

Exploring Critical Pedagogy in an Indonesian Higher Education: Possibilities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The prior and recent literature on the second and foreign language education has touched upon a number of discussion regarding Critical Pedagogy (CP). CP is generally defined as an approach to teaching that focuses on socio-political context of pedagogical practices that aim not only to transform the wider society. This case study aimed to investigate the perspective of teachers towards CP in an Indonesian higher education in order to see the possibilities and the challenges of applying CP in this particular context. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data to five teachers, and the data was analysed using a thematic analysis. The result of this study revealed that while some of the teachers were in favour of implementing CP, the others seemed to be rather pessimistic due to some constraints they had in the classroom. Some strategies, e.g. problem posing techniques were found to be essential to engage the students in critical dialogue with the teachers. It is hoped that this research can shed new light on to what extent CP can be implemented in certain educational contexts and on possible challenges that teachers may face in the process.

Keywords: *Critical Pedagogy, English language teaching, transformative approach*

1. INTRODUCTION

Underpinned by the work of Paulo Freire (1970) in his book entitled *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, CP, rooted in the critical theory of Frankfurt School, began to flourish in Latin America where he empowered the “powerless”, in an attempt of challenging the oppression of the capitalists, through raising their critical awareness of their being oppressed. In prior and recent literature, CP encompasses both political and pedagogical realms. With regard to its political sphere, CP mainly concerns about seeking social transformation and social justice through liberation and critical reflection against the oppressive political systems (Giroux, 1997; McLaren, 2002). Pedagogically, CP offers a

way of understanding and criticising both historical and socio-political contexts of education in order to develop pedagogical practices that aim not only to liberate education, but also to transform the wider society (Pennycook, 1999). In this sense, CP uses education as a means to empower individuals and collectives as agent for social change (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2007). As Shor (1996) argues, the implementation of CP demands learners to critically question power relations and gain transformative experience by problematising the status quo. Thus, regarding the scope of CP in education, CP pushes both language educators and learners to unpack oppressive realities, inequality, and power relations that exist within classroom contexts and society at large.

In general, the concept of CP has raised our concerns to rethink our classrooms. Sometimes classrooms are viewed as a separate entity to outside world. Nevertheless, in fact, they are inseparable and influenced by the representation of the society where conflicts and violence take place (Bohórquez, 2012). As a consequence, classrooms should be “places of hope, where students gain glimpses of the kind of society we could live in and where students learn the academic and critical skills needed to make it a reality” (Christensen et al., 2000, p. 4). This can be a challenging in the sense that traditional paradigms in English Language Teaching (ELT) have emphasised the importance of applying the methods that best support language teaching, instead of focusing on students’ learning process and sociocultural classroom practices that deal with students’ lives and experiences. With this in mind, teachers play an important part in addressing socio-political issues in classrooms. Thus, they should be made aware of the issues of power, oppression, and inequality that have dominated the classroom in particular and the educational system in general.

The prior and recent literature on the second and foreign language education has discussed a number of discussion regarding Critical Pedagogy (henceforth, CP) (e.g. Crawford-Lange, 1981; Pennycook, 1994; Crookes & Lehner, 1998; Hayati, 2010; Mambu, 2009; Larson, 2014; Junaidi, 2020). CP is generally defined as an approach to teaching and curriculum that "seeks to understand and the historical and sociopolitical context of schooling and pedagogical practices that aim not only to change the schooling, but also the wider society" (Pennycook 1990, p.24). McLaren (2002) also defines CP as a method for reflecting and changing pedagogical practice and social relations of a wider community. In this sense, CP helps students have transformative experience by questioning

the status quo, the commonly accepted and taken for granted knowledge (Shin, & Crookes, 2005). Following Canagarajah (2005, p. 932), CP “is not a set of ideas, but a way of doing learning and teaching. It is a practice motivated by a distinct attitude toward classrooms and society” (ibid). Thus, both teachers and students should place learning in relevant social contexts, understand the effects of power in education, and transform learning, in order to achieve more egalitarian and equitable educational environments.

