



Critical Pedagogy and Its Realization in Classroom Context

Mehdi Shokouhi

Department of English, Sari Branch, Islamic Azad University, Sari, Iran

Farnaz Pashaie

MA student of TEFL, Sari Branch, Islamic Azad University, Sari, Iran

Abstract

Critical pedagogy with the aim of theorizing practice and practicing theory has proved itself to be of great value; but the application of critical pedagogy is an issue which has to be handled and scrutinized with meticulous care. Throughout the present paper, first a definition of critical pedagogy with its theoretical underpinnings is given. Afterwards, the application of critical pedagogy in classroom context and the ways through which critical pedagogy can be recognized in classroom context are brought into consideration. Some techniques of applying critical pedagogy in the classroom are also introduced. Finally, the present paper argues that how the selection of topics which are both socially and individually of great value and importance and also meaningful to students can function as a strategy for the realization of critical pedagogy in the classroom context.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, praxis, problem-posing education

INTRODUCTION

Critical pedagogy is a radical approach to education that seeks to transform oppressive structures in society using democratic and activist approaches to teaching and learning (Braa & Callero, 2006). Considering the relation of critical pedagogy and second language learning, Norton and Toohey (2004) believe that advocates of critical approaches to second language teaching are interested in relationships between language learning and social change. They also note that from this perspective, "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" (p. 1).

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND EVERYDAY CLASSROOM CONTEXT

When a teacher is not satisfied with the current methods suggested in SLA, what alternative options are available? Researchers (Benesch, 2001; Morgan 1998; Norton &

Toohy, 2004; Pennycook, 1999, 2001; Ramanathan 2002) have recently proposed that critical pedagogy is crucial to English language teaching. Additionally, Lipman (2003, as cited in Rafi, 2008) says that it is responsibility of the teachers to develop critical thinking in the students other than pushing them from one educational level to the next.

More importantly, Brown (2004) underlines that the objectives of a curriculum in an ideal academic English program should go beyond linguistic factors, and to develop the art of critical thinking. As a result, the present paper tries to shed more lights on the application and realization of critical pedagogy in classroom context.

Theorizing practice and practicing theory

Critical pedagogy starts with the idea of praxis. Praxis involves theorizing practice and practicing theory. Critical pedagogy considers a continuous relationship between practice and theory which involves a constant give-and-take of practice by theory and theory by practice. As Freire (1985) eloquently notified “Cut off from practice, theory becomes a simple verbalism and separated from theory, practice is nothing but blind activism” (as cited in Monchinski, 2008, p. 2). Moreover, Brutt-Griffler and Samimy (1999) defined praxis as

The self-creative activity through which we make the world and the requirements of praxis are theory both relevant to the world and nurtured by actions in it, and an action component in its own theorizing process that grows out of practical political grounding. (p. 419)

The Banking System of Education vs. Problem-Posing Education

The very basic and fundamental aspect of critical pedagogy is the sharp and meticulous distinction which is made between the banking system of education and the problem-posing education. The everyday classroom is the site of numerous limit situations. One of the biggest limit situations confronting teachers and students in the everyday classroom is what Freire called “the banking system of education”

The banking system of education sees students as empty vessels waiting to be filled with information by knowledgeable teachers. Students are viewed as passive sponges waiting to soak up facts. Teachers in this model are viewed as “bank-clerks” who make deposits into empty students. The banking system of education is a mechanistic conception of education. It fits well with the assumptions of behaviorist learning theories. (Monchinski, 2008)

The two main characteristics of banking system of education could be defined as that the teacher knows everything and the student know nothing and the teacher talks and the students listen. On the other hand, as direct opposition to the banking system of education, problem posing education as one form of the realization of critical pedagogy in classroom context encourages critical learning. One of the teachers’ roles in a problem-posing education is to “problematize situations” by presenting to students situations with

which they are familiar but in a way that make them thinking about those situations in new ways. Shor, one of the distinguished features in critical pedagogy, (1980, as cited in Monchinski, 2008) describes this procedure as “extraordinarily re-experiencing the ordinary where students re-perceive the reality they know” (p. 123). Similarly, Johnston (1999) writes “Critical pedagogy offers a way of combining a trenchant critique of previously unquestioned practices in education with concrete ways of introducing change- that is, with a belief in the transformative power of the individual teacher” (p. 557).

