

EFL Learners' Attitudes toward Writing Instruction Based on Critical Language Awareness

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Abstract—The present study sought to investigate the attitudes of upper-intermediate EFL female learners toward writing instruction based on critical language awareness (CLA). Sixteen participants were selected based on their performance on a quick placement test (QPT) and a writing task. Three instruments namely, QPT, a researchers made opinionnaire and semi-structured interview were used to elicit the data. The findings of the opinionnaire and semi-structured interview revealed an overall positive attitude toward CLA-based writing class. This study might be of help to writing teachers, and textbook and syllabus designer in that they can bring critical language awareness into consideration in EFL context.

Index Terms—attitude, critical language awareness, writing, EFL

I. INTRODUCTION

In the post-method epoch of language teaching and learning, the importance of psychological factors has been argued to be inevitable. The psychology of language encompasses postulated views from behaviorism to humanism to cognitive psychology and social constructivism. Williams and Burden (1997), in a comprehensive book on social constructivism, designed their framework via four interrelated concepts of teacher, learner, task, and context, in which, constructs such as motivation and attitude were argued to have a direct influence on teacher and learner. Among the aforementioned constructs, attitude has been defined by Gardner (1980) as “the sum total of a man’s instincts and feelings, prejudice or bias, preconceived notions, fears, threats, and convictions about any specified topic” (p.267); hence, this specified topic can be the mother tongue or other languages (Crystal, 1997).

It is axiomatic that students with high degree of positive attitude or feeling toward a particular language or skill will show better results in their language education lifespan. Accordingly, Kara (2009) stated that positive attitude will result in positive behavior; therefore, better learning is the outcome of their enthusiasm on solving the problems through acquired skills. Rich literature exists on the attitudes of learners such as Al-Kahtany (1995) who investigated the views in relation to different languages, or Gan’s (2004) study which probed the relationship between attitude and learning strategies. In order to alleviate some possible difficulties regarding the language studies, we have to put the focal attention on the skills as well. Among the skills of English language, writing is reputed to be difficult; the complexity of this skill might be due to different factors such as the distance between reader and writer, absence of suprasegmental features, body posture or cultural factors (Rivers, 1981; Chastain, 1988; Brown, 2001; Richards & Renandya, 2002). This complexity might affect the attitudes of the learners in relation to language and language learning as Gardner (1985) emphasized the role attitude plays on enthusiasm of learners toward language learning.

To faint the negative attitude of the learners, practitioners came with different approaches and techniques for writing skill. For instance, Ismail, Hussin and Darus (2012) recommended online writing programs as a compensatory solution. Notably, the aforementioned instrument might not be applicable in various circumstances where economical factors play an important role. In this respect, critical language awareness (henceforth CLA) may come in handy. This approach was designed by Fairclough in early nineties to empower learners in resisting, revising, or at least making learners aware of discriminations, inequalities, injustice, and conventions that became norms by authority in educational contexts (Fairclough, 1992). The existing shortcomings and limitations as crux of the matter provoked the present researchers to use a new approach namely, CLA in an upper-intermediate EFL writing classroom to investigate the attitudes of the EFL learners toward their writing skill. It seems that understanding manipulative thoughts of writers might not only be interesting but also worthy of consideration in language related studies. This study aimed at

investigating the attitudes of learners as a main objective by unveiling hidden meanings in comprehension and production of texts through the tenets of CLA in EFL writing class.

This study might be of help to teachers who seek the interest of their learners as a pinpoint of their teaching in writing classes by the strands of critical studies. CLA might trigger the learners' attitude with the aim of obtaining writing proficiency when they find themselves active participants. In addition, CLA might come into account for institutes' supervisors, curriculum designers, test makers, and other stakeholders as a motivational phenomenon. Textbook designers might take an advantage of this study to give some hints for unveiling the hidden ideological assumptions in the adapted texts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Attitude has numerous facets and applications in different contexts via new approaches or technology in the realm of language learning and teaching. Gardner (1980) has classified attitude into specificity, generality, social and educational. The first two categories, as the terms are self-explanatory, were exemplified by attitude toward learning French or learning a foreign language which is a good indicator of the construct to be investigated. The other subsequent categories referred to attitudes to educational context which encompasses teachers, classrooms, classmates, beside attitudes toward social factors of target language, respectively. Later on, Dornyei, Csizer and Nemeth (2004) determined the modifying factors in language attitude and motivation such as gender differences, geographical variation and language instruction in Hungary. For the gender, the result of their survey indicated significant difference for languages such as English, German, and Russian in which boys were more into them compared to feminine Italian and French languages (Dornyei, Csizer, & Nemeth, 2004). They also found that there was tendency of positive attitudes in relation to foreign languages by the geographical situations. Dornyei, Csizer and Nemeth (2004) used these two components of attitude as the main variables along with some others to scrutinize the attitudes of non-learners and active learners, in which, the result indicated higher scores of active learners against non-learners.

