

From Classmates to Soulmates: Diary of an Educational Reincarnation in Critical Reflection-based Iranian EFL Classroom

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Abstract—The study narrated here is the diary of a community whose participants attended the class while they were going through critical reflection process, the process in which everyone experienced the same pathway of learning English. This Ethnographic project highlighted the life of five EFL Learners who were from the same ethnic background in Homa Town in Tehran. This was realized through observation and participation in learners' activities while the researchers were interviewing individuals on several occasions. In this paper the authors animate the steps they followed as every one of the learners developed as a whole instead of just academically. This happened when they were all treated as unique, important people whose spiritual growth, and self-knowledge in life were evolved.

Index Terms—critical reflection, diary study, cooperative competition, multi-sited ethnography

I. INTRODUCTION

On May 31st, at the bottom of the page sixteenth in the right corner of Iran Newspaper was a small item entitled "Critical Thinking, the Missing Link in Educational System" It entailed that in the formal educational system in Iran students are guided to the correct answers, and therefore participation, interaction, and proposing questions in particular are not the main concern. In this situation among wealth of information available, students have to only find the results and outcomes. In fact, they are not allowed to choose and be responsible for their own choices in solving problems. On the other hand, in order for the students to think critically and creatively to solve their problems, there should be a holistic approach to develop balanced individuals, (Latif, Ghafar, Libunao, Amin, and Peter, 2013).

To go into more detail, in Iranian educational system teachers do not engage learners in mutually active and responsive learning. Hence, Iranian EFL learners are always alienated from active and purposeful process of exploration and discovery which would give the opportunity for risk-taking, and adversarial views to be created. Then, critical reflection would pay further attention to this tenet for effective learning to take place. In this paper, we take a look at how learners drew meaning out of experiences while they were experiencing interpersonal relationships which played an important part in learning foreign language. To clarify the point, we would like to describe and document participants' differences in personality to deal with surroundings. Then, we intend to present our findings through stories of participants in the process while critical reflection makes any kind of difference in their personality in English processing information, in particular social issues.

In order to investigate the mechanism of transformation of classmates into soul mates, we would first narrate the story of how participants get together to contribute to the study, and how they consolidated themselves as an ethnic group. Then, we move to the main concern of this paper and tell a story of how the participants moved from diversity to university to create their own viewpoint toward social issues while they were in a democratic learning community where their participation, opinions and thoughts were all valued and respected.

II. BACKGROUND

Wishing to explain participants' world through stories, first we decided to have a clear meaning of just what Critical Reflection is, what it involves, and how it may be used. The reason behind this is when the idea is described and clarified from the perspective of a body of literature, these stories can be rationalized and legitimized.

From reading many of the works of literature, we chose to focus on the first major goal of our project-reflection. Reflection is a self-inquiry process which results in individuals' understandings of themselves in relation to the society (Panadit, 2011). It is considered as a form of individual development and Critical reflection is a route to collective action and a component of organizational learning and change (Gray, 2007). It actually leads to deeper understanding as well. Reflection occurs when a disorienting dilemma happens which requires individuals to question their previous

experience. Reflection happens when a concept is involved into personal knowledge structure or person's other forms of knowledge and experiences (Leung and Kember, 2003, as cited in Gray, 2007).

Moreover, individuals are different in styles of forming concepts, solving problems, and thinking specifically in relation to second language learning. These styles are a set of the information processing habits of an individual which is defined as personality dimension, a typical mode of thinking, remembering, and solving problems.

