Implementing critical pedagogy in EFL contexts: closing the gap between theory and practice

Implementación de la pedagogía crítica en los contextos de EFL: cerrar la brecha entre la teoría y la práctica

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Abstract

As a result of post-modernism in the present world, a dramatic recent shift has been the emergence of offshoots such as initiation of critical pedagogy in academic settings. Besides, there is a shift toward a critical era that defines a new relationship between teachers and theorizers, which is pushing teachers towards the world of skills, knowledge, and autonomy. Considering the increasing importance of the critical pedagogy, this paper firstly provides basic concepts and objectives of critical pedagogy and how it has emerged, then it draws on the basic tenets of this theory and offers how it can be adopted to the field of language education in EFL contexts. Finally, it gives some practical applications for implementing this theory in EFL classrooms, supporting Crooks' (2010) argument that more practical examples of critical pedagogical EFL literature need to be reported

Resumen

Como resultado de la posmodernidad en el mundo actual, un cambio dramático reciente ha sido el surgimiento de ramificaciones como el inicio de la pedagogía crítica en contextos académicos. Además, hay un cambio hacia una era crítica que define una nueva relación entre profesores y teóricos, que está empujando a los maestros hacia el mundo de las habilidades, el conocimiento y la autonomía. Teniendo en cuenta la creciente importancia de la pedagogía crítica, este documento en primer lugar proporciona conceptos básicos y objetivos de la pedagogía crítica y cómo ha surgido, luego se basa en los principios básicos de esta teoría y ofrece cómo se puede adoptar en el campo de la educación de idiomas en Contextos EFL. Por último, ofrece algunas aplicaciones prácticas para implementar esta teoría en las clases de EFL, lo que respalda el argumento de Crooks (2010) de que se deben informar más ejemplos prácticos de literatura de EFL pedagógica crítica

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy; EFL Contexts; Post-modernism

Palabras clave: Pedagogía crítica; Contextos EFL; Posmodernism

1. Introduction

Based on Kumaravadivelu (2006), the post-modern era defines a new relationship between teachers and theorizers, which helps teachers move towards the world of skills, knowledge, and autonomy. In addition, there is a dramatic shift in academic settings as a result of the emergence of offshoots of post-modernism such as initiation of critical pedagogy which is considered as a flexible, dynamic and open-ended teaching concept, and is different from any traditional approaches of language teaching in that it highlights that society, politics and education system have an important effect on language teaching.

Brazilian educator and theorist Paulo Freire's philosophy of education relates not only to the critical or radical education of earlier thinkers, but also to the modern Marxist and anti-colonialist philosophers. Freire promoted critical literacy skills among the socially oppressed Brazilian farmers, addressed ways in which minorities had been marginalized, and preached the ways in which education can give people tools to construct better lives and to participate more fully in determining their own destinies. Freire's (1970) problem-posing model of education strived for empowerment as an aim of education and he also attacked the traditional education which presumes learners as empty agents who receive knowledge from teachers.

A fundamental aspect of critical pedagogy is to overcome unfavorable life situations by raising awareness of the power relations embedded in society. As commonly argued by critical discourse analysts, the reason for minority marginalization is due to the power imbalance in society. Auerbach (1995) explains that power is unevenly and unfairly distributed in society, and the dominant classes exercise power through coercion and through consent. For these reasons the oppressor and the oppressed will always exist. As Giroux (2001) explains, critical pedagogues theorize that educational institutions are in fact a part of societies with unequal distribution of power, that they are political sites and are not neutral, and that therefore they tend to reflect and reproduce societal power imbalance.

Not only should language teachers consider the sociocultural reality that influences identity formation in the classroom, but also should separate the linguistic needs of learners from their social needs. In other words, to satisfy their pedagogic obligations, language teachers need to satisfy their social obligations, and they will be able to reconcile these seemingly competing forces if they "*achieve a deepening awareness both of the sociocultural reality that shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality*" (van Manen, 1977, p. 222). On the other hand, Kumaravadivelu (2001) points out the participants' experiences have "*the potential to alter pedagogic practices in ways unintended and unexpected by policy planners, curriculum designers, or textbook producers*" (p. 543).

