# Teaching English through Critical Pedagogy: Problems and Attitudes

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*Abstract*—**Critical pedagogy is an issue which deserves a lot of attention from language teachers. This paper presents a qualitative study which investigates the attitudes and perceptions of language teachers towards teaching English through applying features of critical pedagogy. The study has been conducted in a small scale with about 10 language teachers from 3 popular institutes in Ardebil, Iran. The research was done through observation and semi-structured interview. We came up with positive attitudes but for some reasons most teachers tend not to apply the features of critical pedagogy.**

*Index Terms*—**critical pedagogy, teaching English, teaching critically, teaching English**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Critical pedagogy began its life in the works, thinking and pedagogic practice of Antonio Gramsci along with the works of key thinkers from the Frankfurt School, but in reality it became wholly recognized in the seminal writings of Paulo Freire, the Father of critical pedagogy, especially with work of Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1972). Ira Shor (cited in Pennycook, 1999) nicely characterizes critical pedagogy as:

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impression, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology and personal circumstances of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media or discourse (p. 129).

It reads as being after kind of commitment to social transformation. Transformation of what's so far accepted as unquestionable truth. But to achieve such an end, individuals of the society need to become critical and empowered enough to make their voices loud enough in order to be heard. Critical pedagogy criticizes entanglement of individuals in every-day phenomena without ever questioning it.

Individual cognitive development ◄─────► Collective social transformation

Along with this line of thought, continuous problematization of the common sense is a great help. Not to mention educationalists do not aim at going to the extent of getting radical rather than critical. When social transformation comes to focus, education proves to be a political issue in the need of being dealt politically. This kind of system brings everything including curriculum, materials, teachers, and learners under its influence. Critical pedagogy through critical thinking looks to create a healthy non-alienating classroom-social relationship with no dominant policy overhanging in the minds of individuals. That is, pedagogy needs to be domesticated. Critical theorists highly criticize a one-model-fits-all look toward education. Critical pedagogy, on the whole, rejects a "blanket approach". Looking at education through *their* glasses, we can see that individuals with different identities and voices are all to be appreciated, all to be discussed dialogically and all to be developed to the point of finding a place in the outside society. Critical theorists believe that adult literacy programs should not be confined to teaching specific literacy skills but rather should contextualize instruction within a framework of social activism and societal transformation. In such a democratic setting, the learners are able to attain a power to analyze their own place in the society critically using their literacy skills.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

For all the above-mentioned to be appropriately fulfilled, individuals need to be intellectually developed and according to Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social construction which takes the view that an individual's intellectual development results from social interactions within specific cultural contexts. This kind of prerequisite community for development can be created in the classroom which is already a part of society if treated properly. Learners need to be active participants in the process of their own learning. Dewey (1933) theorized that only students who were actively involved in their learning could become informed participants in a democracy. He believed that rote learning contributed to the passive acceptance of one's place in society, whereas learning through problem-solving and practical

application would lead students to take a more active role in determining their experiences and their positions within society.

In traditional classes, the teacher is the agent of knowledge transfer and students are knowledge consumers. But in the new approach, the teacher is the agent of change and sets the right condition for the exchange of ideas, as a result, they all learn together, they all teach each other. Freire (2002) believes in a more fluid relationship between teachers and students, so that learning goes both ways; teachers are learners and learners are teachers (cited in Giroux, 2004). Taking this, classes are not expected to reflect "banking" sensibility. Akbari (2008) rightly defines critical pedagogy as "connecting word to world", but for this connection to be established, the marginalized learners (those felt to be in need of getting conscious) must learn how to tackle with their world problems. Freire and Macedo (cited in Lin, 1999) believe that marginalized learners must learn to "read the world" before they "read the word". In other words, students must come to an understanding of the cultural, political, and social practices that constitute their world and their reality before they can begin to make sense of the written words that describe that reality.  As it can be seen, the approach is against what's going on traditionally. Barrera (cited in Pennycook, 1999) uses the concept of "culturalectomy" to refer to the processes of exclusion of the culture and non-school lives of the students from what happens in school. In such setting, the only thing that's appreciated is to maximize academic outcomes but in no way to nurture socially intellectual individuals.