It is important to distinguish, however, between reflection and critical reflection. critical reflection was developed as central element in transformative learning theory. In transformative view in education, the acquisition of knowledge, skills, knowing, acting, even teaching are in holistic way which includes considering whole person as a human soul with mind, body, emotions, and spirit. The basis in this approach is to think in a complementary way. In fact, transformation is one of the aims of holistic education which refers to common process of encounter and investigating of life-based issues and challenges, (Schreiner, 2010). And, critical reflection, which focuses on whole person, actually involves revising interpretations of the meaning of an experience (frame of reference, habits of mind). It makes sense out of experiences which ends in learning. According to critical theory, critical reflection is a process which is different from day-to-day problem solving and concentrates on the evaluation of taken for granted social and political assumption which acts as a tool in learning process. Critical reflection inspires students to ask question, to explore, and to think and behave critically. In fact, problems involve critical thinking or creative thinking which needs team-based learning in which learners can learn more by experiences and active involvement rather than by observing. On the other hand, effective cooperation between the students positively makes them be reflective. It actually "leads to increased motivation, greater retention of knowledge, deeper understanding, and more positive attitude towards the subjects being taught" (Collins and O' Brien, 2003, as cited in Froyd and Simpson, 2008). Therefore, the use of critical reflection in cooperative education would increase the chances of learning (Lucas, 2012). The main point in learning process is acknowledgement and stimulation of student ideas and lack of criticism in the group. In this atmosphere there is a chance for the learners to learn independently and from one another effectively.

Through cooperation with others, learners are directly involved in the discovery of their own knowledge. Through the development of this discovery process, learners reflect on their thinking. They are actually encouraged to reflect on their own learning, share their insights with their peers. Accordingly, they can talk about more personal feelings or experiences while they are stimulated to apply new learning to real-life experiences. The end result would be meaningful performances in real-world contexts.

In this situation, "learners do not depend on their teachers all the time, waiting for instruction, words of approval, correction, advice, or praise" (Jones, 2007). As a matter of fact, the teacher supports learners to develop their language skills, while they are naturally considered a member of the class as a participant in the learning process. In fact, the teacher and students are a team working together in which a sense of belonging is grown in the members of the group.

Cooperatively taught students become autonomous and are not aspiring to please the teacher, or get a good mark. They make an effort to learn something. They are willing to cooperate with the teacher and others in the learning group and consciously monitor their own progress and make an effort to use opportunities to their benefit including classroom activities and homework, (Scharle & Szalso, 2000).

At last, the bulk of research that has been done in the process of critical reflection in cooperative education does not seem sufficient, and this area needs further transparency.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. *Characteristics of the Current Research Study*

The ability to convey meaning proficiently in written texts is a critical skill for academic and professional success. Hence, narration is recognized as an important and useful kind of composition for knowing and telling about the world. In fact, narrative inquiry stands up for deep understanding of experiences in a story-based form. It also can be in the form of autobiographies, diary studies, life history, and case studies. We position the work we are doing here as diary study, mainly because it is an inherent part of ethnographic research which has been developed in anthropological research. And, because studying people in their natural environment to understand their meaning and cultural practices would strongly support ethnography, we personally involved in the location and tried so hard to look at participants' world alongside them. "What are you thinking?" was the question mostly we used all through the sessions to make the participants have reflection on their own thoughts. Several intimate conversational interviews at the end of the sessions consisted our data collection procedures from which the stories were crafted. Meanwhile, we as the two observers watched, described, and kept a diary of events happening to collect the desired data for the work. Therefore, unexceptionally, at the end of each session, we recorded their stories as they happened. All the diaries went through individuals' experiences and how participants saw and interpreted themselves in different situations and time. Soon after, we both did our best to find private and noiseless place to get together to listen to the recorded voices, to discuss about the events, and finally to write about positive changes in participants' behaviors in detail. This narration also draws from variety of instruments including video and audio recording, and finally, surveys to help development of our project.

In this study, we were interested in the other much less common mode of ethnographic research which would be called multi-sited ethnography. The essence of this ethnography is to follow people, connections, and associations across space. According to Antony Falzon (2009), “It is about giving further contextual meaning to particular lives by demonstrating their integration within more inclusive social forms” (p. 5). Conventionally, ethnographers involve in a field site, but we intended to practice “variation on a theme”. Our observation for this work spanned over seven months. Four months of these time, we observed the participants when they had undergone treatment in fifteen sessions in an institute in autumn-winter 2012-2013 and the final seven sessions being when they were experiencing studying in Nahjolbalaghe Park for three months in summer 2013.

