



Honing English as a foreign language learners' language abilities through critical pedagogy

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Critical pedagogy, by all means, is an attitude which serves the world through the word (Freire 1970) and leads to self-worth. Students in a critical pedagogical language classroom learn not only how to deal with studying and learning what is meaningful to their life, but also how to know and overcome their deficiencies and lacks which eventually brings on self-esteem. This paper works out to feature in how critical pedagogy consolidates students' language learning. For this reason, two sets of instruments including a language proficiency test (Cambridge 2005) among 90 participants and a teacher-made language proficiency test as pre-test and posttest among 40 were administered. The findings through t-test acutely demonstrated that the mean performances of language proficiency (0.016) in experimental group was higher than the control group and expresses significant difference ($P \leq 0.05$). This showed that the incorporation of the critical pedagogy into the language classroom can benefit EFL learners.

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Introduction

Once the schools had been targeted at education, teachers were signified as the supplier of knowledge warehouse. Educators, on the other hand, were totally responsible for providing their teachers with materials and supplementary according to their own would-be perfect perspectives (Lopez-Gopar, 2019). Alternatively, students were to be grateful for all these ready-made facilities and resources. This condition even worsened when no educator doubted his performance, to spend time on revision and to criticize it. Although Students comprises the first and most sensitive group in every society, they could find no room to be involved in the process of curriculum designing (McLaren, 2015). As a result, there would be collections of human, so-called literate and illiterate, live together without even a little nuance of mutual respect, understanding, nobleness, and esteem.

In our society, classrooms look like shops filled with apparently attractive containers to satisfy the fleeting feeling of students seeking for a tension free environment where they would be able to overlook outdoor disasters. The disease spreading fast in such a society is not race or color but bold inequality where one will not be worth other's while to respect their rigid right of human dignity (Pennycook (2014). In order to apply a giant change towards a strong foundation, classrooms can turn into a place for enacting the statement of collaboration for executing social justice. This way, critical pedagogy is an emergent need for the improvement of educational environment in which students are involved in decision making process in order to guarantee the success (Sussex & Kirkpatrick, 2012).

Critical pedagogy in education refers to a connection between classroom environment and the society and is after social transformation (Akbari, 2008). Its emphasis is on enhancing student's view to the facts outside the classroom. Participants in a critical pedagogical classroom not only know the world outside and learn how to

conflate class time with their real-life realities, but also they are able to know themselves and practice their abilities (Valdez, Navera & Garinto, 2019). In such a classroom, there is not even a white lie if it's not a wish. No participant is compelled to tell others "I didn't make a mistake", no students' deficiency is going to be hidden from them, and no life reality and social fact is going to be ignored. Students, free from authority governs their decision making, play the main role in bringing their life into the learning environment and it would be easier for the teacher to provides opportunities for them to understand proper ways of reflecting world through critical pedagogy(Kuo, 2013). Hence students in a critical pedagogical classroom can be assiduously after reciprocal interaction between themselves and their world and eventually explore their own lack of abilities in language learning and begin their utmost endeavor to overcome it. As a result of a true attempt, they enjoy more and develop their self-worth and self-esteem (McLaren, 2019).

Criticality and Creativity

Critical pedagogy was first introduced by Paulo Freire in a zealous attempt for constructing a better learning environment in order to improve the world. Freire in his first famous book, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (1970), opposed his time education through dividing it into two concepts of "depositories" and "depositors" where he believed students as the 'depositories' were only receivers of what 'depositors', teachers, provides for them. On the contrary, he proposed problem-posing education in which the students are free to "develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves" (Freire, 2003: 65).

