A Pedagogy of Possibility for EFL: Rewriting Paulo Freire's Humanization Process in an Islamic Context

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Introduction

Abstract

In the last decade, new trends have been developed in the study of foreign/second language learning, especially English. In this respect research has shown that language should give learners the power to talk, to express their thoughts and to understand a variety of different perspectives.

The present research was an attempt to implement Freire's philosophy of teaching, that is critical pedagogy, in EFL university classrooms with respect to students' Iranian-Islamic socio-cultural backgrounds. In other words, this study explored how learning English socially and linguistically empowered foreign language learners.

An examination of this teaching methodology using interpretive qualitative methods uncovered the elements participants considered essential for efficient learning and teaching.

Results of the study reveal that teachers as "transformative intellectuals" empowered student voice and developed critical dialogue. Furthermore, through the authentic use of language, the act of reading, writing, listening, and speaking helped students to construct meaning freely.

In the last decade, new trends have been developed in the study of foreign/second language learning especially English (EFL). Through research scholars have shown the importance of implementing a sophisticated theory of education that may be applied in classrooms and lead into more efficient language learning. In their belief learning a language is not parroting but rather it should give one the capacity to see the world through and also to open up one's individual world to others. It should give learners the power to talk, to express their thoughts and understand others' points of view. As Pierce (1989) suggests, "The teaching of English can be reconceptualized as a pedagogy that opens up possibilities for students and teachers of English, not only in terms of material advancement, but in terms of the way they perceive themselves, their role in society, and the potential for change in society"(pp. 402-403). In the last 30 years in Iran, prescribed school textbooks and university EFL materials together with the experience of the researcher as a teacher of university general English courses reveal the long lasting behavioristic approach in teacher centered Iranian EFL classes and the dominance of an authoritarian discourse in EFL teaching methodologies. In search of a solution for the problems in EFL classrooms, the researcher made an attempt to implement Freire's philosophy of teaching in EFL classrooms because of the students' social and cultural particularities that closely match what Freire intends to argue.

RELATED LITRETURE

Discourse and Language

Pennycook (1994) talks about language and discourse from a different point of view. Contrary to common view in applied linguistics that considers language as a bigger entity than discourse, Pennycook believes that language as a system operates under discourse. According to Fairclough, discourse is 'language as social practice' (cited in Pennycook 1994) and that it relates to other social practices and is determined by the larger social and ideological conditions of society. Kumaravadivelu (1999) criticizes current classroom discourse analysis and offers a framework for critical classroom discourse analysis drawing on Foucauldian post structuralism and Saidian postcolonialism. Pierce (1989) argues that teaching English internationally is a discourse and we as teachers should open up possibilities for our students to perceive their role in society for the change and growth.

Critical Pedagogy and Banking Education

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian philosopher, originally wrote about promoting adult literacy within Latin American peasant communities, but whose work has become the interest of many scholars in education throughout the world. Freire refers to the traditional way of teaching as 'banking' education that teachers drill into the mind of students the prespecified materials. In this kind of education the assumption is that information should be filled into the empty heads of students who, as a result, become

nothing but passive learners. Liberating education, on the other hand, empowers both teachers and students and enables them to be active participants in their social, cultural and political life in their every day experience.

Transformative Intellectuals

According to Giroux and McLaren (1986) the idea that teacher education programs should attempt to consider education of teachers as critical intellectuals has been the debate over the last fifty years. They refer to intellectuals whose discourse is based on moral and ethical grounds and also fight against power relations. They write that, "Teachers who assume the role of transformative intellectuals treat students as critical agents, question how knowledge is produced and distributed, utilize dialogue, and make knowledge meaningful, critical, and ultimately emancipatory" (p. 215).

Method

The concept of method has been questioned by many scholars (A. Pennycook 1989, N.S. Prabha 1990, Jack C. Richards 1984, B. Kumaravadivelu 1994). Pennycook (1989) argues that language teaching is in some sense political because " many decisions about what gets taught, to whom, how, when, and where, are made at high levels of the political hierarchy" (p. 590). Another aspect that is mentioned by Pennycook (1989) regarding the "interest" in Method is in the context of gradual de-skilling of the teacher's role. The same idea is mentioned by

Kumaravadivelu (1994) that the concept of Method undermines the role of teachers and ignores their skills.

METHADOLOGY

The Freirean pedagogy model quoted in Shor (1993, pp. 33-34), provided directions in determining classroom practices and interactions and curricula development in terms of the following values:

Participatory; Situated; Critical; Democratic; Dialogic; Desocializiation; Multicultural; Research-Oriented; Activist and Affective.

The following questions guided this study through the use of qualitative research methodology:

1. How may teachers escape the prescriptive force of prespecified course content and methods?

2. How may a dialogic method give voice both to the teachers and students through empowerment?

3. How may we produce counterdiscourse in English through students' voices in an Islamic context?

4. How may students' own cultural and social issues be situated in a critical foreign language classroom?

5. How may dialogic method, context, voice, and sociocultural factors influence students' reading, writing, speaking and listening practices?