Other criterion that became the vogue these days in language-related studies is the usage of technology in the classroom. Although, non-probability of its application in all contexts might be considered as a weakness but Ushida (2005) probed the motivation and attitude in relation to online learning of Spanish and French which revealed a satisfactory positive attitude. The aforementioned study beside Kern (1995), Warschauer (1996), Ismail, Hussin and Darus (2012) and Tahriri, Danaye Tous and Movahedfar (2015) highlighted the importance of technology in language learning which results in higher motivation and positive attitude of learners.

In educational contexts of learner-centeredness, the focal attention is chiefly on the attitude of learners; however, the teachers' view toward learning, learners and different methods play a crucial role. Salema (2015) probed the attitude of the teachers and the students through mixed methods in learner-centered pedagogy in two separate contexts of private and public schools. Salem's result revealed positive attitudes of teachers and learners along with the significant difference between attitudes of public and private teachers as a major outcome of that study. Apart from the attitude of teachers toward different methods, their perceptions on different skills were reported to have a tremendous effect on education system as a whole. In what follows, other more pertinent studies on attitudes toward writing skill will be reviewed.

Jones (2007) sought to investigate the negative views in the direction of male writers through interview and detailed observation. In a nutshell, the findings not only revealed a weak piece of evidence to support males as weak writers but also the structures of their writings were more similar to successful writers. Other than gender, Cunningham (2008) found that the quality of the literacy classrooms had a significant impact on learners' attitude to writing and reading.

The attitude of pre-service teachers in addition to possible effects of age, educational background, proficiency level and gender have been probed in EFL writing by Aydin and Basoz (2010); in brief, the result of their study indicated positive attitudes of teachers and significant correlations between background and proficiency level. Moreover, age didn't play a significant role unlike gender; females were reported to have more positive attitudes to writing; hence, it is inline with the studies that positioned males as less enthusiastic in writing compared to females (Browne, 1994; Barrs & Pidgeon, 2002).

Farrah (2011) conducted a research on the attitudes in relation to collaborative writing and the result revealed positive attitudes in relation to writing; additionally, female students favored it more than their male counterparts did. In addition, Erdogan (2013) explored the effect of the creative drama on teachers' writing and their attitude via mixed methods. The creative drama was found to be influential in terms of improving writing skill and positive attitudes of the learners. Teachers also reflected positive attitudes when they considered themselves writer or writing teachers (Bifuh-Ambe, 2013).

Various educational methods lead teachers to play various roles. By the same token, when we discuss the teacher's role in different circumstances, it reminds us of the power of teachers in the classrooms; CLA tries to empower and emancipate learners against possible transmissible attitudes of power sources such as teachers, textbooks, peers, etc. (Clark, 1992).

Kumaravadivelu (2006) characterized teachers as providers and manipulators in language-centered methods, as facilitators or interdependent participants in learner-centered methods, and as authorities (teacher-fronted classes) in learning-centered methods. Accordingly, teachers might apply banking model instead of problem-posing model,

proposed by Freire (1970), in all the mentioned methods or even post-method classes. In other words, they might consider themselves as an authority or sources of power. Sahragard, Razmjoo and Baharloo (2014) conducted a study on the awareness of the teachers in terms of critical pedagogy (CP) and their standpoints regarding the implementation of CP in the classrooms through mixed methods. Their findings revealed that participants were aware of CP which might fetter the impact of considering themselves as the only one in the class. They also found that PhD students reflected better familiarity compared to MA students and their views favored CP but there were degrees of mismatch between their views and aspects of CP. Moreover, they found class size, top-down system and time as major barriers in bringing CP into practice. Equally important, the findings of Anari and Zamanian (2014) determined a positive significant relationship between teachers' effectiveness and critical pedagogical attitudes. Kumaravadivelu (2006) divided vantage points towards language into three aspects of language as system, language as discourse and language as ideology. Putting aside the system and discourse, ideologies in the English textbooks along with the attitude of the learners in two separate contexts and awareness of teachers toward those ideologies were examined by Abdollahzadeh and Baniasad (2010); in this study, the prevalent ideologies in the commercial textbooks (Spectrum and True to life) were about sexism, consumerism and hegemony. In order to empower learners and teachers in unveiling ideologies, Rashidi and Safari (2011) introduced a model for EFL materials development through which practitioners should bring into consideration aspects such as process, culture, teachers' role, and expectations along with the learner roles. To have a better grasp on the implementation of CP in language skills, Barjesteh, Nasroulahi and Esmaili (2014) checked out the contribution of critical literacy approach in writing ability and the attitude of the learners towards writing classroom. The results showed a significant progress in writing after the treatment and positive attitude to critical awareness. In the respect of critical studies, Chaparro (2014) argued that CLA is a must in educational context vis-à-vis the use of pluralism and transnationalism as resources of learning. Concomitantly, the importance of CLA and its significant effect on raising critical thinking and motivation of learners have been highlighted.

