

## Basic Principles of Critical Pedagogy

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**Abstract.** This article is intended to give some context to the discussion of critical pedagogy (CP) as one of the post method approaches to language teaching. It adopts the Frankfurt school principles as its main source in search for a more just society. It relates the school context to the social context in which it is embedded. It stresses empowering learners to think and act critically with the aim of transforming their life conditions. Although this approach has recently gained momentum, few studies have exclusively addressed it. Therefore, the present study aims at exploring major themes in CP including the liberatory and problem posing education, teacher and student roles, praxis as the reflection on the world, and dialogism and to make suggestions for application of this approach in ELT classrooms. To achieve this aim, available books and articles written on the subject were scrutinized. The results showed that the transformative CP, despite being a new and useful approach, is barely explored and attended to in Iranian educational system.

**Key words:** critical pedagogy, post method approach, critical theory, history of language teaching, political education, praxis.

### 1. Introduction

Critical Pedagogy (CP) is an approach to language teaching and learning which, according to Kincheloe (2005), is concerned with transforming relations of power which are oppressive and which lead to the oppression of people. It tries to humanize and empower learners. It is most associated with the Brazilian educator and activist Paulo Freire using the principals of critical theory of the Frankfurt school as its main source. The prominent members of this critical theory are Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas. Critical theory is concerned with the idea of a just society in which people have political, economic, and cultural control of their lives.

Thinkers of critical theory believe that these goals are satisfied only through emancipating oppressed people which empowers them and enables them to transform their life conditions. It is actually the starting point for critical pedagogy. The major concern of CP is with criticizing the schooling in capitalist societies. As Gor (2005) puts it, the major goals of CP are awareness raising and rejection of violation and discrimination against people.

CP of Freire like critical theory tries to transform oppressed people and to save them from being objects of education to subjects of their own autonomy and emancipation. In this view, students should act in a way that enables them to transform their societies which is best achieved through emancipatory education. Through problem posing education and questioning the problematic issues in learners' lives, students learn to think critically and develop a critical consciousness which help them to improve their life conditions and to take necessary actions to build a more just and equitable society. Thus, it can be said that CP challenges any form of domination, oppression and subordination with the goal of emancipating oppressed or marginalized people. As Kessing-Styles (2003) points out, CP is an educational response to inequalities and oppressive

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power relations which exist in educational institutions. Major authors associated with CP include Paulo Freire, Wolfgang Klafki, Michale Apple, Peter McLaren, Ira Shor, and Henry Giroux.

According to Hall (1995), language learning theory and teaching should focus on larger sociohistorical and political forces which reside in the social identities of people who use them. However, recent research on SLA, as Okazaki (2005) argued, has shown that classrooms are far removed from historical and social conditions. He also maintains that, as a consequence, researchers advocating examining sociohistorical and political aspects of language learning including, Benesch, 2001; Canagarajah, 1999, 2002; Morgan 1998; Norton, 1997; Norton and Toohey, 2004; Pennycook, 1999, 2001; Ramanathan, 2002, proposed an alternative approach- critical pedagogy- which they believed should be the heart of language teaching. It seems that CP in recent years has gained momentum. Evidence also comes from the large amount of practice done in this area, a large body of texts that explore it and the creation of a doctoral degree in CP (Brookfield, 2005). Despite receiving so much attention both in the past and recent years, it seems that few studies have exclusively aimed at examining major themes in CP. Thus, the present study aims to shed more light on major themes in CP including, education, teacher and student roles, praxis, and language and dialogue in CP.

## 2. CP and the Educational Process

The major goal of CP, as Vandruck (1994) claims, is to emancipate and educate all people regardless of their gender, class, race, etc. Gadotti (1994) also notes that pedagogy is of major interest for Freire by which he seeks to change the structure of an oppressive society. Critical pedagogy in Kanpol's (1998) terms rests on the belief that every citizen deserves an education which involves understanding the schooling structure by the teacher that would not permit education to ensue.

Freire (1970) distinguishes between banking education and problem posing education. In the traditional view of education, teachers are pillars of knowledge; they know everything and students know nothing. Teachers deposit knowledge in students and never ask them to question that knowledge. The teacher thinks, the students don't. The teacher chooses the content, students comply with it. Teacher is authority and students are obedient to authority. Students in this model are receivers of knowledge. They receive, memorize and repeat. They are not asked to relate this knowledge to the current problems and injustices in society with the aim of improving the society. Accordingly, they get a passive role in this view. Freire (1970) refers metaphorically to the traditional view of education as *banking model of education* because it is like depositing of money in a bank. This model mirrors the structure of an oppressive society in which the oppressed and the oppressors are divided. It advocates fixation of reality. So it is a vehicle for continuing the political oppression and working against liberation or emancipation (Joldersma, 1999).