Accordingly, there is increasing concern of the importance of the critical pedagogy for foreign language learning, and understanding EFL teachers' mindsets and attitudes on critical pedagogy can play a crucial role in the effect of this revolution on the teaching and learning processes. However, it seems that some EFL teachers would rather mostly continue to use the old approaches and methods in the educational settings, and the critical pedagogy principles are insufficiently used. Given the significance of critical pedagogy in the current English language teaching debate, the current study aims to explicate on the concept and aims of critical pedagogy and explain basic tenets of critical pedagogy and how to implement it in EFL contexts like Iran.

2. Background

The most prominent educational theory which should be studied in order to understand the historical background of critical pedagogy is progressivism. Darling and Nordenbo (2002) summarize the five main themes of progressivism to be the following: a criticism of traditional education, a new understanding of the conception of knowledge, a new understanding of human nature, a democratic education, and the development of the whole person.

"*Progressive*" educators believe that knowledge should be based on the child's natural interest and curiosity, and that traditional schooling does not serve the child's needs and interests. Progressive educators see humans as natural learners. This fundamental theory is integrated by identifying a mismatch between what children actually want to learn and what the traditionalists insist that they ought to learn, with the belief that traditional schooling is unsatisfactory. Crooks (2010) explains that understanding Dewey, as a well-known figure in the evolvement of progressivism, is important in order to recognize and acknowledge the historical tradition and practice of critical pedagogy. Dewey emphasized learning through activities rather than formal curricula, and he opposed authoritarian methods. His left-wing social reconstructionist theories and works are said to be responsible for the change in pedagogy that began in the United States early in the 20th century as emphasis shifted from the institution to the student (Darling and Nordenbo, 2002).

Various free schools and alternative schools were inspired by the progressive, anti-authoritarian educational theory during the mid 20th century. Among institutions to put the theory into practice was A.S. Neill's Summerhill School. Summerhill School is a pioneering, co-educational residential school which was founded in 1921 as the very first 'free school' in the world. 'Free' refers to the personal freedom of the children, as the school provides freedom, equality, and happiness after acknowledging that a child is innately wise, realistic, and capable of self-government and democracy (Neill, 1996).

In the same vein, Guijarro Ojeda and Ruiz Cecilia (2013) in their study on the perceptions of Spanish EFL trainee teachers in the classroom pursued to know how EFL teacher trainees perceive the introduction of queer issues within their teaching practices. This qualitative study was conducted at the University of Granada (Spain) with ten would-be teachers who were in their final year of university studies and had completed their school practi¬ce period. To underpin the research, they analyzed the postulates of queer theory for the pedagogical field, some of the Spanish educatio¬nal foundations regarding gender, and the roles played by teachers to implement these practi¬ces. It was concluded that developing multicultural learning is not just a matter of acquiring cultural knowledge, but it rather implies changing attitudes and skills on behalf of language teachers. Concepts, procedu¬res, and attitudes contained in queer discourses must be systematically observed, practiced, and discussed. Furthermore, teacher training should incorporate queer discourses as an integral part of their training in order to have a beneficial effect on social educa¬tion and moral development.

3. Critical pedagogy in ESL context

With the understanding that society is in fact unequal and unfair, critical approaches to second language teaching focus on the relationship between language learning and social change. English as a Second Language (ESL) educators who believe in critical pedagogy find it meaningful to adapt the theory of critical pedagogy into their curriculum and syllabi especially since ESL teaching mainly deals with racial and language minorities (i.e. immigrants and foreign students). Studies on second language learner identities (i.e. Norton, 2000; MaKay and Wong, 1996; Miller, 2003) indicate that some second language learners, without social, communicative, and linguistic competencies, and often with damaged identities, face hardships living in a new country. Language teaching and learning must be linked to the goals of educating students, to understand why things are the way they are and how they got to be that way (Simon, cited in Morgan, 1998). Norton and Toohey (2004) remind second language teachers to keep in mind that language is not simply a means of expression or communication; rather, it is a practice that constructs and is constructed by the ways language learners understand themselves, their social surroundings, their histories, and their possibilities for the future. When the language classroom can be a place where students understand their own identities and their own society, language learning can be empowering. Critical ESL pedagogy is the "*pedagogy of hope*" (Freire, 1992).

