

Is Liberating Education a Chimera? Understanding the Rural ESL Classroom with Reference to Foucauldian philosophy and Freire's Banking concept of Education

S. A. Wanniarachi

Introduction

Despotism has need of darkness, but liberty, radiant with glory, can only survive when surrounded by all the light that can enlighten men.

- Michael Foucault -

This paper discusses the Freirian ideology on banking concept of education along with the Foucauldian perspective in order to understand the rural ESL classroom. A comparability between Foucault's ideology and Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1968) is underscored in the paper while referring to English language teaching in the rural Sri Lankan context. Highlighting the desultory perspective of the banking concept of education, Freire depicts the rigid authority exercised over the oppressed. Similarly, Foucault discusses the impact of power on men in Prison Talk (1977). In the banking concept of education, "narration leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content" (Freire, 1968, p.58). This pedagogic practice of memorization of the grammatical rules and sentence structures prevalent in Sri Lanka is mostly derogatory towards the second language learner of the rural sector and the underprivileged learner of the urban sector whose access to English language learning is scarce. This paper further investigates the reasons behind the perpetuation of hostile memorization that obstructs the local learner as well as the teacher to acclimatize to rather a reconciling praxis where both parties interdependently coexist.

English Language Teaching in Sri Lanka

Articles 18 and 19 of chapter IV mention Sinhala and Tamil as the national languages of Sri Lanka and English as the link language. However,

even many years after the introduction of English to the country, it is a highly-valued commodity that the underprivileged are debarred from. Despite being a subject of compulsory status, English is taught differently according to the rural- urban polarity **Walisundara & Jayasinghe (2012)**. convey that “despite the uninterrupted use of English for over two centuries in Sri Lanka, its relegation to a second language, or, in the more remote areas of the island, to a foreign language, puts it in a somewhat ambiguous position. (**Walisunadara & Jayasinghe, 2012, p.01**). This paper questions this ambiguity of Sri Lankan English which divides the populace into two. What makes English a second language for some and an alien language for the Other? Especially, when school education in the country is supposed to be equal for every student regardless of the geographical position. **Wijesekera (2012)** posits that “English being associated with former colonial powers has had a pervasive influence on the educational system in Sri Lanka.”(**Wijesekara, 2012, p.02**). There is an obvious unequal resource allocation among the schools in the urban setting and the rural. The dichotomous nature of English language teaching in Urban versus rural contexts has resulted in producing incompetent learners who are made to believe that English is a possession of the elites. On the contrary this has “ultimately resulted in 'hatred' towards English which can be used as a 'Kaduwa' to undercut the opportunities of rural children.”(**Kandiah, 1984**).

Banking concept of Education

Freire has dedicated the second chapter of 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' to analyze the banking concept of education. In the banking concept, “education is an act of depositing” (**Freire,1968, p.58**) where the students are required only to repeat what the teacher says. Freire highlights a common feature discernible in the local ESL pedagogy, narration sickness, which is woven around teaching about “reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. Or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students.” (**Freire, 1968, p.57**). Incorporating distant lesson material to local pedagogy has resulted in producing a student who cannot be autonomous or creative. Freire emphasizes the gravity of depositing men/students with just content by the ones who exhibit a dearth of creativity in a misg uided society. This mechanical process, extensively omnipresent in the local ESL curriculum, rather leads to a discriminatory education system where “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Disregarding the vital fact that the teacher-student relationship is inter dependent, the

banking concept of education promotes “projecting an absolute ignorance onto others” (Freire, 1968, p.58). The damage caused to the critical consciousness of the students due to the utilization of the banking concept of education is noteworthy. The probability of one getting attuned to the world as it is, accepting the status quo is higher when his critical consciousness is inhibited due to the banking concept of education. This is highly derogatory towards knowledge which is effective, as Freire propounds, “only through invention and re-invention”. (Freire, 1968, p.58) Hampering creativity and invention, banking concept of education limits the world of the student.

Student-Teacher Communication

Since many ESL students speak only if they are spoken to, the much-needed integral conversation between the student and the teacher has deliberately been forbidden. When the much-needed communication between the teacher and the student is avoided in the classroom due to reasons such as incompetency shown in communication, rigidity of the oppressor and unfamiliarity towards the materials utilized, the learner is deprived of authentic thinking. Depriving the learner of authentic thinking leads to grave repercussions including prolongation or termination of their liberation. Hence, ESL teachers must be educated of the cruciality of reciprocal communication in the ESL classroom. Freirian approach to establish a solidarity in a student-teacher relationship through the implementation of communication is a grave necessity in the Sri Lankan ESL classroom. Freire postulates that “the teacher cannot think for his students, nor can he impose his thought on them. Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication.”(Freire, 1968, p.64) However, it is debatable whether this is a utopian ideology since the elites, to whom English is a tool of manipulation, design the frontiers of Sri Lankan English and English language teaching clearly demarcating their priorities from the priorities and realities of the Other. When the curriculum is designed discarding the realities of the underprivileged rural learner, his voice is deliberately silenced in the ESL classroom. Even the teacher of the rural school is desperate in this plight. Even though Freire speculates the cruciality of establishing a balanced reciprocal conversation in the classroom, understanding the coexistence between the teacher and the student, Russell (1938) highlights the difficulty of doing so. “Equal cooperation is much more difficult than despotism, since it is natural for each to strive for complete mastery, since the submissive impulses are not brought into play” (Russell,1938, p.14).