Our ethnography project started when we were detecting five of EFL students’ visages who looked to have come from the same culture and ethnic norms. They were actually living in the same geography (Homa Town) all of whom were teenagers ranging in age from 13 to 19. Having participants’ consents regarding using their real names in any kind of publication, we are allowed to use their names freely and with no limitation.

To commence the processes of information gathering, by the help of the secretary, we invited them to gather together and make an ethnic community in the Land of Progress institute. Subsequently, on November 22nd participants got down to the critical reflection process while we were carefully recording any progress in our diaries. Not long after starting the class, while watching students’ behaviors, they were consolidating their common cultural experiences (ethnic origin). Investigating different articles in sociology, we concluded the Figure 1 for peoples’ lifestyle model. This was actually inspired by Majidi, Nabavi, Behravan, and Hooshmandi s’ (2012) article.

Going through this model, we should start with people s’ values, opinions, and behaviors which would make their lifestyle in a way that their equal social status would be a great help to create these values, and opinions. Subsequently, equality in social status means having both the same financial investment and cultural heritage in ethnic communities which is all about having the same speaking manner and interests; in addition to, financial investments that directly is related to having real estate. Considering properties of community members, a kind of intra group concordance emerges in them which would result into having similar consuming patterns in that geography.

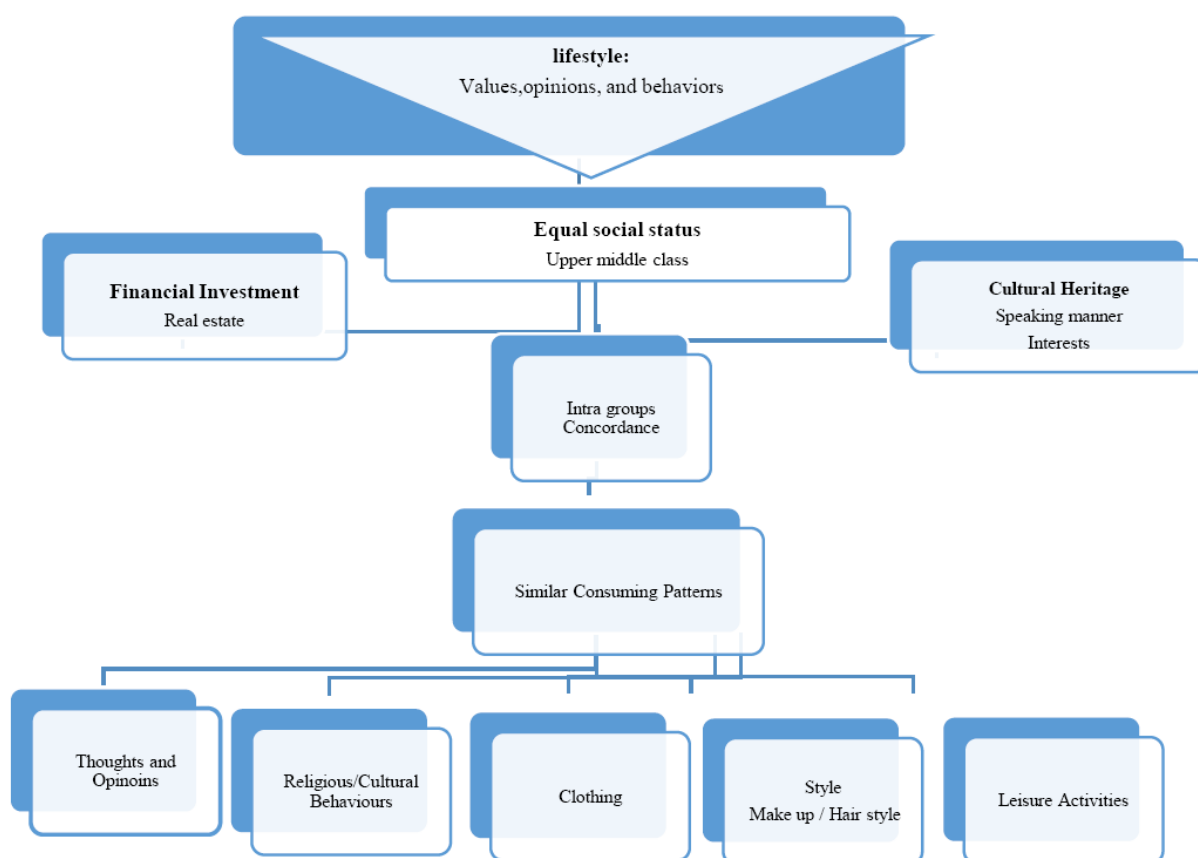


Figure 1. Participants’ Lifestyle model

Here are the examples of each one of the consuming patterns which perfectly demonstrate this ethnic community.