4. Functions of ESL critical pedagogy

ESL critical pedagogy functions with the basic theory that materials and approaches should be relevant to the social, political, and cultural conditions of each group of students. Topics should be locally situated and should meet learner needs in the society which they live in. It is also important to find a subject matter that provides meaningful content for lessons. Discussion topics such as ecology, gender roles, changing social identity, and employment equity are often valid and appropriate topics for ESL classrooms (Morgan, 1998). It is often emphasized that critical pedagogy is about 'finding possibilities of articulation' rather than the 'medium of voice' (Pennycook, 2001). In other words, it is more important to teach students the way to claim their rights in society than to teach them how to speak and write fluently and accurately.

Problem-posing and rights analysis are considered the most crucial aspect of the syllabus. By posing problems regarding the status quo, and including social, political and local issues that concern students, they are encouraged to be aware of the society they live in. Awareness of the issues promotes the participation in society, community, and politics. Participation in communities where language and racial minorities are often marginalized will, in fact, empower ESL learners as a result.

5. Critical pedagogy in EFL context

While educators in the fields of literacy education, ESL, and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) have discussed a large number of articles and accounts of the actual implementation of critical pedagogy (e.g. Norton and Toohey, 2004; Benesch, 2001; Auerback, 1995), much less has been reported in the EFL context, as critical pedagogy has been dismissed as culturally inappropriate especially for the East Asian contexts (Crooks 2010). One of the few studies conducted in an EFL context is reported by Shin and Crooks (2005). The study investigated Korean high school students' reactions to critical dialogues and non-authoritarian interactions with teachers. The study result showed that students were not resistant to the materials containing critical topics, and that East Asian students are capable of handling critical approaches.

Perez Valverde and Ruiz Cecilia (2014) in their paper entitled "*The development of FL teachers' professional identity through the production of narratives*" presented a pioneering teacher training model based on the development of teacher identity. They examined the planning and steps carried out in the implementation of a research project financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (Spain). The first phase focused on the trainees' own narratives; in addition, the researchers used questionnaires, interviews, and held weekly seminars to elicit information from a multifaceted point of view. The results, having profound implications for studies of teacher training, showed agreement with theoretical predictions and matched former studies outcomes. Also, the results showed evidence in the development of participants' critical thinking and reflective capacity.

On the other hand, Ruiz Cecilia (2012) in his study aimed to prepare would-be EFL teachers to teach in culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Based on the study, would-be teachers should be most aware of the importance of cultural systems as a means to understand peoples' behavior; also, a multicultural approach to education is essential to engage children of all cultures in learning and to prepare students for the diverse and global society that will be their adult world. Ruiz Cecilia (2012) concluded that developing a heightened sensitivity to and an understanding of people from various cultures and traditions is a basic goal of education for our children. Would-be teachers need to be directly trained in this issue since they play an important role in the education of children at schools. They have to fight against cultural stereotypes and teach them to look through the eyes of many children. Thus, we have to empower them to be cross-culturally minded, to critically analyze cultural misunderstandings, and to take action to solve these problems. In other words, teachers should help children to live in a diverse society and strive for common goals toward peace. All this can be a reality if we foster dialogical tools in the classroom and bring their voices into interaction with others' voices.

In Iran, Fathi, Ghaslani, and Parsa (2015) investigated the relationship between the extent to which Iranian English teachers show willingness and conformity to principles of post-method pedagogy and the degree of their reflection in their classrooms by using questionnaires. The result showed a meaningful positive relationship between the post-method mindsets of the participating teachers and their reflection in teaching. Also, based on the results, the researchers concluded that the five elements of teacher reflection can be related to the three post-method components in terms of the nature and the domain of the constructs.