This model is rejected because teachers should concern about society and to give human beings the opportunity to critically reflect and act on the position within society. Joldersma (1999) criticizes this model on the ground that here knowledge is too packaged, complete and objective and easily transferable into passive students and depicts the world as static and unchangeable. In this model, students believe that power, authority and activity are held by the teacher and students are viewed as objects rather than human. So in Joldersma's (1999) term, this model is dehumanizing because it creates oppressive passivity in students.

As an alternative to the *banking model*, Freire (1970) proposed a problem posing education which can lead to critical consciousness. According to Joldersma (1999), good teaching or problem posing pedagogy leads to the development of knowledge by the students themselves. Freire, in the 1960's, suggested that through a problem posing process literacy becomes immediately relevant and engaging by focusing on problematic issues in learners' lives. Problem posing education, according to Freire (1970), involves uncovering of reality, striving for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality. This consciousness allows students to take the necessary actions to improve their life conditions (Freire, 1970). It is based on the realities of learners and their life situations. It shows people that they have the right to ask questions. In this process of problem posing, the teacher listens to students, then, he selects and brings known situations to students in codified forms, finally he asks a series of inductive questions regarding the discussion of the situation (Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan, 1999). Moreover, Nixon-Ponder (1995) maintains that, the learner undergoes five steps of problem posing respectively ; describing the content of discussion, defining the problem, personalizing the problem, discussing the problem, and discussing the alternatives of

the problem. In different terms, Elias (1976) confirms that in problem posing model students are closely equal to their teachers regarding the problem under analysis and the developing knowledge. They exercise freedom and together with the teacher control the educational process. To Freire (1970), both students and the teacher are subjects in this process. The teacher uncovers reality and creates knowledge of the world. Students in this view develop power to critically reflect on the way they exist in the world and they "come to see the world not as a static reality, but as reality in process, in transformation" (Freire, 1970, p. 71). Education in CP is thus a liberatory process. It means that it raises students' consciousness, it prepares students to engage in a larger struggle and it also helps students develop a more accurate perception of their experiences, and it empowers students to challenge oppressive social condition and to work toward a more just society (Foley, 2007). The aim of education, according to Ares (2006), is not learning but learning that comes from critical examination of the social order which leads to action in service of social justice as the result of school learning. As Giroux (1998) suggests, education should make the students critically thinking citizens who can take their place in the conduct of democratic life. So it should occur in an environment connected to everyday life encouraging discussions conducted within the language and knowledge of the students (Foley, 2007).

### **3. CP and Politics**

The most important theme in CP is the belief that education systems are political (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1997; Shannon, 1992; Shor, 1992). As McLaren (1989) asserts, the major concern of CP is the centrality of politics and power in our understanding of how schools work. To Freire (1985), education should lead to transforming action and it is a political praxis which constantly serves to liberate human. Good teaching should aim at political transformation for the purpose of justice (Joldersma, 1999). Kessing-Styles (2003) also confirms that CP is concerned with social justice and develops practices capable of transforming oppressive institutions or social relations largely through educational practices. Freire (cited in Gur-Ze'ev, 1998) views education as political practice in the control of language and consciousness as a condition for the subjection of individuals and groups by the rulers. To him, education is an aspect of the relation between critique and domination. He refuses the ruling group's claim that schools distribute knowledge in an objective and neutral manner. To Giroux (1997), it is essential to make everyday experience problematic and critical by revealing its hidden political assumptions. He maintains that, this critical understanding by empowering students to develop the courage to participate in their self formation has a liberatory purpose. He also asserts that higher education should engage in political education by "teaching students to take risk, challenge those with power, honor critical traditions, and be reflective about how authority is used in the classroom" (p. 265). Needless to say that, the political view helps learners' growth in society. "Lacking a political project, the role of the university intellectual is reduced to a technician engaged in formalistic rituals unconcerned with disturbing and urgent problems that confront larger society" (Giroux, 1997, p. 265). Norton and Toohey (2004) also point out that in ESL context both language learning and language teaching are political processes. Similarly, Kessing-Styles (2003) asserts that social and political analysis of life should be at the center of curriculum. That is, all decisions regarding the sort of curriculum that should be followed, the kinds of books, language used and people hired are all political (Degener, 2001).