Although the concept of critical pedagogy is old enough to bear a package of experience, it is during the recent years that some scholars (Canagarajah, 2002, Kincheloe, 2008;) make a true endeavor to actualize its concepts and principles. They concentrate on developing a collaborative milieu through applying critical pedagogy in education and classroom contexts for improving

understanding among students and showing a wide range of critical pedagogical practices in language classrooms. Likewise, different authors (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Norton and Toohey, 2004) adorn critical pedagogy with innovative ideas of post method pedagogy to merge theoretical and practical aspects within the framework of classroom implication. They try to provide some hints for students, teachers, and teacher educators to consolidate collaborative community which in one way or another pave the way for these ELT practitioners and exploit 'dynamic learning'.

This implication of critical pedagogy perceived to be a concept which aroused different pros and cons. Different scholars (Canagarajah, 1999; Pennycook, 1999) tried to widen its principles in favor of their own ideas of critical approaches to ELT, and share their standpoints to involve whole groups of educators concerning in one way or another with critical aspects of pedagogy. Also, a true endeavor towards illustrating critical pedagogy in different aspects of a language classroom is being followed by worldly well-known followers of Freire. Moylan (2021), as one of the most famous proponents of the application of critical pedagogy in classroom settings, offers a contract based on which students are engaged in their own assessment process and score their own final works. Norton and Toohey (2004) in a collection of topics including 'gender, ethnicity and language background' attempts to concentrate on the practical aspects of critical pedagogy in a wide range of contexts in order to shed light on critical pedagogical application regardless of restrictions exist in educational environment through different parts of the world.

Few scholars, nevertheless, detected some meaningful relationship between critical theory and practice and developing self-esteem among students (Moreno-Lopez, 2005). They, indirectly, pointed out that self-esteem is a necessary means for language learning as it helps students clarify the amount of knowledge they actually perceive and by which they are able to help others and make them feel cooperative rather than competitive. In order to provide students with achieving this elegant target,

teachers and educators, through critical pedagogy, can extend their students' view towards a better world.

Furthermore, critical pedagogy does not limit itself to the teaching concept. It, also, influenced testing assumption as well. Keesing-Styles (2003) in her article concerning "the relationship between critical pedagogy and assessment", attempts to elaborate "the overt links between the literature of critical pedagogy and orientation to assessment" and particularly self-assessment. She declared that both teacher and students' voice should be validated through the entire process of assessment. That is, whatever erects students' background knowledge should be taken into consideration for the purpose of optimal negotiation instead of oppression. Shohamy (2001) identifies testing through democratic perspective where she believes it should minimize the powerful effect of force. According to the aims of her book, test users and test takers should reconsider the fields that tests use and increase awareness of "cultural, social, political, educational, and ideological agendas that shape the lives of individual participants, teachers and learners" (p. 131). Miller (2008), in a study and in an accurate seek for applying "liberatory assessment", emphasizes the valuable process of active and continuous negotiation between teacher and students in order to establish a sense of judgment over their performance and set a "more equitable dynamic" in the learning environment. He considers national assessment as a device for bringing awareness for a successful school efficacy and states that:

While there are outcomes that teachers and instructors have no control over, teaching students about what exams mean as part of an agenda promoting meritocracy can help them think critically about what it is they want to learn (Valdez, Navera & Garinto, 2019).

From the critical cultural consciousness viewpoint, Kumaravadivelu (2003) endorses community culture as a radical resource for learners. In fact, as he states bringing home-issues to the classroom environment as a means of comparing native and

target culture arouses awareness towards differentiations between the two and provides learners with a new reflection on their own culture which eventually leads into a real self-diagnosis. Besides, Akbari (2008) emphasizes that students and teachers should pay thorough attention to the culture of their first language in order to prevent self-inferiority and enhance self-worth and respect. He states that in the widespread world of English, two interlocutors may not need to know the target culture for communication since both may come from nonnative communities of English. Therefore, each should manage to transform his or her cultural background and preserve the cultural identity.