In this regard, considering an example of the conversation that Monchinski (2008) provides as the site where Paulo Freire engaged in conversation with a group of farmers seems to be useful to help us better understand the notion of problem posing education. Speaking in a two-sided manner for 5 minutes, the farmers suddenly became quite realizing that Freire was a university trained Ph.D. holder. Now let us take a look at the conversation.

- Farmer: You know because you're a doctor, sir, and we're not.
 Freire: Right, I'm a doctor and you're not. But *why* am I a doctor and you're not?
 Farmer: Because you've gone to school, you've read things, studied things, and we haven't.
 Freire: And why have I been to school?
 Farmer: Because your dad could send you to school. Ours couldn't.
 Freire: And why couldn't your parents send you to school?
 Farmer: Because they were peasants like us.
 Freire: And what is being a peasant?
 Farmer: It's not having an education . . . not owning anything . . . working from sun to sun . . . having no rights . . . having no hope.
 Freire: And why doesn't a peasant have any of this?
 Farmer: The will of God.
 Freire: And who is God?
 Farmer: The Father of us all.
 Freire: And who is a father here this evening?

[Almost all raised their hands, and said they were. Freire asks one of the farmers how many children he has and the man answers three]

- Freire: Would you be willing to sacrifice two of them, and make them suffer so that the other one could go to school, and have a good life . . . ? Could you love your children that way?
 Farmer: No!
 Freire: Well, if you . . . a person of flesh and bones, could not commit an injustice like that—how could God commit it? Could God really be the cause of these things?

[A different kind of silence ensued A silence in which something began to be shared]
Then:

Farmer: No. God isn't the cause of all this. It's the boss! (Freire, 1992, as cited in Monchinski, 2008)

The example is quite revealing. Freire poses a problem which made the farmers question the necessity of the reality and help them draw their own conclusion. The implication of problem posing education is that we as teachers should problematize situations and encourage our students to extraordinarily re-experience the ordinary.

Significance of dialogue

Critical pedagogy welcomes teachers who are confident and at the same time humble enough to know that they don't know all the things and their students are going to know things that they do not. Dialogue is essential to the implementation of critical pedagogy in the everyday classroom. Freire (1970) "For dialogue to be a method of true knowledge, the knowing subjects must approach reality scientifically in order to seek the dialectical connections which explain the form of reality" (as cited in Morrow and Torres, 2002, p. 115).

Dialogue implies mutuality between teachers and students. The traditional lecture format represents a transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the students. Drawing on Freire (2005), Monchinski (2008) wrote that dialogue and the willingness of the teacher to engage in dialogue with the students represents a horizontal relationship between teacher and students. In contrast, in a banking concept of education a "culture of silence" exists. In these classrooms students feel what they say isn't or won't be considered important. This may lead to the "mutism" where students in classrooms avoid dialogue in favor of becoming silent. Mutism and a culture of silence signify oppression and dehumanization in classrooms.

Critical pedagogy and the available tools

Critical pedagogy demands engaged and imaginative teachers who aren't afraid of leaving their comfort zones and taking risks in the classroom. Critical pedagogy demands teachers who are committed to their fields, teachers who will follow developments inside and outside their subject matter. Critical pedagogy demands teachers who will not knowingly fool themselves and their students.

There are three ways that critical pedagogy could be used based on the topic that teachers bring to the classroom context. Based on Shor (1992), Monchinski introduces the themes as following:

Generative themes are "provocative themes discovered as unresolved social problems in the community that are good for generating

discussion in class on the relation of personal life to larger issues" (Shor, 1992, p. 47).

