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Critical Issues: An Introduction

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The idea for a book on critical issues in teaching English and language education from international research perspectives sprang from years of teaching a doctoral course at the University of Exeter. This course aims to introduce doctoral students to critical discussions of several themes and issues related to language education in general, and to English-language teaching in particular. The book marks a celebration of the contribution of a large number of my students over the past 20 years and recognition of their efforts, participation, the research studies they conducted and above all their ideas and passion about bringing equity and improvement to classrooms and schools. They are all English-language teaching professionals mainly working at tertiary level. Some were in leadership positions while many were classroom practitioners.

The chapters in this book aim to capture the spirit of the lectures, activities, seminars and the research produced by diverse groups of doctoral researchers from different parts of the world. The contributors to this book are mostly past students of the Doctor of Education in Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages (TESOL) offered by the Graduate School of Education at the University of Exeter both in its Dubai and

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Exeter campuses. Some of the studies were conducted in the Gulf region, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait and United Arab Emirates. Other investigations come from Lebanon, the UK, Chile, the Dominican Republic, and China, hence providing a wide international spectrum about issues of voice, equity, discourse, language of instruction policies, curriculum, classroom pedagogy, and teacher education among other topics.

All the studies in this volume are informed by the main tenets of critical theory, critical education and critical applied linguistics. Their common point of departure is an ambition to question set definitions, policies and taken-for-granted practices and approaches in the language classroom. Drawing on the work of critical philosophers and scholars such as Jurgen Habermas from the Frankfurt School, Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Alistair Pennycook, Robert Phillipson, James Tollesfon, Edward Said and many others, the research represented in this volume is set to challenge mainstream discourses in teaching English and language education. The theoretical frameworks used in the reported studies allow its authors to revisit very recent developments in the field of TESOL and foreign language education as an attempt to tackle language issues from the perspectives of critical applied linguistics, critical pedagogy, critical discourse analysis and critical literacy. The studies empirically demonstrate that there is more to the field of TESOL than classroom techniques, language proficiency, materials, communicative competence, and outcome-focused professional development.

The studies reflect a clear sense of dissatisfaction with strategies and hegemonic practices of performativity, outcome-based evaluation and teacher marginalization from decision-making processes, and an aggressive focus on financial interest and reduced support for teachers. These are all carried out at the expense of widening access, social mobility and the development of the critical learner. Through engaging in critical research, the authors of this volume engage in counter-hegemonic discourses questioning and challenging the incessant encroachment of neoliberal and neoconservative policies and practices in language education and TESOL.

The book is organized into four themes with each chapter being a research study following the established structure of an introduction, a literature review, a description of the research methodology, methods,

analysis of the findings, and implications and recommendations for future studies. Three main features characterize each of the chapters: first, the inclusion of a section on the critical research agenda of the study and a clear elaboration on the theoretical framework or philosophy adopted by the researchers to guide their investigations; second, a section on the theoretical and pedagogical contributions of the studies. These two features are essential elements of research informed by a critical paradigmatic position aiming to question, challenge and suggest better and preferred futures for learners and teachers. The third feature is a section on further reading whereby the reader is provided with additional and up-to-date resources on the topic of the chapter. Each title is followed by a brief description of the main points addressed in the resource. For the novice researcher in education and TESOL in particular, each chapter serves as a sample of a research study located in the wider framework or approach referred to as the critical paradigm. This research has also been referred to as radical, aiming to make a difference to the research participants and society at large. To question, challenge and offer recommendations and alternatives for preferred futures in TESOL and language education, the authors of the chapters in this book have at their disposal a range of methodological options. Actions research, critical discourse analysis, critical ethnography and critical exploratory designs have been adopted, explained and justified theoretically and practically. Each section on research methodology is followed by a theoretical justification to explain how the adopted methodology is compatible with the critical agenda of the study and the research questions. Procedural descriptions of the design and data collection methods, sampling techniques as well as ethical dimensions are also described and explained. The authors provide detailed reports on their data analysis frameworks and procedures. In a time of an overall lack of specialized educational resources on how to conduct critical research in TESOL and language education this book marks a clear continuation to the field. It does so by drawing upon a wide range of data derived from focus groups, individual interviews, questionnaires, direct observations, textbook content and students' writing. This variety of methodologies and methods will enable readers to explore their own ways in designing critical research.