Critical pedagogy attempts to act through post-modern discourse. And as Giroux (2004) claims, it is through these discourses that it tries to problematize the modernity's universal project of citizenship, and its narrow understanding of domination; the kind of domination that aims at "disempowerment". So in addition to bringing about changes in looks, some deconstruction and reconstruction of long-accepted discourses and ideas should be brought about. In other words, a critical kind of pedagogy rejects being overwhelmed by market discourses, identities, practices and voices; that is, in order to be critical, one should consciously reject totalizing certainties. This way, critical pedagogy promises democratization (to borrow the word from Giroux, 2004). As Giroux (2004) states:

Educators need to develop a language of possibility for both raising critical questions about the aim of schooling and the purpose and meaning of what and how educators teach… In doing so pedagogy draws attention to engaging classroom practice as a moral and political consideration animated by a fierce sense of commitment to provide the conditions that enable students to become critical agents capable of linking knowledge to social responsibility, and learning to democratic social change (p. 41).

Critical pedagogy encourages students to respond to text not as consumers but as active and conscious members of society.

### *What language has to do with all this?*

Language is the thing that is quite acceptably ideological in one way or another. Language can be a best tool to empower the learners. They can have a desirable language experience without ever having their real identities hurt. Such a language classroom favorably goes beyond linguistic knowledge. Things are handed on to the learners to be negotiated and challenged. Language is pragmatically dealt with in an ideal sociocultural atmosphere. So language is not just a tool for communication. It's a good approach that makes the learners engage in a fluid relationship between society and texts. As it was mentioned at the very beginning many studies has attempted to bring critical pedagogy into language classes. By presenting dependable evidence on its working influence in language learning Thinsain (2008) in his semester-long self-study with his students came to a belief that kind of "compromisation" should be exercised in classes. He concludes that in a language class the dominant issue should not be put aside in its totality; rather, the marginalized issues should be worked on as an alternative in order to be given a voice in turn. He sees the tension, as a result of opposing issues in the class or as a stimulator of learner development in the class. Learners' discomfort works to their own good and triggers their development. He states that total alienation of learners from mainstream would obviously do disservice to them. The table below presents the gist of what he came to:

TABLE 1

| Banking education's assumed teacher-student relationships (Freire, 2002, p. 73): | His lens: |
|---|---|
| The teacher teaches and the students are taught; | We should not go to the opposite extreme. Teachers can teach and learn, but teachers cannot teach. Balance must be found. |
| The teacher knows everything and the students know nothing; | Teachers know more about certain things, but not everything. Freire (2002) also thought "the teachers must be expert and knowledgeable to be a responsible critical-democratic educator (Shor & Pari, 1999, p. 13). |
| The teacher thinks and the students are thought about; | Who is in charge? Don't students as human beings have the innate ability to think and challenge? (action <-> reaction!) |
| The teacher talks and the students listen meekly; | This is not true in the real world. No teacher wants to talk too much and the students cannot do so either. |
| The teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined; | Students at least need self-disciplines; and teachers can help arrange the agreeable mechanism. |
| The teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply; | Both parties can contribute. Yet, the goals must be firm, and teachers can have an agenda while students can learn to read the worlds. |
| The teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher; | This depends on what kind of actions and the given roles and situations. |
| The teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it; | Teachers as authority of knowledge that is not ill-structured need to set up the program. However, flexibility and space can still be embedded and negotiation can exist. |
| The teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students; | The freedom of the students can be constrained by many factors, linguistic needs, background experiences, etc. and the teachers usually can help to provide guidance. |
| The teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects. | Where is the line? How far can the students be in taking care of their learning? The ground may vary in different cultures, fields of study and profession. |
| Learners are regarded as adaptable, manageable beings. | Do we not want the students to be adaptable and manageable |

On a study conducted in Venezuela on critical pedagogy and EFL, as it is stated in Carmen's (2001) paper, Brutt-Griffler & Samimy used EFL learners' reflection through discussion and diary writing in order to empower learners through critical praxis generated from within. They emphasize ongoing process of self-reflection and a "construction of subjectivity". There are many other researchers presenting models of teaching through consciousness-raising activities in the language classroom. Morgan (2002) uses Quebec Referendum as a generative theme to involve the learners in a meaningful activity in order for them to master the modals; so grammar is taught critically by employing some hot issues. This way, such community-based ESL programs become different from generic ESL programs. Students own their learning and generate the knowledge and extend it from classroom to community and they are said to gain "double consciousness"; themselves as learners and themselves as creators of learning. The point is that the teachers and students all participate in co-constructing the class through a process of negotiation. The current study sets out to shed more light on the issue of critical pedagogy in a language class.

III. METHODOLOGY

*A. Participants*

Ten language M.A. language teachers were randomly chosen from three popular language institutes in Ardebil, Iran. They were all interested in the topic and quite too eager to participate in the study.

*B. Instruments*

The study was conducted through observation and a semi-structured interview. Interview questions were aimed at investigating the extent to which language learners feel empowered or disempowered by the language they're getting to know about and to what extant features of critical pedagogy are employed by the teachers objectively and these teachers define their role as a teacher, then how they define the teacher-learner relationship. I also asked them questions to get on their perceptions on critical pedagogy and ELT. The commonly used activities and techniques exercised in the class were explored through interview and observation.