One might ask if EFL learners who choose to learn an optional language, or those who can afford tertiary education, really need to be "*empowered*" so that they can "*overcome their unfavorable situation.*" EFL learners are quite different from ESL learners, as many fall into the category of future bilinguals in an elite category. Elite bilinguals, as Yamamoto (2001) explains, are generally highly educated individuals who choose to become bilingual and who seek out either formal classes or contexts in which they can acquire a foreign language. They are likely to continue to spend the greater part of their time in a society in which their first language is the majority or societal language. Yet within the EFL context, learners also come from different backgrounds of gender, sexuality, social classes, and the struggles within micro-relations of power always exist. Moreover, when the learners are indeed the elite members of the society who exercise power, critical pedagogy could serve an important role in education as the language learning could be a tool for them to understand how they came to possess societal power, how to shift that power to the less-powerful, and how to exercise their influence in a right manner to make the world a better and more equal place. EFL critical pedagogy can be the "*pedagogy of possibility*" (Simon, 1992).

Crooks (2010) strongly argues that more reports of the actual implementation of EFL critical pedagogy are needed. Increased sensitivity to diversity, to different types of oppression, is likely to make radical pedagogical initiatives more relevant in a variety of classrooms, especially in EFL contexts.

6. Application of critical pedagogy in EFL context

This section briefly lists the application of EFL critical pedagogy at a university classroom in Shiraz, Iran as an EFL context. It is noteworthy that critical pedagogy does not neglect nor replace well-developed teaching methods. Rather, it adds critical flavor to the existing textbooks and everyday instruction, often subtly. The aim is, thus, not to educate learners to be radical and anti-authoritarian, but to be aware of diversity, witness, and experience an example of power-shifting, and hopefully take these ideas outside of the classroom. In this vein, critical pedagogy is a grass-roots activity with the hopeful belief that if a teacher can change the classroom, students can change the world.

7. Negotiated syllabus and attendance policy

One way to start a new semester with an activity based on critical pedagogy is to have students decide their own class policies. When an instructor has some freedom in syllabus design and class policy making, she/he may opt for a negotiated syllabus. The negotiated model differs from other syllabi in that it allows learner participation in selection of content, mode of working, ways of working, and assessment (Clarke, 1991). In the researcher's sophomore classes that are not coordinated with other sections, the researcher of this study allowed the students to decide on their own attendance policy, depending on their previous experience and maturity. Also, this can provide a model (i.e. attendance policy from another class) and have students discuss in small groups whether or how they want to alter it. After a group discussion, they select a class discussion leader and finalize the policy. The teacher just sits in the back of the classroom, takes notes and speaks only when a direct question is raised.

The purpose of this activity is for students to take full responsibility in the policy making process and experience the traditional teacher-student power shift from the very beginning of the

semester. By-products of this process are the students' realization of their responsibility as college students and the meaning of democracy in education. Another way to accomplish the same goals is to implement self-evaluation as a part of student assessment, especially if the students are graded on a presentation or a portfolio. This ensures student participation in the grading process, sharing what is traditionally a non-negotiable authoritarian power.

8. Materials and course books selection

Materials and Course book selection immensely affects the topics to be covered and tasks to be done in the classroom. Although they are not necessarily based on the theory of critical pedagogy, many course books nowadays promote critical thinking (e.g. Active series by Sandy and Kelly, 2009) and cover controversial topics and social/ global issues (e.g. Impact Issues series by Day, Shaules, and Yamanaka, 2009: *Stimulating Conversation* by Goodmacher, 2008).

When selecting a course book, attention ought to be paid to the characters and the illustrations in the books. There should be non-native speakers of English using English, and there should be diversity of characters in terms of race, culture, gender, handicaps, age, and families such as nuclear and extended, single or divorced parents as well as childless and reconstituted families. Inclusion of rather unique and "*different*" people works against reproducing the social norms of marginalizing them.

Another way to implement critical pedagogy and be fully involved in critical dialogues with the students is to develop one's own material. Instead of using a course book for an advanced discussion course, students and teacher can select social/global issues that concern them, read articles on the topics, and discuss the societal power relations. With step-by-step explanations and multiple examples, it is possible to raise an issue, critically analyze the power relations embedded in society, discuss how that power is reflected and reproduced in the community, pose problems, and come up with at least one realistic and doable action that the student can take.