### **4. Curriculum and Authentic Materials**

Curriculum in CP is based on the idea that there is no one methodology that can work for all populations (Degener, 2001). As Bartolome (1996) also maintains, there is no set curriculum or a program because all decisions related to curricular and material to be studied are based on the needs and interests of students (Giroux, 1997; Shor, 1992). Degener (2001) also points out that the curricular is framed through the use of student experiences and realities of their lives. This curriculum is transformative, that is, it fosters students' acquisition of the necessary strategies and skills that help them become social critics who are to make decisions which affect their social, political, and economic realities (Giroux & McLaren, 1992). Kessing-Styles (2003) also confirms that CP covers understanding curriculum as political text at the center of which, she believes, lies the social and political critics of everyday life.

CP lesson plan should be based on authentic materials such as TV, commercials, video movie, etc. which are representative of the culture that are to be examined by the students and which serve as the basis for discussion and critical reflection of the culture (Ohara, Safe, & Crookes, 2000). Kincheloe (2005) points out that texts and their themes should be provided by both teachers and students who bring their experiences for study and place that knowledge with the context in which it was taken place. In their assignments students are able to pick up these themes that are most meaningful and most relevant to their own lives and the content in which they work (Kessing-Styles, 2003). According to Okazaki (2005), the content should be immediate and meaningful to students in order to make them aware of both the reproductive nature and the possibility of resistance to problematic content. The authentic materials help students link their knowledge to existing problems in society and take necessary actions for its improvement. This transformation practices help students develop skill in reflection and action that allows them to recognize and work against oppressive conditions in society (Ares, 2006). Ares further goes on to say that in enabling transformative practice special attention is paid to students' cultural heritage, practices, knowledge, and languages. It is also stressed that the aim of transformative practice is social transformation.

## 5. CP and the Role of Teacher and Student

Teachers in this approach are viewed as problem posers. As a pioneer to this approach Dewey (1963) believes that, learning through problem solving and practical application leads students to take a more active role in determining their experiences and positions within society. Kincheloe and McLaren (1994) maintain that teacher must empower his or her students by raising their awareness of reproducing process of an inequitable status quo in schooling and offer societal institutions. So teachers, in Giroux's terms, are *Transformative Intellectuals* who have the knowledge and skill to critique and transform existing inequalities in society (Sadeghi, 2008). The role of this transformative intellectual, she maintains, is to learn from students, appreciate their viewpoints and to take part in the dialogical process. According to Giroux (1997), by creating appropriate conditions, teachers enable students to become cultural producers who can rewrite their experiences and perceptions. They also help students learn from each other and to theorize and understand how to question the authoritarian power of the classroom. According to Paulo Freire (1998), classroom experiences, with the help of the teachers, should become situations in which students are encouraged to act as active agents in their own education and to develop a critical consciousness that helps them evaluate the validity, fairness, and authority within their educational and living situations. He goes on to say that "teaching that does not emerge from the experience of learning cannot be learned by anyone" (p. 30). Teachers, according to Degener (2001), have a central role in CP because they spend the most time with students and have the greatest impact on students and program and how learning occurs in the classroom. He suggests that a critical teacher should be able to elicit student opinions about program structure and curriculum, to set up a classroom that is involved in dialogic interaction, and to find a way when class discussions are obstructed. Teachers have also a critically reflective role, that is to say, for producing an open and equal environment, they must engage in deep self-reflection about their position and the affects of their authority in the classroom. According to Crabtree and Sapp (2004), self-reflection is "the form of questioning one's motives, purpose, ideology, and pedagogy as informed by theory and habit" (P. 110). Self-reflection enables teachers to make their classes *student-centered* by accepting unsuccessful educational ideas and oppressive forms in their own educational practices (Higgins, 1996). Degener (2001) states that a critical educator helps students to understand the reasons behind the facts.

As Horton and Freire (1990) believe, a teacher in CP has to be an authority on her/his subject matter but at the same time should be open to relating what he knows through interaction with students. Teachers in CP communicate with students about the society and culture to help them reflect critically on various aspects of the culture they are studying about and preparing to enter into. This way, students through reflection can determine the necessary types of action that they should take in order to improve the life conditions of the oppressed groups (Ohara et al., 2000). Students and teachers should engage in questioning knowledge but it is the teacher who helps the students to identify how to move forward critically in their practice (Kessing-Styles, 2003). Teachers should challenge the current structure by rejecting long standing cultural expectations and mores of their own and the system, additionally, they must give up much of the power

which is given to them through their titles (Foley, 2007). Critical educators are concerned about emancipatory knowledge that helps students understand how relations of power and privilege distort and manipulate social relationships and help oppressed students by identifying with them.