The present study seeks to answer the following research question:

- What are the upper-intermediate EFL learners' attitudes toward CLA-based instruction?

III. METHOD

This study took an advantage of mixed-method design (QUAN-Qual) and triangulation to provide a clear picture of various vantage points of the issues under the investigation. To achieve this goal, two research tools, namely, an opinionnaire and interview were used the details of which will be discussed in the following sections.

A. Participants

The target participants of this study included 16 upper-intermediate EFL female learners who were studying English for general purposes in a private institute located in Tehran province, Iran. Using convenience sampling, the study was conducted on adult female EFL learners with the mean age of 24 years. In addition, the background of the learners was examined to check their familiarity with CLA in order to decrease its possible effect on their attitude.

B. Instruments and Materials

Oxford Quick Placement Test (version 2)

This test was administered to determine the participants' level of language proficiency. It consists of 60 vocabulary and grammar items. The participants were required to answer the test items within 60 minutes as standard allocated time.

Independent five-paragraph essay

The researchers administered a five-paragraph essay within 30 minutes to assure the requirements. The rubric used for evaluation of the participants' essays was the rubric of City University of New York (CUNY); as such, the internal consistency of the rubric was already confirmed. The inter-rater reliability was also established for this instrument.

Opinionnaire and semi-structured interview

Best and Kahn (2006) distinguished questionnaire from opinionnaire while enquiring attitude; that is why, opinionnaire was used in this study. A 4-point Likert scale opinionnaire (strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree) was developed based on the existing literature.

The content validity of the opinionnaire was confirmed after several amendments by two experienced faculty members who examined it thoroughly. To ensure the participants' understanding of the items, a translated version was given to the participants. To check the appropriateness of the translation, its validity was ensured through back-translation. The SPSS (version 21) was used to check the reliability of the instrument through Cronbach's alpha. The alpha reliability coefficient was assessed through a pilot study (n=9) which indicated a reliability coefficient of .736. An acceptable level of reliability, as indicated by Barker, Pistrang, and Elliot (1994), is .7.

The second instrument used to validate the participants' responses to the opinionnaire was a semi-structured interview. This type of interview was selected because of the flexibility and control as discussed by Nunan (1992).

Textbook

Participants received the texts of the Mosaic paragraph review and essay development 1(2008) which were modified. In terms of ideological orientations. The framework of Fairclough (1989) which embraced the analysis of text,

interaction and social action was used to unveil those ideologies. This part was chiefly centered on their reading; to bring CLA approach into writing, the principles of Ivancic and Simpson (1992) was taken into account.

C. Procedure

A pilot study was first conducted on nine EFL students similar to those who took part in the main phase of the study. The shortcomings of the study were determined and the steps were checked. Then, the level of the participants was determined through a placement test and independent essay writing. Next, they received the instruction of Mosaic essay writing during 12 sessions. This instruction encompassed Fairclough's (1989) and Ivancic and Simpson's (1992) models. After the experiment was over, the EFL learners received the opinionnaire to checkmark the items in 30 minutes. The confidentiality of the responses and the anonymity of the respondents were guaranteed. After the completion of the opinionnaire, 20-minute interviews were held on the subsequent days. During the interview, the information was jotted down by a colleague while the participants were interviewed by another. It is worthwhile to mention that instruction of CLA, the interview, and the opinionnaire were all piloted to check the blind spots in advance.

D. Data Analysis

In accordance with the nature of this study, the analysis of the collected data was done in two separate dimensions. For the opinionnaire, the SPSS (version 21) was used to calculate means and standard deviations of the items. For interview, the transcribed responses of the interviewees were scrutinized through content analysis. To this end, the the pertinent themes were summarized, categorized, and reported.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In order to find the upper-intermediate EFL learners' attitudes toward CLA-based instruction, the opinionnaire along with the semi-structured interview were administered. The opinionnaire included fourteen items. The following table presents the means and standard deviations for the items of the opinionnaire (see Table I).