9. Providing supplemental materials

Even with traditional course books selected for four-skill-courses, the practice of critical EFL pedagogy can be included in everyday lesson plans. Teachers should ask themselves if they are not representing an inequitable society and its status quo when providing supplemental materials, visual aids and example sentences. Teachers should also pay extra attention to the quality and quantity of the kind of input that the learners are provided. For example, "*she*" can be a pilot and "*he*" can be a nurse in example sentences and flash cards. If a listening component only features a stereotypically dichotomized "*man*" and "*woman*" as defined by traditional gender roles, a teacher could switch the roles and add more variation of untraditional gender orientations where appropriate and possible. The goal is not to take up the class time with the discussion of the social issues, but to intentionally include the otherwise marginalized groups of people.

10. Conclusion

In the present post-modern world, the term "*critical pedagogy*" is more frequently mentioned in the field of EFL, and hence, there are more EFL teachers who tend to actively promote and practice critical and radical topics such as gender education, radical feminist pedagogy, global issues, and critical thinking, as seen among the members of some special interest groups (e.g., gender awareness in language education and global issues in language education). When the theory of EFL critical pedagogy becomes more widely known by like-minded teachers, this powerful theory could unite those educators as critical pedagogues. When more educators report and share their classroom ideas, materials, and syllabi as examples of practical EFL

critical pedagogy, the power of a supportive community can, as a result, empower the teachers as well.

As teachers' mentalities towards the critical pedagogy play an important role in the effect of this revolution on the teaching and learning processes, the present study aimed to probe the implementation of critical pedagogy in EFL contexts in order to bridge the gap between theory and practice. In this regard, it comes up with the conclusion that empowerment and betterment of the society should be objective goals of every classroom, especially the language classes. In the same vein, Chuck Sandy, textbook author and language teacher, commented in his interview:

> *"By definition, teachers are agents of change, and true education in any real, transformative sense is radical by nature. It's our job to wobble systems, to gently incite personal revolutions within our students, and to rebel against educational practices and ideologies which lessen anyone's chance at becoming more than he or she is. To say so in such terms is simply to put into words what all good teachers instinctively know and what most students instinctively recognize when they encounter such a teacher -- and I mean, here, a teacher in any field, in or out of school, foreign or not-so-foreign, with a course book or without any books at all"* (ELT Journal, 2011).

What's more, EFL critical pedagogy can be altered, appropriated and applied to classrooms of various levels and in various contents, from a fully involved critical discussion course to a coordinated four skill class with little flexibility in syllabus design, with a course book or without any books at all. When students understand social power, experience the power-shift, and learn to be sensitive and inclusive of diversity, an EFL classroom can be a learning community that leads to empowerment. The practice of EFL critical pedagogy is a grass-roots activity for the betterment of the community and the wider society. In this regard, EFL critical pedagogy can be a pedagogy of change. Accordingly, there is need to listen to teachers' voices in understanding classroom practice (Richards, 1996), and as aptly Hargreaves, (1994) and Prabhu (1992) maintained teachers' performance in class ought to be shaped by their "*attitudes*" and "*minds*". Additionally, as Crandall (2000), believed the dramatic shift from the method era to post-method era indicates "*a shift from a positivist-oriented perspective to a constructivist-oriented one and a shift from transmission, product-oriented theories to process-oriented theories of learning, teaching, and teacher learning*" (pp. 34-35).

Findings of research on critical pedagogy in EFL contexts can have a number of implications for theorizers, policy makers, educational authorities, and teachers: Theorizers and policy makers can make sure of the positive attitudes of EFL teachers and learners towards the critical pedagogy; also, educational authorities may consider the effect of context of teaching on teacher' attitudes and provide opportunities for them to try different strategies in their classroom, which is in line with teachers' autonomous decision-making proposed by post-modern pedagogy. In addition, concern with the importance of the critical concepts in pedagogy can help curriculum designers gain a better understanding of teachers' mindsets on the critical pedagogy, which can be of crucial importance not only to EFL teachers, but also to test developers and material designers to diagnose and analyze their orientation concerning barriers facing the implementation of critical pedagogy in different contexts, and to pave the way for a better future in the process of language teaching/learning.

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