Students, as Giroux (1997) puts it, are active participants in that together with the teacher they correct the curricula and that they share their ideas and learn to challenge assumptions. According to Degener (2001), students contribute to curricular decisions and determine areas of study and the associated reading materials. Critical learners, as Moore and Parker (1986) maintain, are those who can accept, reject or suspend judgment about a claim. They can also offer good reasons for their ideas and can correct their own and others' procedures (Lipman, 1988). They should engage in social criticism in order to create a public sphere in which citizens can exercise power over their own lives and learning (Giroux, 1992). Degener (2001) believes that by enabling students to reflect on their commonsense knowledge, they learn how to transform their lives. This is a shift, in Freire's term, from naive consciousness to critical consciousness. To help students engage in critical consciousness, educators should empower students to reflect on their own worlds, and to self-assess in fact. Guthrie (2003) views both teachers and students as co-agents, that is, teacher's authority directs the class but this authority differs from that in the traditional pedagogy. This is in line with what Freire (1970) proposed in that there is a fluid relationship between teachers and students, that is, teachers are learners and learners are teachers. Therefore, learners are not recipients of knowledge rather they become creators. Freire also confirms that "no one teaches another, nor is anyone self taught, men teach each other, mediated by the teacher" (p. 67). Guthrie goes on to say that teachers are in a hierarchical position above the students with regard to the existing knowledge and institutional authority. However, Dheram (2007) suggests that both students and teachers should act like awareness raising critiques who aim at identifying positive and negative aspects of education. He believes that by turning verbal and nonverbal means of education into effective instruments of self-affirmation, students and teachers will understand their roles as subjects of research and agents of change.

## **6. CP and Marginalization**

Marginalization is avoided in CP. The aim of CP, according to Freire (1970), is to return to marginalized groups their lost voices and identities. When students gain their lost voices and resist unjust reproduction, they become active agents for social change. Freire also points out that marginalized students should be able to reflect on their concrete situations to find out why things are the way they are. They should be aware of the factors that contributed to their position in society. In a similar position Degener (2001) asserts that teachers should help marginalized students to recognize the need to change their conditions that prevent them from socioeconomic success.

## **7. CP and Levels of Consciousness**

Boyce (1996) reports that critical consciousness is central for Freire because the focus of CP is on the development of critical consciousness. Freire (1973) distinguished three stages or levels of consciousness namely, intransitive, semi transitive, and critical consciousness. In the lowest level or intransitive, the individuals accept their lives as they are and the change that might happen in their lives seem to be the result of magic or miracles. They do not make any attempt to change their life conditions and injustices done to them. The next level or stage of consciousness is semi transitive consciousness which is above the previous level. People with this kind of consciousness are aware of their problems and can learn to change one thing at a moment. They cannot make any connection with outside world and they consider their problems as something normal or accidental. Actions that are taken with this kind of consciousness are often shortsighted. The third level is critical consciousness or critical transitivity which is the highest level of consciousness. People with this kind of consciousness view their problems as structural problems. They can make connections between their problems and the social context in which these problems are embedded. People with this consciousness can interpret the problems and analyze reality. To gain this sort of consciousness, as Heaney (1995) argued, learners must reject passivity and practice dialogue. He also believed that critical consciousness is the result of collective struggle and praxis not individual or intellectual effort.

## 8. CP and Praxis

The purpose of the educator and the educated, the leader and the followers in a dialogue between equal partners is called praxis (Gur-Ze'ev, 1998). It is defined as “the self-creative activity through which we make the world. 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 and political grounding”( Buker, 1990, cited in Lather, 1991, pp.11-12). In education praxis aims at bridging the gap between theory and transformational action. That is, praxis connects education which is liberatory with social transformation (Boyce, 1996). Praxis for Freire is both reflection and action, both interpretation and change. As he puts it, “Critical consciousness is brought about not through intellectual effort alone but through *praxis* through the authentic union of action and reflection” (Freire, 1970, cited in Burbules & Berk, 1999). Boyce (1996) also asserts that learners equipped with praxis are well prepared to participate in collective actions. Praxis is critical reflection and action the purpose of which is to implement a range of educational practices and processes with the goal of creating not only a better learning environment but also a better world (Kessing-Styles, 2003). Admitting the importance and the effects of praxis Sadeghi (2008) maintains that only through dialogical process, the practice of praxis is likely to happen.