At the content level the four themes, which mark the four parts of the book, fit well within the main aims of critical research in TESOL raising questions about the status of English, related pedagogies and the effect of English and TESOL policies on the lives of teachers, learners and researchers.

Part I is dedicated to the issue of language policies emanating from the strong position of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in the Gulf region and beyond. Contrary to the rationale and arguments put forward by proponents of EMI in mainstream ELT literature, the authors of the three chapters in this part invoke a critical approach to policies on language of instruction to deconstruct the concept of EMI and expose its effects on the learning experiences of university students, their proficiencies and their sense of cultural and linguistic identity. The authors do acknowledge the role of English in the lives of the participants as well as the positive discourses of development, economic competition, access to world markets, global communication and a skilled workforce. This is the discourse of the protagonists of the expansion of English paradigm. However, the authors also expose students' lack of agency as they have no choice in the language of their education and are therefore forced to seek and develop additional strategies and efforts to cope with the demands of EMI, as all as those of their academic disciplines. In Oman, Chap. 2 by **Sawsan Al-Bakri and Salah Troudi** reports that EMI policy has detrimental effects on university students' writing abilities and records that many of them had to resort to plagiarism in order to write academic assignments. The demands of English were above their abilities; given that EMI does not seem to be reversible for the time being, the authors recommend stronger English for Academic purposes (EAP) courses to help the students cope with the demands of writing in several disciplines. In Kuwait, Chap. 3 by **Abdullah Alazemi** demonstrates that university students do attach importance to English for employment and career purposes, but they are also concerned about the negative effects EMI has on the status of Arabic as the language of science and academia. The study participants also expressed concern on how their ability in Arabic had declined because they were more focused on improving their competence in English. They would prefer to have more Arabic incorporated during their learning journey, either by moving to a complete Arabic as a

medium of instruction (AMI) policy or by implementing Arabic alongside English. These issues were echoed in Chap. 4 by **Taghreed Masri,** who raises the question about the effects of EMI on students' sense of linguistic and cultural identity in the United Arab Emirates. Results showed that many of the students seem to have lost their faith in Arabic as a language of academia and see EMI as the normal medium of instruction, but still consider academic Arabic an essential part of their identity, which raises questions about their sense of self-worth and self-esteem.

In Part II, issues of classroom pedagogy, students' voice in their learning, and discourses of EAP textbooks were investigated by four studies. In Chap. 5, **Reine Azzi** uses dialogue and reflexivity as research tools to challenge a group of Lebanese university students to think of the position of English in their learning experience and lives, its hegemony and effects on Arabic. Through a critical pedagogy intervention the study provided the participants with the space to discuss their own assumptions and prejudices. In Chap. 6, the second study in this part, **Alina Rebecca Circiui** challenges her Omani university participants to experience learning through a critical pedagogy approach in order to promote global citizenship skills. The study engages the participants in discussing global issues by developing multiple perspectives in reading and reacting to authentic texts. In both studies, Azzi and Circiui reported more criticality, awareness and tolerance of different perceives and views on the part of the students. The third study, Chap. 7 by **Antonia Patterson**, challenges the mainstream views and definitions of students' classroom participation often advocated by Western academic discourses that place speaking at the front of language skills that represent students' engagement and learning. Patterson's study is a critical action research that aimed to challenge dominant perceptions of what constitutes "voice" in the language classroom. Through classroom observations and focus groups in China, the researcher worked with her students to plan and implement an intervention aimed at establishing more equitable classroom practices that allow students' voices to be recognized in their multiple forms. Patterson argues that by engaging with students' perspectives and culture, the pedagogical space for the various forms of student voice in both verbal and non-verbal communication and practice can be created in the classroom. In Chap. 8, the fourth of this part, **Mubina Rauf**

applies a critical discourse analysis approach to analyze two commonly used EAP textbooks in pre-university English programs at a Saudi Arabian university. The study shows that the chosen texts served a neoliberalist ideology through an overt and covert use of lexical and visual techniques representing themes and concepts such as globalization, individualization, philanthropy, heroism, success, celebrity culture, environmental issues, economics, the free market, and production growth. The author calls for the development of alternative, context-specific EAP along with indigenous teacher development programs where teachers are trained to hone their linguistic analysis skills that determine the ideological content in ELT materials.