When applied to classroom contexts, one of Freirean CP’s theories, called a humanising pedagogy, have greatly influenced educational purposes. As opposed to a banking approach to education in which teachers are regarded as “the depositor of knowledge” that determines what students receive in classrooms (Freire, 1997, p. 53), he proposes a transformative approach which leads to liberating education. In this sense, the role of teachers does not include imposing what they regard as ‘truth’ to students’ minds. Rather, they should let their students to articulate their own thoughts (Mambu, 2010) and unpack real-world issues so that they can improve and develop themselves professionally (Crookes & Lahner, 1998).

Compared to banking education, humanising pedagogy demands different roles of teachers and students. While the former is in favour of a teacher-centred approach in which teachers always teach students, the latter requires teachers not only to teach but also to learn from students. As a consequence, teachers are no longer seen as a dominant individual who spoon-feed students with what is considered as ‘acceptable’ and ‘normal’ knowledge. (Freire, 1990) Rather, students are made aware that the realities around them are not static, but subject to transformation.

Another Freirean concept is problem-posing framework which includes three stages, "listening, dialogue, and action" (Wallerstein, 1987, p. 35). According to Freire (1997, p. 64), “problem posing education regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality”. With regard to education, it has extended the notion of dialogical action by placing students in a position of “critical co-investigators” who engage in dialogue with the teacher” (Freire, 1970, p. 68). The problem posing approach requires teachers to encourage students to (1) express their personal and collective conflicts that need to be addressed; (2) relate their issues to the larger socio-economic and political contexts; (3) create possible ways of overcoming the issues. These steps are in line with

Freire's idea of consciousness stating that students' personal experiences can be a useful resource that can generate content to be dealt with as part of the class. Therefore, they can be engaged in their own learning through active participation and reflective thinking.

Critical dialogue in problem posing has been identified as an essential feature of CP that is beneficial for students. Underpinned by the notion of dialogical action, CP entails the teaching and learning of words and actions (Freire, 1990). Thus, a sound CP practice should focus on discussing issues which require action to transform them (ibid). Shor (1996) also argues that such activities can help students problematise the status quo, leading them to gaining transformative experience. Through critical dialogue, students can control their own learning (Shin & Crookes, 2005) and "focus their attention on the reality which mediates them and which- posed as a problem- challenges them" (Freire, 1970, p. 149). Being aware of the link between students' personal issues and the socio-political and cultural context, they are able to learn to make necessary decisions and eventually take real actions outside the classrooms.

Even though the application of CP is considered essential in education in general, and in English language teaching in particular, there have been some issues that need to be addressed. Generally, the conservative forces that control education have attempted to exclude critical ideas out of classrooms (Akbari, 2008). Moreover, ELT has strived to emphasise neutrality and avoid provocative issues (Wallace, 2003) since language teaching is merely seen as a cognitive activity with few social-political implications (Akbari, 2008). Most ELT coursebook publishers follow a set of guidelines, called PARSNIP, which stands for Politics, Alcohol, Religion, Sex, Narcotics, Isms, and Pornography (Gray, 2001). As a result, controversial issues are left out, and only socially refined topics are discussed such as family, sports, or hobbies. This phenomenon may demonstrate that the complexity of the social conditions that exist among teachers and students is not given serious consideration. Thus, it is argued that the transformation will be impossible unless problems are identified and opportunities are given for all citizens to make their voice heard.

While most of the discussion on CP has been about its rationale, little research has been done regarding CP in Indonesian contexts. Mambu (2009) investigated 14 EFL pre-service teachers using four pictures which became the media for these teachers to understand realities. The results showed that these teachers demonstrated nuanced interpretations of the pictures. Some pre-service teachers still focused on literal

descriptions of things and people in the pictures. Although some other student teachers used their critical thinking and views to criticise the society, they did not propose realistic agendas for social actions.

Yulianto (2015) examining 59 EFL students in the reading classes using multiple data collection methods found that the program has facilitated the students to think critically by providing a range of activities that reflected criticality.