The prolonged voice

Many ESL teachers complain that the students hesitate to actively participate in the ESL classroom. In the rural school, the failure to open the tight mouths of the ESL student has become normalized. Prolonged voice of the rural ESL student is ubiquitous in many instances. Hence, abandoning the rural ESL learner has become a popular practice. Foucault's ideology that “ it is quite true that in popular consciousness, and also in the present economic system, a certain margin of illegality is not seen as a serious problem, but rather as perfectly tolerable”(Foucault,1977, p.43) is apt to fathom the gravity of the aforementioned issue. The rural student failing English at the O/L examination has not become a problem to the authority or even to the ESL teacher sometimes. Analyzing the grades of the O/L students obtained for English, it is conspicuous that this problem requires a considerable attention. A cursory glance at the O/L results of English during the last six years will assist one to understand the vital need to alter the system. Even though a gradual decrease of the students who fail the subject is discernable over the years, it is questionable whether this is a result of more urban students passing the subject or less rural students failing the subject.

Year	No. of students (A+B+C+S)	No. of students Failed	Passed %	Failed %
2014	256,444	115,701	45.08	54.92
2015	272,576	123,742	45.40	54.60
2016	285,686	136,851	47.90	52.10
2017	296,157	151,393	51.12	48.88
2018	295,744	162,366	54.90	45.10
2019	305,162	190,311	62.36	37.64

What went wrong?

Unquestionable authority of the ESL teacher in many rural school leads to many repercussions. The teacher, knowing that the student is a 'receptacle' whose existence is possible only due to the existence of the teacher, “presents

himself as their necessary opposite" (**Freire, 1968, p.58**). The student, aware of his ignorance, is helpless and not in a position to question the teacher. This can be ubiquitously observable in the rural school than in the urban since the rural student is more susceptible to the dominance of the authority. A teacher attached to a rural school in Pilimathalawa mentioned in an interview that the students in her school do not have the family background to learn English. Surprisingly, the teacher is from the same village. This is a quintessential elucidation of the chasm between the oppressor and the oppressed. The oppressor, (in this case the teacher) being in power has the ability to manure the oppressed to believe in their ignorance. "The students, alienated like the slave in the Hegelian dialect, accept their ignorance as justifying the teacher's existence" (**Freire, 1968, p.58**). This strategy is beneficial to the oppressor whose intention is to make the oppressed less autonomous. An autonomous learner is a threat to the very existence and authority of the oppressor. On the contrary, this accentuates the mundanity of the rural ESL teacher's role who loathe teaching the rural learner. In the above example, the 'pointlessness' of teaching English the rural learner and their 'inability' to learn English have 'demotivated' the English teacher to educate the ESL learner. As Foucault posits, "pointless work, work for work's sake, was intended to shape individuals into the image of the ideal labourer. (**Foucault, 1977, p.42**). The quandary that needs to be discussed in this context is whether the teacher can "regulate the way the world enters into the students" (**Freire, 1968, p.62**) while playing the role of a labourer **Hettiarachchi (2013)**. emphasizes that job satisfaction of the Sri Lankan teachers relies more on "a supportive, autonomous, safe environment" (**Hettiarachchi, 2013, p.03**). than on the salary. This leads to another issue that requires attention. Is the rural ESL classroom autonomous? It is conspicuous that neither the ESL teacher nor the ESL student is autonomous in the rural context. This issue can be analyzed on different levels, segregating them according its nature.

One hindrance to the autonomy of the rural ESL classroom is the English text book. The teacher has to abide by a text book that rather utilizes alien examples, distant to the local rural learner. English language teaching in the urbanized Sri Lanka is totally different from that of the rural where for most of the urban privileged students' examples provided in the text book are authentic. Yet, the rural learner and the urban underprivileged are rather intimidated by the text book since the examples are far from their realities. For instance, there's a lesson in grade 11 English text book, under the title 'Facing Challenges'. The sports that the writers have included in the lesson