B. Thoughts and Opinions

On July 11th, students’ themselves realized how similar their parents’ attitude were regarding raising their kids. Sourena admitted that his father s’ way of thinking is very similar to Aidin’s father. Actually, their parents want them to behave as if they are older than their real age.

C. Religious and Cultural Behaviors

On December 20th, it became clear that Soheil and Sourena both, are coming from deeply religious families. Tapping Soheil's leg for getting his attention, he replied, "You are *namahram*, and you cannot touch me!" "Instead of tapping on his hand you are not allowed, you tap on his leg?" It was Sourena's reaction to this event. There is a huge gap in religious belief between these students and a student from Marzdarn, a place ten kilometers from Homa Town, named Ashkan who declared, "As far as you can tap his hand very easily, why are you tapping his leg?"

According to the findings, Homa Town is a place where there is a long-established mourning commission in which residents hold especial religious ceremonies for "*Moharam*" months every year.

On January 24th, Aidin was talking about the way he started his day. He said, "At five I woke up, and after prayer, I went out to get some bread for breakfast." The word *prayer* demonstrated that, he is also from religious family. This fact was manifested on sessions Thirteenth and Fourteenth for both Rojin and Hoorvash.

On December 4th, it was obvious that Rojin had trouble going back home in winter nights. Asking the reason, she declared that her family do not allow her to be out, due to probable dangers which threaten her at night. Talking to Aidin and Sourena on the way home, they confirmed whatever Rojin family believes.

D. Clothing

Throughout the process, and aside from the social status students possess, they did not have much variation in wearing clothes. In the writing course; for example, Soheil just wore one set of shoes, and carried just one bag; the exact situation both Aidin and Sourena were experiencing. Wearing just one scarf did happen for both Rojin and Hoorvash too.

E. Style: Make up / Hair

Not wearing much make up was an important fact in Rojin and Hoorvash's appearances. On March 6th, after Soheil's grandmother died, he shaved beard and moustache, and he got his hair cut too. Exactly the same thing happened to Sourena when his grandfather died.

F. Leisure Activities

On December 6th, when students were talking about spending time with their families in term-based class, Ashkan said, "I cannot have good time with my family, I mostly prefer to be with my friends." The way he was talking, was clear that he has not truly experienced family gathering. We turned to Aidin, Sourena, and Soheil, and they all preferred to spend most of their times, especially their leisure times with their families.

Even the way they go out is different. For example, Ashkan prefers to be with girls and go to different parties, but these three boys prefer to go to restaurant with their friends.

IV. DISCUSSION AND RESULT

Homa Ethnic Community's Life in EFL Classroom

In order to emphasize the importance of reflection in transformative learning in particular critical reflection, let us focus our attention on figure 2 which has to do with the general analysis of events that happened in the class. Simultaneously, we are going to discover the microscopic particles of reflection levels in the class by the help of figure 3 which is the result of detailed analysis of participants' transformation throughout their holistic learning process. It actually reviews the situations they coped with until they all converged on thinking. Considering participants' ethnic personalities, their linguistic performance, and finally critical reflection process, we would intend to narrate every step of these figures in detail.

