on the need to educate teachers to 'take risks' and to develop students as 'critical agents' through the use of counter hegemonic and, most importantly, transformative, pedagogies. Note too that critical thinking is not enough; the emphasis is on critical agency in wider society. Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1970), as we have already noted, speaks of this in terms of praxis.

In order to illustrate this, I draw upon data from my own teacher education classroom. This is because, as Cooke and Simpson (2008: 18) observe, in political and media discourse, an inability to use English has often been cited as cause of a breakdown in social cohesion. Indeed, this fear that without a unified and unifying standard there will be social as well as linguistic fragmentation is longstanding (Cameron, 1995: 23). These claims have been challenged by sociolinguists (Blackledge, 2008) and the debate is something prospective Adult ESOL teachers working need to be aware of in order that they might help defend migrant rights.

This is because, language itself is a controversial issue in that it is 'something which engenders strong feelings' (Cameron, 1995: vii), and engages fundamental questions of value and belief around: 'the nature of persons, of power and of a desirable moral order'(Gal, 1995: 171). The trainees were working with perhaps one of the most controversial of all language topics, namely grammar, which Cameron identifies as the key term of the most powerful discourses around verbal hygiene, defined as the desire to regulate language use (Cameron, 1995). This is held to be the most controversial

issue because it tapped into the 'moral panic' or 'grammar crusade' that began in schools in the late 1980s around the place of grammar in the curriculum:

The call for a return to traditional grammar was wrapped up in a moral discourse on good and bad, right and wrong; so much so, in fact, that its moral element often obscured the linguistic and educational questions that were supposedly being addressed.

(Cameron, 2012: 81)

I asked them to evaluate a number of nonstandard grammatical utterances and, moreover, to try to uncover the principles that underpinned the judgements they were making. In the following extract, a discussion has begun about the utterance 'I'm liking that dress':

A: this last one could be said by an ESOL speaker

B: it could be said by a native speaker too.

C: yeah it could be…this use of the present continuous is creeping in slowly it's kind of an American thing well look McDonalds I'm loving it rubbish food rubbish language that's what I always tell my students.

A: yeah somebody asked me I was going on about how you don't use love and like and what about McDonalds I'm loving it

C: well yeah but there are some grammar books that say things are starting to change that people are starting to use verbs in continuous tenses rather than simple tenses so that's

A: that's the difference between descriptive and prescriptive approaches to grammar because you can't just say this is wrong because we don't use continuous tenses with verbs of whatever they're called

C: so you look it up in a grammar book

A: yeah but then it doesn't reflect usage

(Hepworth, 2015).

In terms of critical thinking about language, there is much of value here, such as the recognition that language change is inevitable, that grammar books don't always reflect usage and the identification of prescriptive and descriptive approaches to grammar. In short, they are beginning to knowledge-build and problem solve, and so are languaging (Swain, 2006). In this sense the students are also enacting good pedagogical practice in terms of what sociocultural theorists term Concept-Based Instruction.

However, there are the seeds of controversy here, most apparent in C's pejorative judgements ('rubbish food rubbish language') about language use and the conflation of these judgements with broader judgments about a fast-food culture. Indeed, A reminds C of this later when they observe that: 'when you say rubbish food rubbish English you are assigning your set of values.' This is a threat to positive face (Brown and Levinson, 1978) and makes them both potentially vulnerable and C performs a face-saving act in insisting they were 'only joking.' It also reminds us that: 'popular beliefs about grammar are so difficult to shift'; even amongst teachers in training (Cameron, 2012: 81).

As the teacher educator I realized I missed an opportunity here in that I didn't use the discussion to develop an awareness of the ways in which judgments about language use can reflect broader and deeper social and political anxieties. For example, I could have explored Cameron's questions around language prescription: who prescribes what for whom and whose purposes do they serve? (Cameron, 2005). In Adult ESOL, this has very current resonance.

There are clearly ways in which this would bring risk with it. The first risk would be connected to the fact that the teacher is seen to be stepping beyond their traditional role as a language teacher and 'meddling' in politics. Moreover, the following dialogue illustrates how there are also other ways in which the professional authority and identity of the teacher might be called into question. During the discussion of non-Standard usage, I said the following:

T: so how would you judge that use (.) if I said ok youse three have you finished

S1: I'd say what is it you do for a living again? (laughs)

Here the trainee questions the authority of the trainer in response to the hypothetical question. The irony and laughter is negative face saving (Brown and Levinson, 1978) and allows the trainee the freedom to pose such a question. Indeed later, another trainee explicitly states that the trainer's use of non-Standard English, coupled with a lack of awareness, would, in their words, 'question your authority in front of us in the classroom.'

S2: well you're using non-standard English and if you really really didn't understand that that then there'd be some gap in your education somewhere I would assume but and that would question your authority in front of us in the classroom

T: and if I was from Liverpool a teacher from Liverpool

I have suggested earlier in this chapter and elsewhere (Hepworth, 2015; 2019) that teachers can be vulnerable when controversial issues emerge. We see here the same holds for teacher educators.

Conclusion and Implications

Teaching controversial issues in order that students better understand the world they inhabit is a worthwhile aim in and of itself (Stradling, 1984: 115). Despite the challenges, risks and vulnerabilities discussed in this chapter, the benefits of dealing with controversy outweigh them. This is because a robust democracy is surely premised upon the existence of an informed and articulate citizenry. Engaging with controversy develops both the language skills the critical thinking ability of language adult migrant students and their teachers and so it is definitely worth taking the risk.

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