Critical pedagogy in classroom generates a rhetorical collocation of critical involvement, creation, and consciousness for prevailing further hatred towards injustice differentiations and ill-learned prejudices. These concepts, raised by some studies (Glenn, 2002; Gruenewald, 2003; Morgan, 2004), are viewed to define an educational condition under which a collaborative milieu is meant to be formed in order to decrease the sense of powerlessness and helplessness. Creativity, the significant product of a critical pedagogical classroom, provides students with increasing awareness of their capabilities and persuades them to seek the power of change among themselves. This would lead into the "opportunities for self-reflection, self-improvement, and self-liberation" (Zompetti, 2006) to which whole participants plan for gaining frank acceptance of criticizing the surrounding area and being criticized for their own lacks and deficiencies while simultaneously taking their giant steps towards refreshment and improvement.

Among all advocates of critical pedagogy, there are some critiques of it which consolidate its principles. From (McLaren, 2019) perspective, the main criticism is hidden in the concept itself. She believes critical pedagogy is dominated by "two distinct strands" of concrete and abstracts each with its proponents. She claims Giroux and McLaren look for philosophical aspects of critical pedagogy,

while Freire and Shor offer its practical application base on their experiences in educational environment. Also, Widodo, Wood and Gupta (2017), in a personal reflection on the role critical pedagogy had played in his profession, points out political aspect of critical pedagogy is not enough for the teaching with all its complexity and primacy.

To sum up, these are the proponents and opponents of critical pedagogy that strengthen its principles. Each scholar with his or her perspective attempts to highlight either creativity or criticality of critical pedagogy. In other word, the concept of critical pedagogy requires more investment on the part of student-teacher negotiation in the process of learning, whether it's personal, socio-cultural, or knowledge dimension.

Pedagogy of Rapport

Through practical implication of critical pedagogy in the classroom environment, students are able to relate this milieu to the society outdoor, they can also find out realities about their abilities or lack of abilities and work toward improving them. These all lead to what actually is called self-esteem.

Dweck (2000) provides a different view of self-esteem through dividing its sense into "entity theory" and "incremental theory". Entity theory, in his opinion, purchases students' continuous success to feel smart so that deficiencies are hidden from them. On the other hand, incremental theory demonstrates difficulties to the participants in the process of learning and encourages experiencing feeling smart and good when trying to use their "resources" properly in order to resolve them. Hence he emphasizes telling the truth to the students in order to make them aware of their needs and equip them with strategies for the optimal learning as the result of continuous success. Additionally, this will make students share their knowledge with others to help them involve in the process of "challenge and effort". And as Moreno-Lopez (2005) mentions, this is the true means for providing a critical pedagogical classroom with a sense of rapport and collaboration that eventually leads to the achievement of self-esteem.

Critical pedagogy in language teaching provides an active environment for both students and teacher. Instead of only being consumers of knowledge, Moreno-Lopez (2005) states that “authority and responsibility are shared between teacher and students”. They are all participants in language environment to decide on the materials most related to the world. In critical pedagogical classroom, no one sits quiet and calm to dream on how smart she/he is on perceiving ready-made knowledge without experiencing difficulties of studying and understanding. Instead, everyone is in charge of finding out what are his lacks, or most importantly, world’s deficiencies. All class members are active to learn and help each other reject the negative forces which prevent progress in learning L2 (Akbari, 2008). In fact, learning language through luxurious part of life, what nowadays constitutes the main body of course books from their commercial point of view, like vacation, restaurants, and fashionable clothes leads students to ignore life destruction.

Through critical pedagogy, students will magnify and know more about the other negative aspects of life (for example, charity, joblessness, drugs, and so forth) and let these issues enter into the class, and they will discuss about them and try to find solutions. These leads students’ conscious awareness and worry towards the world they are going to live in. Accordingly, as they increase their knowledge about the subjects they find most related to their surrounding society, it begins to occupy their minds with processes for a better world and unconsciously involves in progression and develop self and other’s worth and value.

The implementation of critical pedagogy in Iranian situation and among intermediate English learners is a quite new concept. Some university professors (Akbari, 2008) have concentrated their area of interests on different aspects of critical pedagogy. Also, some EFL students attempt to base their master and doctoral thesis upon the various dimensions of language learning and its application through critical pedagogy. Apprehending the pertinent demand of applying critical pedagogy in the real classrooms in every place and with every

situation, the following statistical procedures were employed in order to investigate whether there is a relationship between critical pedagogy and the development of students’ self-esteem and language ability.