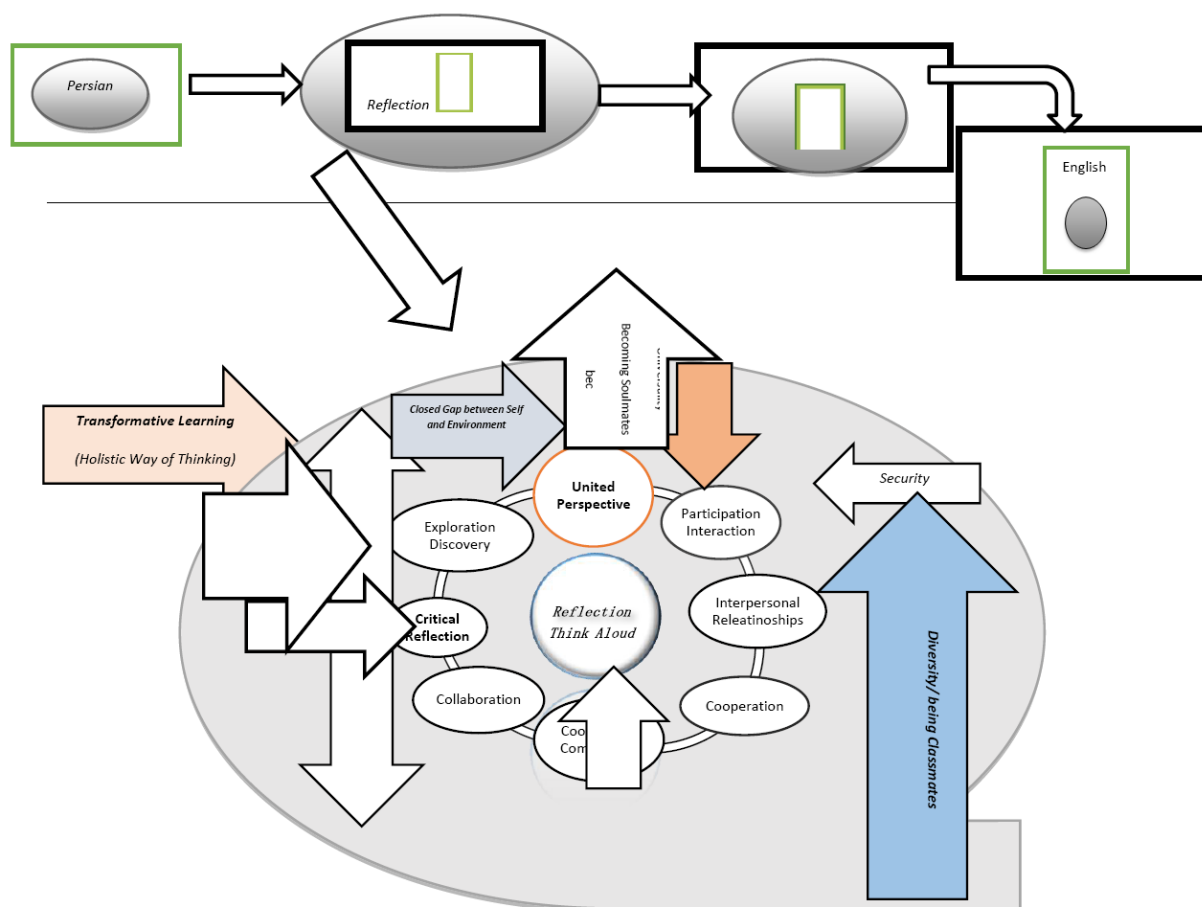


Figure 2. Reflection Level

In the beginning the first focus of ours, the two ethnographers/teachers, was to practice on reflection which would result in participants’ understanding of their own roles in a society (English Class). But, conducting the class time just in English officially stressed the participants in responding to events. The reaction to this atmosphere was their silence all the class time. Therefore, according to the figure, in the beginning participants showed no evidence of attempt to reflect. It was actually due to English domination in the class. Reflection in fact, provides the opportunity for participants to consider themselves as a member of the class, it makes them learn to talk and think clearly to discuss their thoughts and feelings. Nevertheless, ability to discuss thoughts is also important to have noticeable effect on critical reflection process.

For the purpose of reducing this stress resulted from very many English use, which became a kind of obstacle for us to achieve more (Reflection), we decided to switch to Persian (their Mother Tongue). Therefore, by the help of pictures, readings, and tasks we set a suitable opportunity for participants to talk both in English and Persian, mostly. To talk we mean making them tell the stories related to that specific topic in the text and think aloud what came to their mind the time they saw the pictures.