Junaidi (2020) conducted a case study and investigated 45 students of a particular youth leadership program of a community learning centre in Lombok, Indonesia. The specific aspects under investigation as part of this study were teacher-student power distributions, the benefits of project-based language learning, as well as the benefits students' direct involvement with the community learning project. The research revealed that the choice of topics and scopes were critical and authentic, with considerable challenges in the process. It is also argued that CEP enactment should be advocated in university classes while addressing the challenges through a problem-posing approach.

To the best of my knowledge, the research on the application of CP in Indonesian contexts is still lacking although the importance of incorporating CP principles into ELT practices has been called for by some scholars (e.g. Hayati, 2010; Larson, 2014; Mambu, 2011). To some extent, the educational system in Indonesia still reflects a banking approach to education, in which teachers are still considered the only source of knowledge for students (Freire, 1990).

This research aims to investigate the perspective of teachers towards critical pedagogy in an Indonesian higher education. It also explores the possibilities and possible challenges that teachers may face in the attempt of applying CP in this context. This study examines teachers who teach students from relatively high socio-economic backgrounds to understand how CP can be realised in their classrooms.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research used the phenomenological methodology as it concerned with “understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved” (Welman & Kluger, 1999, p. 189). It requires an in-depth investigation on phenomena based on the lived experiences of the people involved with the issue being

researched. In this research, the phenomenon under scrutiny was the opportunities and possible issues of applying CP in a university.

Convenience sampling was used in this research as it involves drawing samples that are willing to take part in the study (Dornyei, 2007). The participants of this study were limited to the English department lecturers. There were 5 English teachers who participated in this research. The reason for this choice was based on the subjects being taught, i.e. reading and writing courses. It was assumed that these courses might involve some discussions regarding the issues that could be investigated through the lens of CP. The limited sampling and scope of the study may affect the implication of this research perhaps making it not applicable in many learning contexts.

Semi-structured interviews to 5 English teachers were used in order to collect the participants' experiences, opinions, and feelings about CP. This research instrument was expected to generate the narration of their experiences and unanticipated responses (Gray, 2014; Punch, 2009). Each participant was interviewed for 30 minutes, and the data was transcribed verbatim.

The framework for thematic analysis proposed by Robson (2013) was used in this study. The data was transcribed and re-read in order to understand common patterns. They were classified into initial codes by giving similar codes to similar extracts. Based on the codes, themes were identified by organising codes into potential themes. Afterwards, main themes were created along with sub-themes. The data was then interpreted by noticing patterns, ideas, and associations.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

3.1. Power Relations among Students and Teachers

Critical Pedagogy (CP) regards “the life situation of the learners” (Crawford-Lange, 1981, p. 259) as an essential aspect to be included in the classroom. This principle is reflected in some of the participants' views regarding the role of teachers in a higher education. Teacher A and C, for example, mentioned that they were the facilitators of students' learning:

“I believe that I should be able to accommodate what my students want to learn in the classroom. Sometimes it is difficult as we need to follow the prescribed syllabus... We must be creative.” (Teacher A)

“I see myself as a facilitator. I think that my students have their own goals in learning English... My job is to help them achieve what they want to achieve.” (Teacher C)

Additionally, these teachers emphasised the importance of student contributions in the classroom. In the interviews, they discussed how they incorporated the students’ experiences into classroom activities. For instance, Teacher C who taught teaching methods said that she purposely engaged the students in critical dialogues which enabled them to reflect on any issues concerning English language teaching in their own contexts. She also stated that during the teaching process, some interesting discussions might arise:

“We talked about the tendency of favouring native English teachers, especially among Indonesian students. When I asked my students’ opinions about this issue, some of them shared how they used to underestimate their ‘local’ English teachers’ capabilities of teaching English. But now, as they want to become a teacher, they realise that this phenomenon should be challenged.” (Teacher C)

These findings may indicate that Teacher B and Teacher C demonstrated more openness to students’ life experiences, making it as a starting point for learning about conceptual knowledge. Teacher C, for example, used a problem posing model of critical pedagogy which allowed her students to identify problematic phenomena in their surroundings (Shin & Crookes, 2005). Pennycook (1999) also asserts that prospective teachers should be made aware of the issues of power and inequality not by showing how they are oppressed with minimum reflection, but by incorporating problem posing and reflective thinking. In relation to Indonesian contexts, Hayati (2012) highlights the importance of increasing students’ awareness of native-speaker fallacy in order to let students take parts in “the deconstruction of socially imposed identities” (Byram & Feng, 2005, p. 420).