Method

Research Hypotheses

In order to find out whether critical pedagogy in language teaching classrooms brings in self-esteem among Iranian students, the hypotheses of the impact of implementing critical pedagogy in the learning milieu and in developing and enhancing students’ language learning were proposed.

The focus of critical pedagogy in language teaching is on relating classroom environment to the society which exists in each student’s real life. They are going to attend language classrooms to receive and present their own perceptions of producing knowledge. Through a critical pedagogical milieu, participants are up and about to improve the huge world outside and the small world inside. In other words, critical pedagogy shows the facts to the participants to achieve self-worth and value and as a result of it make a better world through a better self by means of education.

Subjects

For the purpose of implementing this study, a group of staff members in a Health Center of a small township near Torbat-e-Heidarieh, registered and took English classes previously in different institutes, participated on a proficiency test in an institute. Among 90 participants, 40 obtained the optimal score (between 24- 30, equal to Interchange Third Edition, level 2). This is the book which is taught in this and the other institutes in Torbat-e-Heidarieh. Health Center is usually the place where staffs of adult population and both sexes participate in classes. Because of this, the English course is aimed at the 20 – 35 age group and both male and female were considered in order to clear up sex roles in this study.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection in this study was followed through descriptive statistics in order to describe different

aspects of the data. A criterion-referenced test, objective placement test adopted from Interchange/Passages Placement and Evaluation Package by Tay Lesley et al. (2005) was administered among 90 staff of the Health Center based on which two homogeneous groups of control and experimental were selected.

40 students were randomly divided into two classes of 20 which by tossing a coin, one class was determined as control and the other as experimental group. Before treatment, both groups were given the pretest including a teacher-made proficiency test. There were conducted a teacher-made proficiency test following a standardized proficiency test, Interchange/Passages Objective Placement Test developed by Tay Lesley et al. (2005) which its reliability was calculated through Cronbach's alpha coefficient and estimated as 0.821. This test includes three sections of listening, reading, and language use. Also, both tests were administered over again at the end of fifteen-session course as posttest for comparing the results of mean performances of two groups before and after the treatment.

In this study, the researchers used memes to teaching criticality to the participants in the study. A meme is "a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission" (Davison, 2012, p. 122). Memes appeal to different users as they draw on different resources such as referents to pop culture, current events, and political issues and spread ideas online Memes appear to be suitable artifacts for critical inquiry, through which learners develop the skills of evaluating, interrogating, and interpreting the information presented in memes.

Scoring process for the term in both groups differed as in control group there held a midterm and a final exam according to the syllabus offered by the

institute. In experimental group, on the other hand, instead of final test, all members of the class agreed on a contract developed by Shor (1996) on the first session. The general agreement was making a portfolio in which students' assignment and their diary journals were gathered in a folder for final decision due the course act by the students themselves. The procedure of assembling assignment was introduced by teacher as facilitator and followed by students in form of reaction paper after each part including: recording students' favorite part of a radio program, bringing their favorite text to the class for reading, selecting their optimal extract from an English newspaper and its equivalent in Persian for debates, finding a proper subject for writing or presenting a lecture, and keeping an easily accessible guideline for continuous rEFlection on the amount of progress students achieved.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Having collected the required data based on the mentioned data collection procedures, the researchers conducted the analysis of data and tested the hypothesis formulated for the present study. After matching process for the purpose of homogeneity, students were divided into two classes of 20. A teacher-made proficiency test was administered to both groups of control and experimental once as pretest in order for comparing mean performances of the two prior to the treatment and also as posttest after the treatment. The reliability of teacher-made test of proficiency was estimated to be 0.89 in a pilot study. Data obtained from this research were generally analyzed with the aid of descriptive statistics. Concentration index and dispersion index estimated for language proficiency quantitative variables in pretest for both groups of control and experimental were shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics in Pretest

Pretest		N of items	Mean	SD
Control group	Language ability	20	25.3000	3.64331
Experimental group	Language ability	20	24.9500	2.58488

As the quantities clearly show, there is no significant difference between mean performances of language ability in the two groups in pretest.

