Critical Applied Linguistics: Views on Thai TESOL

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Abstract
This paper discusses critical applied linguistics relative to views on Thai TESOL in greater depth. The writer presents how the idea of criticality in applied linguistics is defined, and thus emerged as opposed to the mainstream one. Also, interesting aspects regarding the stance of Thai English teachers (TETs) based on the writer’s personal and professional life are rendered.

Introduction
The discussion will be divided into four sections. Firstly, the general notion of critical applied linguistics will be delineated, followed by the account of critical approaches to TESOL. To end with, the understanding of critical applied linguistics to the writer’s teaching experience and the critical views for better changes will be discussed.

Critical applied linguistics defined

Critical applied linguistics explores language in social contexts, which is farther than correlations between language and society. It opens up a new set of questions, concerns, and issues that have not been considered in normative applied linguistics (e.g., identity, sexuality, ethics, desire, access, and difference). By this, the notions of critical applied linguistics are mainly influenced by Critical Theory, Neo-Marxism, Poststructuralism, and Postmodernism. A fundamental principle within these approaches is that anything taken for granted has to be questioned and problematised.

This approach makes use of work from other critical domains, such as critical literacy, critical discourse analysis, critical pedagogy, critical language awareness, critical sociolinguistics, and critical approaches to TESOL. With an aim to develop a critical stance in those areas of work, critical concerns are therefore closely connected with each other. In combining these different elements, it is worth looking at critical applied linguistics as a shifting and dynamic approach to questions of language in multiple contexts rather than body of knowledge or method (Pennycook,
The two approaches of critical discourse analysis and critical literacy, for example, are concerned with questions of power and change. They aim to empower learners by providing a critical analytical framework to help them reflect on their own language experiences and practices and on the language practices of others (Clark and Ivanić, 1997).

**Critical approaches to TESOL**

The critical approaches to TESOL have been developed with respect to one of the principle domains of applied linguistics (Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1994). They are fundamentally political and always question beneficial assumptions. A crucial challenge for these approaches must focus on broader political and ethical visions that put inequality, oppressions, and compassion in a particular situation (Pennycook, 1999). In this regard, critical approaches to TESOL attempt to relate aspects of language education to a broader critical analysis of social relations: gender, race, ethnicity, class, power, and identity.

There are three main themes within the critical approaches to TESOL: critical domain, transformative pedagogy, and problematizing practice. The aspects of TESOL in relation to critical domain must be in a wider, critical view of social and political relations. Sociolinguistics, therefore, can be critical if it aims to describe and critique the ways in which social formations such as class or gender are related to questions of power and inequality. Similarly, the understanding of education has to see pedagogy as a question of cultural politics.

Another important composition of critical approaches in TESOL is an element of transformative pedagogy, which is to change things. Because people are trapped in unequal relations of power, they need to act and think differently in order to consider possibilities of change (Pennycook, ibid.). However, absolute change is not necessarily the ultimate goal. Being transformative has various levels, one of which can possibly be a level of awareness. In this regard, Fairclough (1992) raises the notion of critical language awareness as a fundamental factor of social change. A number of critical work aims to make people more aware of their own oppression. Brutt-Griffler and Samimy (1999), for example, attempt to encourage overseas students to see how they have been placed as non-native speakers and how they can make things happen differently.
Critical applied linguistics is concerned not only with relating language contexts to social contexts, but rather does so from a viewpoint that sees social relations as problematic. Hence, problematising practice is considered as another main aspect of critical approaches to TESOL. As the problematising practice always questions the role of language or discourse in social and cultural categories (e.g., race, gender, and ethnicity) and language learning, Dean (1994) considers this practice as the restive problematisation of the givens. Additionally, emancipatory modernism, underlying Marxist thought, is in accordance with this aspect; critical approaches should emancipate people through a way of thinking and questioning the givens of TESOL.

Overall, critical approaches to TESOL offer key insights into important domains of research. The approaches need to be grounded in some forms of critical theory, always continue a constant skepticism, and see theory and practice as always mutually supportive. In trying to define critical applied linguistics work in language education, it is important to focus on the contextual concern and to relate aspects of language education to a broader critical analysis of social relations. Also, English teachers are at the core of the most crucial educational, cultural, and political issues (Gee, 1994). To take up a challenge, teachers need to develop critical approaches to TESOL because the approaches can help understand in much more complex ways in which TESOL occurs and offer the prospect of change.