such as Water rafting, fall with gravity, riding on waves, Pole vaulting, Natural /artificial waves, Inflatable raft, Surfboard, Popular, Skydiving, Rough water/white water are unknown to the rural learner. It is debatable whether the writers are in the dire need of proving the rural learner that English is not their possession but a possession of the urban elite. In 'The Fear of Freedom', **Fromm (1942)** mentions three types of sadistic tendencies in men. The deliberately unanswered plight of the rural ESL learner is symptomatic of a quasi-sadistic pleasure of the authority. First type of sadistic tendency mentioned is apt to define the conundrum that this paper discusses. **Fromm (1942)** hypothesizes that some “make others dependent on oneself and to have absolute unrestricted power over them, so as to make of them nothing but instruments” (**Fromm, 1942, p.124**). The analogy he uses in the book to define this sadistic tendency, 'clay in potter's hand' is a quintessential clarification of how the rural student has been subjugated by the text book as well as the elite/urban speaker of English. The potter, having the upper hand, is permitted to use clay whichever the way he prefers. He has the power either to create or destroy. In the same manner, the authority decides whether to make the ESL learner competent or incompetent. In this case, the utilization of alien material is an indication of making the ESL learner incompetent. Although, it is apparent that such lessons rather intimidate the rural learner than empower them, the authority deliberately includes such examples in the text book ostracizing not only the rural learner of English, but also the underprivileged urban learner. “Therefore, in addition to having to learn a language which is not used in their daily lives, these students have to grapple with situations which are both unfamiliar and daunting. (**Parakrama, 1997, p.87**). This, an indication of banking concept of education, further inveigle the rural learner to remain within his cloistered environment than seeking classroom autonomy. In a situation where classroom autonomy has been obstructed, establishing authentic and critical thinking skills of the students in the ESL classroom becomes a quixotic ideology. The text book is a tool to perpetuate hegemony while oppressing the underprivileged. Freire's dogma that “the dominant elites consider the remedy to be more domination and repression, carried out in the name of freedom, order, and social peace (that is the piece of the elites).”(Freire, 1968, p.65).

Banking Concept

“The 'humanism' of the banking approach masks the effort to turn men into autonomous- the very negation of their ontological vocation to be more

fully humane."(Freire, 1968, p.59). English language teaching in Sri Lanka is very much synonymous with this dogma where the students are practiced to memorize. The method is derogatory in several ways. Firstly, it restricts the learner to be self- ruling since memorization requires the continuous supervision of the instructor/teacher. On the contrary, this deprives the learner to handle authentic situations since memorization of dialogues only caters to prepared situations. Padwad (2012) posits that “traditional beliefs place high value on memorization and testing and tend to view learning as a difficult and painful method.”(Padwad, 2012, p.119). For any learner memorization is painful and mundane. For the rural learner, the pain is aggravating since, the authority persistently use alienating materials in the textbook. Hence, the rural learner is doubly oppressed within the frontiers of English language teaching in Sri Lanka.

When the pedagogy is based on false ideologies, it cannot promote what Fromm manifests as “biophily” but rather leads to its contrary: “necrophily”. A biophily person can connect deeply into his life while a necrophilous person, whose life is structured in a functional manner, “desire to transform the organic into inorganic, to approach life mechanically as if all living persons were things” (Freire, 1968, p.64). It's evident that the local ESL curriculum is prone to design a necrophilous person since narration is prioritized over democratic education.

Is there a remedy?

A paradigm shift from the mechanical narration to other forms of teaching methods is indispensable. Freire's remedy to the issue, 'problem-posing' education which can respond to the consciousness of men, promotes communication. Freire depicts that “they must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of men in their relations with the world.”(Freire, 1968, p.64). Foucault's ideology on the capillary form of existence with the power exercised within the body rather than from above it is more fitting to solve the conundrum discussed. A Capillary form of power “reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives.”(Foucault, 1977, p.43). Although a capillary form of power exists in the local pedagogy, it is utilized rather to hegemonize than to reinforce the oppressed. A capillary form of power cannot be established from outside the body. Rather, it generates within the body.

Hence, it is more convenient for the social body to acclimatize to its effects of power.

Foucauldian perspective also suggests a fitting remedy to the issue discussed. In 'The Birth of the Clinic' Foucault manifests the necessity of doctors liberating themselves against the bad government in order to treat the patients. Foucault further posits that the first task of the doctor is rather political than medical. The analogous nature of the educational conundrum discussed in the paper suggests the necessity of teachers liberating themselves.

References

- Fromm, E. (1942). *The Fear of Freedom*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1973). *The Birth of the Clinic : an Archaeology of Medical Perception*. London: Tavistock.
- Foucault, M., & Gordon, C. (1980). **Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977**. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Hettiarachchi, S. (2013). **English Language Teacher Motivation in Sri Lankan Public Schools**. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research, Vol.4, no.1*, 1-11.
- Kandiah, T. (1984). **Kaduva: Power and the English Language weapon in Sri Lanka**. . In C. T. P, *Honouring EFC Luddowyk*. . Colombo : Tisara Prakashakayo.
- Padwad, A. (2012). *Towards Understanding Rural ELT, Indian Voices in ELT*. New Delhi: Viva Books.
- Parakrama, A. (1995). *De-Hegemonizing Language Standards: Learning from (Post) Colonial Englishes about "English"*. London: Macmillan.
- Parakrama, A. (1997). **"Baduth Unge, Naduth Unge" The Tools and Rules are Theirs- Some Thought on the Language of Privilege of Language**. *Focus Paper, Fourth International Conference on World Englishes*. Singapore: Published as a monograph in 2020.
- Wijesekara, H. (2012). **Dreams Deferred: English Language Teaching in Sri Lanka**. *Vistas Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, The Open University of Sri Lanka, Vol 7 & 8*.