

EDUCATION AND ENGLISH SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) STUDENTS IN THE SPIRIT OF PAULO FREIRE

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Many times we take for granted the language we possess; it came so easily to us in our childhood experiences and education. The taken-for-granted nature of language is salient to my work with ESL (English as a Second Language) students at the Community College of Allegheny County, where I interact with seven to ten ESL students each day. These students are from various parts of the globe. In this context, the work of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator, informs my practice, reminding me of the intersection of learning, culture, and the role I am called to embrace.

Freire used the term “culture circle” in his conceptualization of the dialogical system of education, by means of which students and teacher relate to ideas and themes that create mutual relevance. Students must express their culture and process of learning in order to make true connections in which learning can take place.¹ Freire was concerned with literacy learning, codifications, and visual artifacts drawn from students’ life experiences that prompted conversation and discussion.² As I work with students from various backgrounds, cultures, and language abilities, Freire’s belief that authentic education is always “a practice of freedom,” rather than an attainment of skills, rings true. Here, I offer a reflection on the work of Freire and the implications for a more inclusive and engaged praxis in working with ESL students.

Five components of Freire’s work have an intimate connection to the ESL student. First, informal education is a dialogical or conversational method rather than a lecture given by the teacher to the student, which positions the instructor to learn about a student’s culture and background. According to Freire, “One cannot conceive of objectivity without subjectivity.”³ Freire rejected the typical method of “banking” education where a teacher simply deposits material into a student’s brain as a productive means of acquiring

knowledge.⁴ Dialogue is key, because it supports respectful give and take within the classroom.

Freire was concerned with praxis as is evident in his second concept: informed action linked to specific values. Dialogue was never just a process that dealt with higher levels of understanding—but was part of making the transforming in the world. Dialogue in itself is an interactive process involving mutual respect. According to Ronald C. Arnett and Pat Arneson, “Freire understood the difference between a false dialogue and a genuine dialogue, such insight lessened the chance of communication harm”⁵ Freire called for informed action, and thus included informal and formal educational practices.

Third, Freire’s attention to naming the world has been of great significance to those educators who have traditionally worked with oppressed students that do not have a voice. In the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970/1993) explains the need to serve those students who have little or no desire to become part of an authentic, respectful dialogue. The student may feel invited to engage in dialogue; however, they may be reluctant to share until a level of trust is formed with the teacher. An important element of this approach was conscientization—developing consciousness, but consciousness that is understood to have the power to transform reality.⁶ This term, which expresses the ability to transform, stems from the student who is struggling with multiple cultures and seeking to find a place of belonging in a contextually confusing dialogue. Many ESL students are still striving to come to terms with difficult pasts. Several students that I have worked with from Nepal have spent their entire formative years in refugee camps. They are appreciative of the freedom and opportunities presented to them; consequently, the need for a dialogic exchange between teacher and student is privileged through respect for the experience of the student. In order to learn, the student needs to express the telling of stories to the teacher because they have to make sense of contrasting worlds. This encompasses not only language, but also a cultural shift that does not degrade or diminish the student’s original experiences.

This brings us to the fourth aspect, which includes the argument Freire makes for situational educational practices that reside in students’ lived experiences. This further expresses itself in Freire’s deep concern to look for words that can be the bridge for a new approach to naming and acting in the world, which is now a new reality to the student. The student’s own lived experience and the knowledge that they bring to the table are critical elements in the acquisition of a new language and culture. Freire often illuminates this point using Christian metaphors, which are drawn from Freire’s transcended state of learner to teacher. The process is emergent through the student’s development of consciousness. Freire was concerned with the learning process that comes from a commitment of student and teacher. One cannot exist without the other. All too often, there is no dialogue between an ESL student and their instructor. Without dialogue, learning stops, and concepts become static terms for the student.

The fifth component is the related to the connection of learner and teacher. Freire believed this occurred as the learner developed his or her consciousness, which relates to his term “Easter experience.” The “Easter experience” describes a change in teacher and student, especially of transcendence by the teacher.⁷ The entire relationship of learner to teacher becomes one of transformation.

The future of ESL students will depend upon the willingness of teachers/instructors to engage students in dialogue. This requires an investment of time and listening to students’ concerns and questions. As Freire expresses so well, “Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a *distortion* of the vocation of becoming more fully human.”⁸ Part of our responsibility as teachers is to encourage and develop the vocation of humanity. For the ESL student, we as instructors are opening a door. Dialogue and communication are the keys to the door of literacy, education and freedom.

NOTES

¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1970).

² Andrea Gibbons, “Freire: Finding Voice and Praxis.” *Struggle & Movement* (blog), July 27, 2016, <http://writingcities.com/2016/07/27/freire-finding-voice-praxis/>.

³ Freire, *Pedagogy*, 71.

⁴ Freire, *Pedagogy*, 72.

⁵ Ronald C. Arnett and Pat Arneson, *Dialogic Civility in a Cynical Age* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 170.

⁶ Paul V. Taylor, *The Texts of Paulo Freire* (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1993), 52.

⁷ *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*, “Paulo Freire and Informal Education,” by M. K. Smith, accessed May 1, 2017, <http://infed.org/mobi/paulo-freire-dialogue-praxis-and-education/>.

⁸ Freire, *Pedagogy*, 43.