## 9. CP and Dialogism

CP involves *reading the world* as well as *reading the word* (Freire & Macedo, 1987). As Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1995) maintain, in observing one’s human right and dignity, the first step is to respect their linguistic human rights. Giroux (1997) maintains that with the help of a critical, oppositional, and theoretical language, teachers can move toward a discourse by which they seek educational criticism. Degener (2001) confirms that even when the same language is spoken in the class, teachers should be sensitive not to favor one kind of interaction over another. Because it is the educator who decides whose voices will be heard and whose will be submerged in the classroom (Giroux, 1997; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). To Degener (2001), language is important in two ways; first, language needs and curriculum should be grounded in students’ language in order to actively involve students in learning and second, to be able to read the world and transform it, students need a form of discourse. Language is a practice that constructs and is constructed by how language learners understand their social surroundings, histories, and their possibilities for the future (Norton & Toohey, 2004). An individual’s L1 is part of his or her identity, so if the aim is to empower and respect people’s voices, there should be respect for who they are and what values they represent. That is why for marginalized groups language is an important refuge (Baynham, 2006). It is the power of language that enables students to enlarge their scope of understanding (Dheram, 2007). Akbari (2008) points out that, the first step towards empowerment and positive transformation is for the teacher to establish a context in which more of the learners’ first language is included in L2 settings as a teaching aid. But there is a need for some sort of dialogue through which meaning, reality and experience is negotiated if the aim is a liberatory one.

To Freire (1998), dialogism is the base of critical education in that it is one means of actively involving students in their own education. The use and practice of dialogue limits teacher talk and encourages learner voice (Shor, 1992). As Freire (1970) puts it, dialogue “is the encounter between men, mediated by the world in order to name the world” (P. 69). He also adds that “only the dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education” (P. 73). The use of dialogue, as Freire claims, implies the use of a language similar to the one the individual is familiar with. That is why establishing dialogue with a community is important. Freire’s (1985) classification considers context of dialogue and context of fact, which he believes are necessary for learning to take place. He also believes that by dialogue education becomes pedagogy of knowing because authentic dialogue engages teachers and students in a relationship where one knowing subject is encountered with another knowing subject (Freire, 1985). In a dialogic classroom, teachers are supposed to listen to their students and learn about their problems that are important within their communities and ask questions that raise students’ understanding of these problems from a societal perspective and then finding ways to take political actions to solve them (Degener, 2001). In Shor’s (1992) opinion, dialogue must balance teacher authority with student input. There should be an environment

of equality for dialogue to be liberating. Higgins (1996) stresses Freire's position in that in a situation where teachers and leaders place themselves above others dialogue cannot take place. In a true dialogical relation there is equal opportunity for all members to speak, everyone respects another's right to speak and all ideas are tolerated (Robertson, 1994). Robertson goes on to say that via dialogue the teacher empowers students and gives them voice, which ends students' oppression, and enables them to decode the hidden codes and power relations and to reconstruct reality. In other words, in dialogue supported by CP there is equal, open, and critical inter-subjectivity between students and their world and between teachers and students. There is also a mutual acceptance and trust between the teacher and students (Heaney, 1995). It is through this dialogue, namely, reflecting on what one knows and what one does not know that one can take critical actions to transform and change reality (Kessing-Styles, 2003). This emphasis on dialogical relations as the center of any educational experience is also recognized in the fact that it is via communication that the meaning of human life is transferred (Kessing-Styles, 2003).

## 10. CP and Educational System in Iran

Unlike traditional approaches, education in CP tries to have transformational effects on learners. This approach aims at changing the point of view of people through which they are used to look at different social problems. It seems that in the Iranian educational system no place is given to such an approach. This approach can enable EFL learners to develop their speaking skills by focusing on their real life problems and at the same time to understand and diagnose their own problems. This way, they can be motivated to speak more and more since they are living with their problems and talking about authentic issues gives students insights to the nature, origin, and possible solutions to their problems. The application of this approach can make teaching sessions more enjoyable by focusing on what the students really need to talk about, letting them discuss their issues of interest, helping students to move forward critically and consequently enabling students to change the structure of their society. This process, no doubt, can lead to improving their life conditions. It is, thus, strongly recommended that this approach be used in EFL classes for the two reasons. First, it motivates students to speak their ideas, that is to say, to develop speaking skills and second, application of its use leads to transformational activities.

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