IV. RESULTS

After the data collection, the responses were coded. Some of their responses regarding their role as a teacher were as the following:

1. *Role as a guide:* Introducing other materials; showing them how the learning process can be facilitated; telling them about their own learning experiences.

2. *Role as a perfect model of language:* Students mostly try to imitate their teachers in all aspects and rely on their teachers for their problems so a teacher should serve as a perfect model.

3. *Role as a provider of the knowledge*: students expect their teacher to provide them with anything they wish to know.

4. *Role as an activator of learning process:* the teacher acts as a trigger so the learners can act upon themselves.

Most of the teachers (6 out of 10) defined their role as a guide and provider of the knowledge. Of course, in their daily work, teachers are encouraged to use other people's ideas as ready-made. They actually import the ideas instead of creating their own ideas of specific and local significance. In the account of the teacher-student relationship they mostly described themselves as being in authority for different reasons as to prevent chaos. They didn't seem to appreciate the learners' autonomy in terms of choosing issues and matters to be discussed, activities to be done and making changes to the materials. All the teachers seemed not to associate critical pedagogy with their own teaching but as they were describing the activities they practice in the class, they unawaringly seemed to work on activities that suit the interests of the learners and because they were locally debated activities they obviously worked toward the learners ' consciousness-raising. I have listed some of those activities below:

1. Setting up discussions on hot, current issues of their own country, Iran, and working on problem-solving activities
2. Writing activities with the topics suited to the area of interest of the learners
3. Diary writing which made kind of reflective writing; the kind which combines experience and knowledge

These activities, if wheeled correctly, can work toward the learners critically conscious as they are all problem-oriented and not unidimensional. Although the attitudes of all the teachers toward critical pedagogy were positive, they claimed not to be expert enough to pronounce on such issue. I have brought some of their quotes below:

*"I cannot deviate too much from the material at hand. This is not suggested by policy of institutes and the syllabus is highly structured and time-limited".*

*"We try to make them think creatively and generatively but cannot ensure social transformation later on by these individuals".*

*"Those who are instrumentally motivated don't care about such things and those who are integratively motivated enjoy entanglement with new culture other than their own".*

*"My students always enjoy discussing relevant issues in the second language because they have something to utter and at the very beginning conceptualization does not pose them a difficulty".*

*"Tackling with problem-solving issues especially of relevant type makes the learners' mind so generative and creative in their writings and this is quite evident when it is compared with those of irrelevant type"*

## V. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The result of the interview and our observations so clearly represented a sample of what's actually going on in almost all institutes in Iran. The language classes are just the practice of whatever the theories including the dominant ones impose. The easiest way to get on with the classroom is to stick to whatever the syllabus suggests. It's obviously a type of being after "one-model-fits-all" approach. As Kachru (1992) states, in most of the outer circle the focus of ELT is on applied linguistics i.e. theoretical knowledge about syntax, phonology, and lexicon; and we all agree as far as studies reveal. I personally agree that language is a very powerful tool and we actually underestimate its power if we only learn it for the sake of being a competent speaker, reader or whatever. Pennycook (1994, 1998) rightly questions the apolitical neutrality of ELT. So language teachers should go beyond words and texts. The learners should own their learning and question the discourse, ideas, words and their implications. Language is a good mind activator. It is an appropriate tool to trigger the mind to start thinking critically. Sometimes what language classes lack is creativity, so to fill this gap, individuals as social entities need to be able to connect the class to their community and as a result the activate their mind to solve problems they encounter, and work for the transformation of some kind; this is simply means "going beyond words". Taken three different models of class activities, according what studies including mine indicate, language classes mostly follow "transmission model" and at the best "generative model".

*What about "transformative model"?*

The question in the first place should be directed to policy-makers, material developers, curriculum designers, and then teachers. That's true that some programs may lack the necessary resources to update curricula or materials to better match learners' needs, interests and experiences. Sometimes it is better to look at the programs in terms of the degree to which they reflect critical pedagogy rather than labeling them as critical or non-critical. The four tables in the appendix show the different degrees of critical pedagogy you may refer to for more information. As a concluding point, let's focus on the question below:

*Is English considered a vehicle of cross-cultural understanding or a symbol of dominance?*

The idea of universal transfer of English discursive and pedagogical norms is on its way of total destruction. Cultures are on the way of gaining their true identity and the people of those cultures are voicing those identities; and language is no exception as a tool to achieve the goal. A different language as EFL/ESL is used to voice the identity differently.

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