TABLE I.
ITEM STATISTICS FOR THE ITEMS OF THE OPINIONNAIRE

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
1) I felt good when I analyzed the texts before I started to write.	2.81250	.655108	16
2) The analysis of texts was an interesting activity for me.	2.75000	.447214	16
3) I found the interpretation of texts motivating.	2.93750	.680074	16
4) The interpretation of texts in group-work activity was boring.	2.56250	.892095	16
5) The class discussions on authors' thoughts made me feel stressful.	2.56250	.629153	16
6) I found it interesting not to limit myself to the thoughts seemingly expressed in the texts.	2.68750	.704154	16
7) I enjoyed the activities for text analysis.	2.75000	.774597	16
8) Categorization of connectors was an interesting activity.	3.00000	.516398	16
9) I feel I can write better in a course like this.	2.75000	.856349	16
10) I can have a better self-understanding in writing.	3.06250	.680074	16
11) Familiarity with the choice of words (for example, use of police officer instead of policeman) was useful.	3.18750	.543906	16
12) I enjoyed understanding the beliefs of writers through analyzing grammatical points.	2.68750	.793200	16
13) I enjoyed taking the responsibility of my beliefs in my writing.	2.43750	.813941	16
14) This writing class was less exhausting and boring class like my other experiences in writing.	2.93750	.680074	16

The participants expressed their highest positive attitude towards items (8, 10, and 11) that investigated the participants' viewpoint with respect to "categorization of connectors" ($M= 3.00$), "having a better self-understanding in writing" ($M= 3.06$), and "the usefulness of familiarity with the choice of words" ($M= 3.18$). In contrast, the lowest mean rank was reported for item (13). Item 13 asked the respondents about their opinion with respect to "taking the responsibility of their beliefs in their writing" ($M= 2.43$).

With respect to the diversity with which the participants rated the items of the opinionnaire, items (4 and 13) had the highest variation ($SD \geq .80$). Item four evaluated the participants' attitude in relation to "the interpretation of texts in group-work activity" ($SD=.89$). On the other hand, item (2) reflected the least degree of variance implying that the respondents were highly consistent in their responses to this item ($SD \leq .50$). Item two appraised their reflection towards "the analysis of texts as an interesting activity" ($SD=.44$). The following figure illustrates the participants' responses to the opinionnaire.

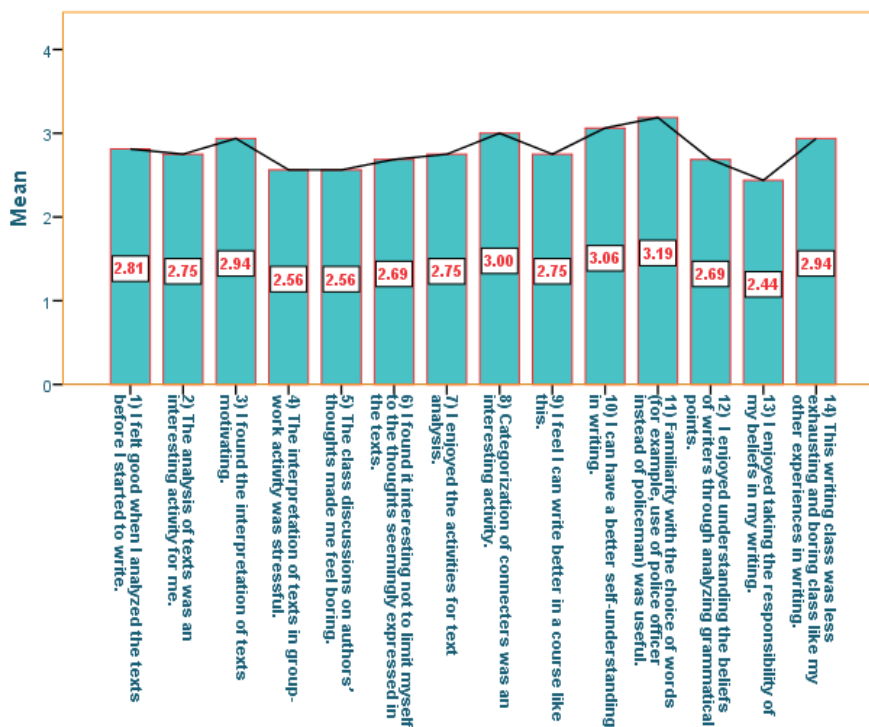


Figure 1. The Participants' Attitudes towards Critical Language Awareness (Opinionnaire)

Consistent with the result of the opinionnaire, the interests of the participants (n=16) regarding different aspects of the course were sought through the semi-structured interview.

