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Implementing critical TEFL in a Johannesburg private language school

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Abstract

This classroom-based research examines what key differences occurred when a course using a critical approach to Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), what I call *critical TEFL,* was inserted into a private English language school in place of a more mainstream conversation class based on elements of communicative language teaching. This research was undertaken to investigate what place a critical approach to language learning, an approach more commonly associated with English as a first and second language teaching, has in EFL.

The sixteen-module course specially created for the research, entitled *Language and Identity,* was conducted at International House Johannesburg, an affiliate member school of a British-based EFL organisation. The study focused on privileged, African, young-adult students and was run as part of their intensive, study-abroad English program. The course was informed by the work of Pennycook and Phillipson and focused on building learners' awareness of the political issues, power relations, and ideological process inherent in the study of EFL. The primary data was comprised of field notes from classroom observations of two separate classes (thirty-two hours in total) and interviews with the fifteen students and two teachers involved.

Drawing on identity theory, Norton's concept of learner *investment* and Bakhtin's notion of *voice*, the key finding of the research were in the areas of: levels of students' involvement and the effects of this on language acquisition; accuracy and fluency and issues around error correction; and how student were isolated or included by the materials. The research examined the implications of these findings including a need to reconcile a critical approach to TEFL with the global business of EFL and issues of customer satisfaction. I argue that despite the difficulties with this approach, with careful teaching training and materials development, there is a cautious place for critical TEFL in EFL teaching.