Meanwhile, quantitative variables in posttest quite differ, table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics in Posttest

Posttest		N of items	Mean	SD
Control group	Language ability	20	28.3000	2.10513
Experimental group	Language ability	20	30.1500	2.49789

As the above table (table 2) indicates, a language ability test performance in posttests in experimental group is greater than the test performance in control group. Obviously, the results express a great impact of applying critical pedagogy in the learning environment in order to enhance students' language ability.

Likewise, statistical significance of the difference between mean performances of the two sets of scores, t-test, vividly showed that there is no significant difference between the mean performances of both groups in the test before treatment.

Table 3. T-test for Mean Performance of Language Ability in Pretest

		t	df	Sig. (2 tailed)
Pretest	Language ability	.350	38	.728

The results showed that P-Value in language ability tests in pretest is greater than $\alpha = 0.05$. Therefore, both groups are homogeneous in this regard. (Language ability) P-Value = 0.728 > $\alpha = 0.05 \rightarrow$ Accept H0

After the fifteen-session duration, the same set language ability test was administered over again as posttest, table 4.

Table 4. T-test for Mean Performance of Language Ability in Posttest

		t	df	Sig. (2 tailed)
Posttest	Language ability	-2.533	38	.016

Table 4 shows that the probability value of t-test (P-Value) in language ability test is not statistically significant and less enough than $\alpha = 0.05$; (Language ability) P-Value = 0.016 < $\alpha = 0.05 \rightarrow$ Reject H0

students' language ability and alongside promotes self-assessment among learners.

According to the findings of this study, the illustration of numerical values in posttest represents that average scores in experimental group is higher than control group and expresses significant difference. In other word, experimental group enjoys a high degree of language ability in comparison to control group. All these evidence comment that critical pedagogy influences

Although statistical analysis is considered as a valuable means of assessing a hypothesis, it is not enough for reliance. Students' reflection is in fact an actual means for calculation. When critical pedagogy provides students with a sense of comfort and make them regard language learning as ease as a piece of cake, statistical procedures just play the role of reinforcement for others who may not believe the effect of friendly language learning atmosphere.

Critical Pedagogical Implications

In order for making a better world, first we should start with a better learning environment. Students in a classroom with critical pedagogy as its orientation are involved in the process of learning. Language is a vehicle for critical thinking and this pedagogical approach highlights the importance of learner agency. They can decide on what is useful for and related to their abilities, needs, interests, and, most importantly, society. Through grading contract (Shor, 1996), right from the first session, students came to know that there was no scoring process and decided to apply some changes after a class debates over some of its items. Also, the established syllabus by the institute (Short et al. 1997) was brought to the class to let students change it according to their needs and interests. As an approach that recognizes the power of collaboration educators are encouraged to engage in meaningful dialogue with students, parents, administrators, and even government officials in thinking of ways to improve the learning conditions of schools. The first reactions witnessed were the faces full of both senses of doubt and concern over the decisions made for the whole semester. The former rooted in uncertainty on holding a course they were quite uninformed about and the latter was resulted from worrying about lack of ability to deal with a course they were in need of and registered for on the part of the teacher. This situation soon afterwards faded away when those who quitted participating after the first session, enthusiastically joined the class later and played an active role even in guiding others and sharing their findings.