Critical applied linguistics: teaching profession

As a non-native English teacher in an EFL context, the writer has experienced that issues of powers and inequality in relation to native and non-native English teachers should be explored and discussed in broader perspectives. In so doing, teaching professionals can better understand this important issue and this would lead to further development of educational system in a particular context.

With the aim of developing the English skills of Thai students and the increase in international competitiveness, the Ministry of Education (2009) of Thailand has been gradually implementing English as the medium of instruction. In accordance with this norm, academic administrators of
public universities have been concerned about the importance of English proficiency of the undergraduate students. Therefore, in most cases, it has been decided that only Native English Speaking Teachers (NESTs) are allowed to teach Listening and Speaking courses as it is reasoned that the students will be given the best opportunity to learn communicative skills from NSs. Moreover, simply because NESTs have been labeled as ‘native’ speakers of English, the academic administrators seem to accept that NESTs are indeed in need and more qualified to teach these courses than TETs. For these reasons, some native speakers could easily take up positions of English teachers without a degree in ELT or in other related areas.

Such a belief has given rise to the idea that a language belongs to its native speakers and has empowered them over non-native speakers in EFL and ESL contexts (Canagarajah, 1999). This practice is unchallenged because most TETs lack critical views towards the teaching role of English and rarely problematise the issue of unfairness occurring in their teaching context. They comfortably accept the ‘non-native’ speaker label, claiming that English is not their native language and they learned English as an additional language.

Taking Davies (1991) into account, the native speaker identity is considered as a sociolinguistic construct which can be overcome within certain circumstances. A ‘native speaker label’ implies a false assumption that challenges the credibility of NNSs. From my stance, TETs need to be against to what they are labeled. Knowing more than one language and being able to teach in a foreign language can empower them in their EFL context. Their ability to use two languages can benefit from sharing the learners’ mother tongue and can facilitate the teaching and learning process (Medgyes, 1992). Additionally, the writer agrees with many scholars who debate over the NS-NNS dichotomy in ELT profession (e.g., Davies, 1991; Medgyes, 1994; Nayar, 1994). The ideology that native speakers are the ideal teachers of language leads to the practice of treating TETs differently from NESTs in the unfair ways. Thus, this ideology needs to be rejected; otherwise, TETs will be eventually negatively defined as incapable language teachers either by themselves or by the academic administrators.
Critical views for changes

This problem must be taken up with a critical focus by questioning not only language education but also language policy and planning. It needs time to gradually change the old teaching and learning system. Meanwhile, TETs should act and think differently in order to create something new and conceive possibilities of change.

Both TETs and academic administrators need to understand what the realistic aim of English language teaching in a Thai context is. The main purpose is not to teach Thai students to speak like native speakers of English, but to use English as a foreign language and to achieve a number of English skills which will be beneficial for their future careers. Therefore, it is not necessarily to study English with NESTs. The majority of English teachers in the world, including in Thailand, are not native speakers of English. They are people who speak other languages; nevertheless, they can contribute their best knowledge and abilities in teaching profession as well as or even better than native speakers of English.

The acceptance of being called ‘non-native’ speakers reflects that TETs are contributing to their own discrimination. Then, the assumption that NESTs represent the ideal teachers of English needs to be rejected because both TETs and NESTs can be equally good teachers on their own terms. The differences in the areas of culture, language, and teaching should not be seen as negative and contradictory but should be recognised and valued as positive and complementary. The unique contribution of TETs should be acknowledged as an important and very credible force in the TESOL profession. TETs should have more self-respect in their own abilities and worth. When TETs are not considered as inferior to NESTs in teaching abilities either by themselves or by others, at least in teaching Listening and Speaking courses, the discrimination against TETs and a sense of inferiority will not happen.

The issue of inequality of native and non-native teachers has been recognised in literature of critical issues in TESOL (e.g., Braine, 1999; Davies, 1991; Liu, 1999; Medgyes, 1992; Phillipson,
1992). Nevertheless, oppression regarding unfair policies has not been considered a critical issue of teaching career in Thai university context. Hence, there should be more formal discussions on specific issues and concerns related to the equality of NESTs and TETs. Also, the continuation of using ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ labels which is the source of discrimination and injustice may be argued. In this way, various new perspectives, such as collaborative team teaching by TETs and NESTs, and the fairer policy would be given greater consideration.

References


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