In Part III, the focus of the four studies is on teacher education and personal and professional development for TESOL practitioners. Chapter 9, by **Assia Slimani-Rolls,** demonstrates, through a longitudinal study conducted in the United Kingdom, that the exploratory practice model can help novice teachers contribute to their own professional development. This model is presented as an innovative form of practitioner research reaction that encourages teachers to work with their learners for better understanding of their own practice. As a model, exploratory practice is a critical reaction to mainstream and essentialist models of teacher education and professional development that view teachers as technicians and implementers of set programs and curricular instructions. In Chap. 10, **Paulina Sepulveda's** critical exploratory study in Chile challenges dominant forms of professional development for English teachers by providing a space for teachers to question top-down provision and to explore their own needs for development. The study recommends a number of activities that will put teachers in charge of their own agency vis-a-vis professional development. The final chapter in this part, Chap. 11, is a study by **Thuraya Al Riyami and Salah Troudi**. They employed a critical action research methodology to introduce critical pedagogy to EFL teachers in Oman. The participants represented four higher education colleges and offered different views and attitudes toward critical pedagogies, ranging between full acceptance, hesitation or caution and refusal towards applying a pedagogy that would challenge mainstream views on education in general and teaching English in particular.

Part IV address issues of voice or rather or voicelessness of English language professionals. Against educational contexts increasingly marred by aggressive forces of neoliberalism, neoconservatism and the normalization of discourses of commercialization, financial interests, customer satisfaction and evidence-based practice, teachers find themselves struggling to find a place, a voice, a role and a sense of dignity. These are unfortunately threatened and pushed to a lower level of priority by educational institutions that comply with the dominant narratives of measurement, performativity and monetization. The four studies in this part can be seen as counter-hegemonic initiatives on behalf of ELT professionals to achieve representation, equity and respect. In Chap. 12, at a university context in the Dominican Republic, **Federica Castro** demonstrates that the process of curriculum change cannot be efficient and successful if teachers are kept out of this process and not part of decision-making. The prevailing of a top-down approach to education in general and an exclusion of teachers from important processes and decisions has left them with a sense of frustration, powerlessness and uselessness. Among the recommendations made by Castro is the creation of an environment conducive for teachers to contribute to curriculum change and their own professional development. These issues and concerns are echoed in Chap. 13, **Kholoud Al Manee's** study conducted with female EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia's public secondary schools. The study shows that the introduction of performance management systems and other audit mechanisms to monitor and control teachers and teaching has a negative effect on teachers' sense of independence, professionalism and dignity. It is pushing many of them out of the profession or turning them into compliant individuals and automatic implementers of instructions and regulations at the expense of creative and imaginative teaching. Al Manee's suggestion that policy makers could reward teachers who show resistance to performative measures and goals and challenge corporate logic in an attempt to show tolerance of diverse ways of thinking, is a natural and critical outcome of the study. The thorny issue of non-native speaker teachers of English (NNSTE) and native-speakerism in the Gulf region is addressed in Chap. 14, **Amal Treki's** study conducted there. Despite the pedagogical and academic recognition of NNSTE, who are bilingual, multilingual or polyglots but still defined by the negative prefix

"non-", as equally competent teachers to their colleagues whose first language is English, the reality on the ground is starkly different. Treki's study demonstrates how market forces influenced by stereotyping, marginalization of NNSTE and racist discourses have affected the personal and professional lives of many teachers. The study critically examined common recruitment discourses, and sought teachers' perceptions of labeling and their experiences with marginalization. Treki also identified ideas and tools for the empowerment of teachers through their engagement in critical praxis which might provide them with a step forward in the fight against discrimination in recruitment. Chapter 15, the final study in this part is by **Randa Al Sabahi**, who explores the controversial issues of students' evaluation of teachers in Saudi Arabia. The participants varied in their view of the process and many saw it as inaccurate, unreliable and invalid. The study highlights the issue of unfairness and marginalization of teachers from decision making in their own evaluations. The results of a student's evaluation of a teacher can have severe consequences on his/her professional life especially in rigid and top-down educational institutions.