While Teachers A and C seemed to encourage students’ participation and accommodate students’ life experiences in the classroom, Teachers B, D, and E emphasised the importance of teachers’ dominance in the classroom:

“I think teachers should lead students because they know better than the students.”
(Teacher D)

“Personally, I think that teachers should be smarter than their students. If not, how can they teach their students?” (Teacher E)

Although Teacher B also agreed that teachers should be the source of knowledge for students, she admitted that students' experiences were important to be integrated in the classroom. However, she mentioned that it was difficult to do so:

"In my classes, there are so many materials to discuss. I don't think I have enough time to let my students tell their stories... I'm also not sure whether they really want to reveal their personal information to others." (Teacher B)

The interview results demonstrated that while some of the teachers attempted to allow their students to direct their own learning, there were still teachers who viewed teaching as merely the transmission of knowledge from teachers to students. This banking approach to education may affect teachers to impose their ideas to students with minimum process of dialogues and negotiation of meanings (Hayati, 2012; Mambu, 2010). As a result, teachers may fail to understand students' views and include them into the learning process. Katz (2014) argues that limiting students' contributions into the classroom may strengthen teachers' voices as the sole authority since teachers are not forced to face opposing arguments. Thus, they tend to favour the knowledge that they are comfortable with.

3.2. Incorporating Social Justice Issues

CP emphasises the importance of integrating social issues into the classroom as it is believed that students need some exposure to why the status quo is problematic in order to make them aware of the necessary changes that they need to do (Akbari, 2008). The result of this study revealed that some of the teachers stated that discussion about social issues had been part of the lesson. In some cases, these teachers purposely asked their students to have some group discussions related to the current issues happening in the world. However, there were times when the students initiated the discussion focusing on social issues that they are interested in. Some of the teachers seemed to be pessimistic about incorporating social issues in their classes. For example, Teacher B stated:

"I think that the curriculum does not facilitate us to talk about such things, especially issues that are quite controversial... something related to religions, racism, sexism... Many still consider these issues as something taboo to be discussed. We never know whether such discussions will hurt someone's feelings if they have different perceptions from us." (Teacher B)

Teacher D and Teacher E also shared a similar perspective that discussing social issues might create tension in the classroom since many of these issues include sensitive topics that are considered inappropriate for discussion in certain cultures.

Despite the reluctance to involving social issues in the classroom, some of the teachers seemed more comfortable discussing such topics. Teacher A said:

“I like to bring up such issues in my classroom, especially if the topic discussed is relevant to the students’ lives. I want to give a chance for my students to be aware of what is happening around them and to think about social conflicts that need to be addressed. After all, they are part of a larger society... They can contribute something to the society.”
(Teacher A)

This finding is in line with CP’s spirit which encourages students to express their personal views and finally actively participate in overcoming social issues around them (Freire, 1997). Thus, they can critically problematise the status quo, resulting in a transformative experience through their real actions (Shin & Crookes, 2005; Shor, 1996).

4. CONCLUSION

This study revealed two main themes which reflect the teachers’ perceptions of critical pedagogy: power relations among teachers and students, and incorporating social justice issues in the classroom. Although the application of critical pedagogy may be challenging, teachers need to be made aware of its importance, especially in raising students’ awareness of what is happening around them and what they can do to overcome the problems. Teachers need to have more opportunities to reflect on their practice and discuss their successes and failures with other teachers. These discussions can possibly be meaningful by drawing on critical pedagogy.

Future research may evaluate education stakeholders’ perceptions of implementing critical pedagogy in their institutions and evaluate teachers’ perspectives after they engage in discussion groups by including a teacher who is familiar with critical pedagogy. It is hoped that this research can broaden and enrich the existing literature, particularly in the field of critical pedagogy.

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