Participants

The study was conducted in the fall semester of 1379-80 at Al-Zahra University, a women university situated in north of Tehran in Vanak

Village. Three teachers and 122 students participated in this study. In order to preserve authenticity and a natural situation for women students there was no random selection of students. All of the students present in the pre-university and general courses participated in this research.

Instruments

Interviews with students and teachers, participant observation, student journals, researcher journals, field notes, and audio recordings helped the researcher to collect her data.

The researcher taught her class for 12 weeks (nine hours per week) and observed two other EFL classes for 12 weeks (six hours per week).

Procedure

The research procedure is listed below in the order of occurring events. Journal writings and group meetings were an exception in that they were conducted before, during, and after the other procedures.

(a) Student initial comments. In the first session the students were asked to write their opinions in Farsi about high school English classes, the way they were taught and the materials (texts) studied.

(b) Classroom observations. Data collection included 54 qualitative observations of my own classes and 10 observations of each of the other EFL classes. Handwritten field notes were used to record my own classroom events immediately after the class and for the observed classes on the spot.

(c) Journal writing. My other source of data collection was the students' journals. First they were briefed on how to write journals. They were told to do self-reflection and social-reflection writing about themselves, their society, and the cultural and social issues form a critical point of view.

(d) Specialized group meeting. Another source of inspiration was the gathering of GE teachers in the English departments. The sharing of ideas, experiences and discussions in the meeting shed light on my interpretations of data.

(e) Teacher interviews. One semi-structured interview was conducted with each of the teachers one month after the term had started, and several informal interviews occurred throughout the research project.

(f) Student interviews. Out of 5 EFL classes, 4 students from each class were interviewed through audio tape recording around the end of the term.

(g) Student final comments. At the end of the term, students were asked to write their opinions in Farsi on what they learnt in this class and how it was different from their other EFL courses in their high schools.

(h) Researcher's reflective journals. The researcher made an attempt to keep a reflective journal of her experiences in the field.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data was analysed through color coding based on Freire's ten values and reading and rereading the field notes.I also used constant comparative method (Silverman, 2000) which is a procedure that combines inductive

behavior-category coding with simultaneous comparison of all incidents observed.

For the sake of credibility, peer debriefing was held systematically during the semester.

For generalizability, a thick description was provided on the whole research process, and classroom context. According to Davis (1995) the details in the description will allow the reader or other researchers to decide whether they can apply the findings to their own research.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study allow us to draw conclusions and answer the research questions in five separate sections.

(i). EFL and liberating education

In the liberating classrooms, the findings revealed that the creative building of language and knowledge was successfully promoted. That is, the students were free to give suggestions; the class discussions before and after the readings were based on generative themes that later became the focal point of further discussions and writing.The findings show that the students' writing developed from personal information at the beginning to creative and critical writing towards the end of the term. By focusing on their hopes, desires, problems, and confusions, students had a built-in reason for wanting to learn.

(ii). EFL and empowering education

The research findings have shown that the democratic situation provided by the teacher created an atmosphere in which the interactions between students and the teacher and among the students themselves through dialogues empowered them to assert the ownership of their education.

They learned to think, cooperate and contribute to their own learning and the learning of others. They could criticize, evaluate, increase their knowledge and thus be empowered as a student and a member of their society.

(iii). EFL as counterdiscourse

As the findings show the students were empowered to think critically about what they read or heard. They began to give their views as a member of their community (in the groups and in the whole class), and if necessary to disagree with the ideas and the people to whom they never dared to say 'no' without fear of ridicule or rejection.

(iv). EFL in a critical classroom

The findings show that the students were very much interested in dialogues which were the reflections of their everyday experiences.

They tried to build dialogue with their own words in English. The findings showed that the more the students were involved, the more they wrestled with meaning in the texts, exercised their critical voices in debates with peers, and expressed their values in a public arena, where they could be examined and related to conditions in society.

(v). EFL pedagogical practices

In this study the findings show that critical pedagogy had positive influence on the students language skills. The students who claimed that they could hardly speak English before, were able to discuss issues with their classmates and the teacher in English in full sentences.They exercised to develop their reading ability on the texts that were selected on their own preferences. Their listening ability also developed in sharing their ideas with their class companions because they had to listen carefully to others in order to give their own suggestions.

The students who never wrote in English before wrote many pages as their journal entries discussing personal and social issues. Thus the students' reading, writing, listening, and speaking developed through authentic use of language although there was no explicit teaching of grammar and vocabulary.

The findings of this study have implications both for the curriculum designers and for the teachers. Curriculum designers may also consider the social, cultural, and political aspects of language use and validate and explore the culture, knowledge and experiences that students bring to schools. Teachers interested in creating a critical environment in their classrooms need to move from the teacher-centered practices to more thinking centered ones and to engage in discourse in a collaborative environment to develop their own capabilities and voice in the educational institutions. It is also suggested that teachers no more act as

classroom technicians whose job is to transfer set curricula to students; instead if they act as "transformative intellectuals" who reflect on their own teaching, they may become more able and willing to reflect upon the ideological principles that inform their practices.

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