Concurrently, to build up good rapport between the participants, we both decided on commonalities. Based on the same geography they have been living and talking on locals, a kind of security feeling emerged in each one of them. From then on, there were interesting talks between the participants in the class time which was demonstrative of their inner thoughts and feelings.

Up to here, due to Persian domination in the class, non-reflection mode changed into understanding and reflective one. But, there was not very much evidence of participants’ interest in English use yet.

As a whole, it seemed like the more sessions passed, the more we were not the only authority in the class. Little by little, interpersonal relationships were developing among the whole class members including the teachers. We let them choose the order of events in the pictures, they all together were supposed to make a story out of them. The intention behind choosing this task was to let students themselves use their own creativity and imagination to deal with those pictures to have good reflection. Unfortunately, in Iranian educational system teachers are the only authority in the class and they decide for students’ thoughts, they actually control their minds. This task and Persian domination in it created an intimate, stress-free environment, in which participants were responsible for their own choices and learning which led the class to true cooperation, afterwards.

Working in a group, participants began to feel a sense cooperative competition. In this regard cooperation not competition was encouraged. Thus, stress-inducing competition was totally rejected by the participants themselves.

Generally speaking, there were not any scores students had earned for their performances all along the procedures. Bachman (1995) mentioned that due to not being able to measure individual's total performance in a given language, interpretations and uses made of scores may be invalid (p. 33). Frozen entity of numerical values attributed to the responses causes insalubrious competition among learners which introduces a long distance away from cooperative learning. As holistic education has put all its emphasis on collaboration, we tried our best to ignore scoring concept to compare students' progress with their own performance in order to put emphasis on collaboration, and not to underscore the noxious effect of competition on learners.

Consequently, the more sessions were passed, the more they realized that score did not have any play in the class. In their opinion, this was useful and unforgettable for the learning process they were engaged in. Due to this fact, whenever they felt they were going to be out of control in the class they notify each other about the situation they were in. They even felt more responsible for their classmates' learning. Or during the class time, whenever they had problems, one of the participants tried to make others understand as if they were taking teachers' place as their real teacher. In fact, they were making adorable effort to learn something. This was when the reflection became dominant in the class, but English was still in its marginal.

Therefore, working as a team, they began to feel a sense of community they all belonged to. The reason behind this was they were all important in each other's learning process, the process in which their total dedication to each other was so obvious. So, the result was collaboration which was perfectly seen in them. In fact, from many events had happened in that English class, one can see how these classmates became a kind of soulmates through holistic way of thinking. And, this resulted in creating viewpoint toward different issues, particularly social ones. Based on our scientifically documented analysis of viewpoint, there are two elements all of which are about giving the participants exposure to the social issues, and the products of attitude form some perceptions. Therefore, according to Deweyen notion of self we are convinced that a closed gap between oneself and one's environment would result in their self-realization (Ma,2009). The following plain procedure in figure 3 would perfectly explain the point.