Topical themes are not generated by student discussion in class. The teacher brings topical themes to the students. Then, they discuss the particular topical theme and how it impacts their lives and the subject matter of the class itself.

Academic theme is "a scholastic, professional, or technical body of knowledge which the teacher wants to introduce or has to introduce as a requirement" (Shor, 1992, p. 73). Academic themes are structured knowledge in specific academic disciplines.

Teacher and student opposition: antagonism vs. partnership

Critical pedagogy recognizes differences between students and teachers. Perhaps the largest difference is that the teacher is an authority figure in the classroom and must use that authority in the class; but critical pedagogy conceptualizes teachers and students as partners. Moreover, it has to be highlighted that this partnership doesn't discourage teachers as authority figures in classrooms.

On the other hand, in the banking concept of education these differences are exactly that of antagonistic. The banking system of education considers teachers as people who know and students as those who don't. Partnership is not possible in a banking concept of education. Moreover, in the banking system of education which is dehumanizing, students are objects of the educational process, not subjects.

Regarding the implication of critical pedagogy for teacher education, Bercaw and Stooksberry (2003) assert that critical pedagogues share a goal of academic success for each student, manifested in the preparation and experience of children to be active citizens in a fully democratic society. For critical pedagogues, the purpose of education is for social transformation toward a fully democratic society, where (a) each voice is shared and heard in an equal way, (b) one critically examines oneself and one's society and (c) one acts upon diminishing social injustices. Teacher educators, therefore, are faced with exciting yet daunting challenges: to prepare teachers to effectively teach each student toward successful academic achievement and to prepare teachers who will actively challenge existing social injustices.

MAJOR CRITICISMS

The first criticism goes to the critical pedagogy's lack of realization regarding the utilitarian ground. Pennycook (2001) believes "One of the critiques leveled at the critical pedagogy has been its tendency to remain at the level of grand theorizing rather than pedagogical practice" (p. 130). Moreover, Johnston (1999) made a similar point saying that

Critical pedagogy has given me insights into and understandings of education process that I would not otherwise have had ... but it is not

enough to capture the complex essence of teaching, especially of ESL/EFL. (p. 564)

The next criticism goes to the language or let us say the diction that critical pedagogy uses. Johnston (1999) wrote that

I feel that critical pedagogy would do well to exercise moderation in its use of language. There will be no revolution- at least not one led by university professors; and I believe critical pedagogy would find a broader hearing if it did not require its adherents to dress themselves up linguistically as Che Guevara. (p. 563)

CONCLUSION

Adopting critical pedagogy is about making a conscious choice of teaching style. Critical pedagogy, like other pedagogies, is not just an innocent bystander. It is a partisan. It is not objective and value free, but subjective. Furthermore, critical pedagogy believes that knowledge is never a "give me". Knowledge is always negotiable and always partial. With this in mind, Kanpol (1999) writes that

Critical pedagogy roots its knowledge as a form of cultural politics that challenges a system devoid of humanistic qualities. Critical pedagogy is not simply a platform or another meaningless discipline model to be adopted by everyone. Above all else, critical pedagogy provides us with a terrain of hope that allows investigation into furthering democratic possibilities. Finally, critical pedagogy is both revolutionary and zealous within which the highest moral attempt to make this world a qualitatively better place for all is paramount. Perhaps to get there we must begin individually and perhaps collectively to "confess" or "own up" to our own perceived moral ineptitude. (p. 174-175)

Moreover, Morgan (1998, as cited in Okazaki, 2005) suggests developing critical pedagogy lessons for ESL/EFL learners that are intended to help prepare students for a social world in which language practices can deny as well as provide opportunity. It is through such awareness that newcomers might better develop the language skills necessary to act in their best interests and contribute effectively in the development of a more equitable and tolerant society. Additionally, Morgan (1998, as cited in Okazaki, 2005) documents how his class raised awareness by selecting for discussion content both socially and individually meaningful to students.

As a result one way for application of critical pedagogy can be the selection of the topics which are both socially and individually of great value and importance to the students.

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