For the second session, students were supposed to provide a portfolio to collect their assignment and diaries in it. Self-assessment process happened through a questionnaire adapted from Moylan (2021). Every often, they tried to consider the amount of changes they received and experienced and wrote a reflection journal about it. The final product represented their general abilities and endeavors towards the learning process. As one student once wrote: “I have learn[t] many structure[s] for speaking. Also, I learned grammar

and too many words and also how [to] apply all of them in sentences....”, ‘Saeed, last journal entry, 22nd Jan’. Another student who chose pseudonym “morning” wrote: “I have learnt if you want to learn English [,] you have to use it in your daily life. ”. ‘Morning, last journal entry, 25th Jan’.

What was found most interesting at the end of the treatment was the participants’ reflection on their lack of abilities. They could elaborate and talk about their deficiencies as well as their progression in learning some aspects of English language and the strategies they strived for expending study. Besides, all class members challenged to overcome their lacks and attempted to find proper solutions for problematic issues they chose to bring to the class for discussion in order for a better world which resulted in their self-esteem enhancement.

The most problematic aspect of applying critical pedagogy in an ELT classroom is the students’ lack of knowledge about it. They almost perceived nothing about what would be its results on their consciousness and value. Obviously, critical pedagogy might not be applicable through only one semester and during class-time. It requires more time and effort upon both groups of participants (i.e. teacher and students) to get to become familiar with and practice critical pedagogy in language learning milieu. It is not sufficient to devise one class or course subject in a school or institute to this concept. Critical pedagogy needs more hands to tie together and put into practice its implications.

In addition, this project was conducted among a group of staff in a Health Center who were too busy for the rest of the day to spend some useful hours on doing their assignment. They succeeded in bringing negative aspects of life into the classroom for discussion and take their own suggested solutions out of the class, but they were always nagging about a lot of writing they were supposed to do, although they all agreed on confessing it as a helpful means for progress.

Conclusion

In a traditional language classroom, students face with the preselected books that instructors offer and they pretend to learn vocabulary, grammar, speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Nobody asks if there is any relation between these subject matters and their life issues. At the end of each semester, there is a final test in which score is added up with some other figures decided by the teacher over the amount of abilities she/he believes students acquired during the English semester. Students and teacher believe the final score tells them all about students' general abilities and capacities for starting a new semester.

Critical pedagogical classroom is far from it. In this class, it is not only the teacher who decides on participants' score and ability. Students are also going to determine the amount of progress they acquired themselves. Self-assessment is an actual means for evaluating acquired knowledge through a critical pedagogical course.

Critical pedagogy is after a true relation between the world and the word Lopez-Gopar (2019). This way, teacher is eager to explore their students' "genuine innovations" in reasoning out their needs and in considering "the themes that are most meaningful and most relevant to their own lives and the contexts in which they work" (Heffernan, 2005). Therefore, through critical pedagogy, all members of a language classroom are to know the society and create a new environment in order to participate actively in their process of achievement and self-esteem. They would be able to wash hands over a sense of selfishness about their haves and they are to remember have-nots.

Anyway, this study has its own limitation. First of all, a critical pedagogical classroom needs its own syllabus. The syllabus should be the result of a long-term investigation in traditional language classes, in order to find their deficiencies and to improve them. Second critical pedagogy without critical teachers is a myth. Before making our students critically aware of their learning, we need to make our teachers critically aware of their teaching. Third, we need to investigate how critical pedagogy applies for boys and girls. Fourth, we

need appropriate tools to test the result of critical pedagogical classroom.

Application of critical pedagogy in ELT classrooms opens new windows towards a brighter future filled with hope and respect to each other's rights. Students will be able to use their abilities to themselves and others in the process of efficient learning and find out their own and other's needs and interests for the sake of utmost endeavor in order to enhance world's self-esteem. Instructors can employ memes in growing crucial inquiry via way of means of attractive college students in related mastering opportunities. Specifically, the usage of memes that capitalize at the passions and pastimes of college students coupled with the modern use of era can assist in reaching instructional outcomes. But extra importantly, it additionally sparks significant discussions on social troubles that subject the country and the globe. As practitioners, we accept as true with that the connection among crucial inquiry and the usage of memes replicate the ever-converting function of language because it travels via area and contexts.

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