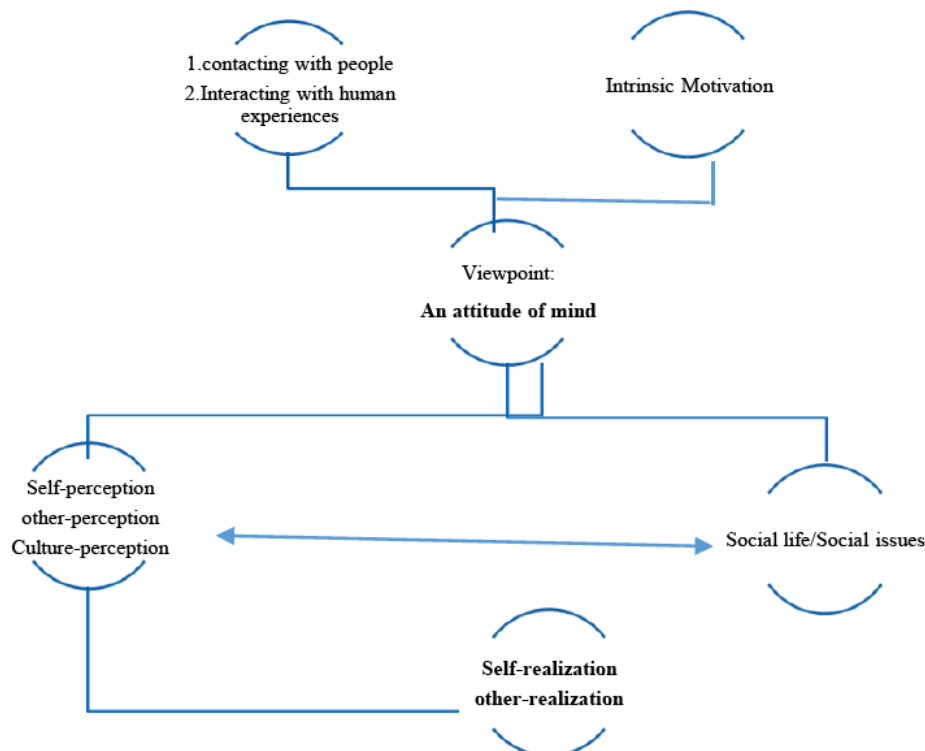


Figure 3. Viewpoint ingredients

Subsequently, after teaching English rules and providing rich input for the participants, and allowing them to choose English or Persian to use for the purpose of Critical Reflection, it seemed it was high time they were provided with the opportunity to improve their English speaking. We put this plan into practice, but they were supposed not to allow English to be an obstacle for them to express their thoughts. Therefore, when domination of reflection was so obvious, Persian was for the most part replaced by English.

Hence, with the help of mother tongue (Persian), participants felt secure and they could reflect their feelings, opinions, and ideas. When reflection became dominant in the class, the English language came into the scene. Therefore, Reflection became a motivation for them to learn English, and, even without any force, they went through English themselves to have reflection.

As we carried out this study, we encouraged cooperation, and after engaging participants in reflection, at around this time our project may have been entering a new phase. By adopting group discussion method based on different social subjects, we tried to involve these cooperatively taught participants in critical reflection process in order to discuss their thoughts and feelings for in-depth learning. In discussion times, whenever something would come to one's mind, they freely expressed it, and from our own side, in those situations we would prefer not to involve ourselves in their thoughts. Surprisingly, those thoughts resulted in challenging talks between them. Generally, the more we were going on, the more their thoughts become purposeful and critical.

V. CONCLUSION

As we carried out this project, we tried so hard to circulate around these participants to look at their social world alongside them all over those seven months. We as the two ethnographers/ teachers lived with these participants, through personal experiences we were involved in, to make it to the final.

We believe that engaging in Critical reflection would encourage active and purposeful process of exploration. On the one hand, this ethnographic study shows that the use of mother tongue would give rise to participants' feeling of security to take action confidently and effectively in the procedure of foreign language learning. On the other hand, what we have accomplished proves that facilitated, comfortable, and stress-free environment can develop caring relationships which would generate mutual understanding, empathy, trust, and respect between participants and the teachers. Thus, the end result would make learners work with each other not against each other in constructive cooperation in which participants could learn many things from each other to be empowered to provide their perspectives toward social issues. This happened when reflective talks in the classroom changed the participants' frame of reference which brought them new ways of defining their world and in particular themselves.

Through examination of our observations, we found that participants did not seek success in their peers' failure. The whole class was likened to a human body and the participants were compared with the organs of the body. For this body to survive, the participants worked in harmony with each other.

In this situation, although every participant attended the class with a different personality, conducting this ethnographic community holistically led everyone to experience the same pathway of learning English. All of them actually were developed as a whole instead of just academically. Thinking about the ways participants grew and learn, while they were all treated as unique, important people, spiritual growth, self-knowledge, and improvement in inner potentials for taking superior responsibilities in life were evolved. Surprisingly, the outcome was that all of the participants had united perspective toward social issues which resulted in actual learning.

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