Firstly, most of the participants (14 out of 16) found the presentation of the lessons interesting, in that, the course instructor tried to respect the participants' viewpoints. This has been driven from Wallace's (1992) view who "wished to make it clear that a range of interpretations were acceptable but that they would need to be argued through and defended against rival interpretations of the group" (p.70). Consequently, this attitude might improve the self-efficacy of the participants and positively influence their writing performance (Williams & Takaku, 2011; Hashemnejad, Zoghi, & Amini, 2014). Some of the unedited excerpts of the interviews are as follow:

He didn't tell me about what I want to write and it was difficult for me first, but it helped me to learn better and feel I can write myself because he taught me how to support my opinion. My other experience was writing in the way my teacher told me not the way I want to write.

I liked it because he respects my opinion and taught me how to support it. Also, I liked it because I could finish the task myself. He explained his interpretation and asks ours. He didn't confirm or reject it. It was interesting because I was responsible for my writing and he only guided me.

In my opinion, it was very interesting because my point of view was different from his point of view but he didn't stop me. He asked me to support my point of view and I searched a lot to do that and finally support it. But my other class teacher changed my mind.

Secondly, the area of their interests over the texts analysis and the discussed materials was sought. The obtained data shed light on the eagerness and the interest of the participants on the analysis, unveiling the hidden intentions of the author and different types of activity. Twelve participants found the activities difficult but interesting.

I enjoyed the division of texts into separate section for understanding hidden intention of the writers. I think it is good for reading skill too. Many things are clear for me that I didn't think of before. I want to use this model in other skills too.

Before I learn how to analyze the essay, I couldn't easily understand text and writers' wants but now I can do it. It is time-consuming but when I put elements of the texts away from each other, I can understand the intention of the author and it is cool.

Finally, the overall feelings of the participants about the course and their learning was sought. Mostly, they found the course motivating compared to other writing class experiences. Moreover, they enjoyed the deviation from biased language along with the possible impacts of the vocabulary and grammar on the meaning. Some statements of the participants are given below:

My other writing classes were extremely boring because I had to copy what my teacher wrote but the text analysis and my writing analysis made it interesting. I learned to think about the words that I want to use or grammar that I want to use.

This course was very good. I enjoyed when I looked at my writings and other writings from another person's eyes. I understood how words and grammar influence our writing and the readers of our writing. I prefer to think more about the words that I want to use. I enjoyed preventing offensive words for other races and gender.

Putting forward the critical approaches toward writing skill, the findings of this study are in line with those of Barjesteh, Nasroulahi and Esmaili (2014) and also support the findings of Aydin and Basoz (2010). Kara (2009) argued that the positive attitudes lead to positive behavior; the participants of this study showed positive behavior to writing skill. If CLA can be considered as a new approach like technology, this study is also in line with that of Ushida (2005). Moreover, as item 6 showed, the participants did not restrict themselves to the thoughts expressed in the texts. If they restrict themselves to the book or teachers' talk, they would probably gain good scores but they preferred their own thoughts rather than a good score.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This study was carried out to investigate the attitudes of the participants toward CLA-based writing. To attain this goal, 16 participants took part in this study and their views were investigated through an opinionnaire and semi-structured interview. The results showed an overall positive attitude towards CLA-based writing which might play a crucial role in syllabus designing for writing course. The categorization of connectors, better self-understanding in writing, and the usefulness of familiarity with the choice of words were the items with the highest positive attitude. As already indicated, most of the participants found the CLA-based instruction interesting as the diversity of viewpoints was respected. This is indicative of the noticeable impact of CLA in improving EFL learners' writing skills. As a result, writing teachers can take an advantage of CLA their classes to overcome the existing barriers of writing. Curriculum and syllabus designers should also pay more attention to CLA as a potentially influential approach to writing instruction.

VI. SUGGESTIONS

This study was an attempt to check the attitude of the learners toward CLA-based writing class. Other studies could be conducted toward other skills, namely, speaking, reading or listening. Since the present study was conducted on EFL female participants, the same study can be carried out on EFL male learners; in which, the main variable of the study become gender. The number of participants can be added to improve the level of generalizability. Because of the vastness of critical studies, the view points of other scholars such as van Dijk or Wodak can be used as the treatment of the study.

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