

<https://doi.org/10.3126/nelta.v25i1-2.49740>

Teachers' Perceptions of Critical Pedagogy in English Language Teaching Classroom

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Abstract

Critical pedagogy practices are rarely followed in the traditional English Language Teaching (ELT) classes in which the focus is on transmitting knowledge to the learners, rather than transforming it. This study is an attempt to explore teachers' experiences in and their perceptions of the existing practices of critical pedagogy and on its usefulness in ELT classrooms. This is qualitative research in which phenomenological research design was adopted to accomplish this study. Six respondents were selected from three secondary schools of Kathmandu district as a sample through a purposive non-random sampling procedure. In-depth-interview was used as a tool to assemble the required data to answer the research questions of this study. The findings of the study show that the ELT classroom in the district is teacher-directed but not learner-centered; the textbooks, teaching strategies, and methods are partially focused on marginalized groups and underprivileged learners. The ELT practices at the secondary level do not address multiple intelligences; and critical pedagogy is not adopted for the elevation of the marginalized learners though the teachers are aware of its usefulness.

Keywords: *critical pedagogy, transform, phenomenological, teacher-directed, multiple intelligence, and equity pedagogy.*

Introduction

Critical pedagogy (CP) is an approach that makes the marginalized, underprivileged, and disabled groups aware of their fundamental rights, equality, and culture as the mainstream of society. These underprivileged and marginalized groups may include female children who belong to underprivileged groups of people in remote areas, children with different abilities and refugees/internally displaced persons or returnees, or those affected by armed conflicts. According to UNICEF's (2003), human rights principle of universality means, the well-being of all children is important and applying the right approach that helps achieve inclusion and equity. CP as a teaching method is essential to provide inclusive education and equitable learning to all genders, classes, and groups of children.

Critical pedagogy is increasingly used in English language teaching (ELT) to encourage textbook writers and material developers to incorporate the local cultures and indigenous knowledge in the content of textbooks and reference books. It brings changes by replacing the traditional educational system with the broad practices of critical thinking. Nepal is a multilingual, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious country. Several castes and religious diversities define our social fabric. The national vision in education addresses education for all and appropriate approaches to teaching and learning have been recommended for doing so. Several educational documents have appropriated critical pedagogy to address the diversity of learners, encourage their active participation and collaboration, create a child-friendly environment and child-centered pedagogy, and respect individual differences in schools as well as in the classrooms.

The practice of critical pedagogy in English language teaching in Nepal is being introduced. The new textbooks for the secondary and higher secondary levels have been prepared and/or modified in order to accommodate the changing socio-political scenarios of Nepal. There has been a lot of discussions about reforming existing/traditional pedagogy in school. Despite the fact that teachers have been advised, encouraged and sporadically oriented to use critical pedagogy for teaching English at the (higher) secondary level how teachers view the application of CP in English classrooms, what their experiences are in conducting inclusive and equitable lessons, and above all, if they are supported for conducting such lessons have not been explored. This study is an attempt to look into the secondary level English language teachers' perceptions of critical pedagogy.

Literature Review

Relevant literature for this article has been reviewed in two ways. First, some basic and notable works have been reviewed in order to provide a general introduction to critical pedagogy, and second, other related literature has been embedded in the discussion of themes. The practice of critical pedagogy was first introduced by Paulo Freire through the publication of his book 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1970). Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren Suresh Canagarajah, and many other scholars in the line contributed to developing concepts and practices of critical pedagogy in education. Critical pedagogy refers to liberator teaching, radical pedagogy and post-modern pedagogy. When the reality of the oppressed was unveiled, it became an instrument for liberation and humanization. According to Freire (1970), the traditional education system is a banking depositing system in which the students are depositories and the teacher is a depositor by filling in their mind with static and preoccupied knowledge. In addition, he states that traditionally teacher-dominated education is the banking concept of education. After an in-depth observation of the traditional education system, Freire pioneered in conceptualization and development of critical pedagogy. The learners cannot learn through the traditional teacher authoritative classroom. Similarly, Dewey (1933)

states that social and cultural values might be learned by individuals through their own reflective inquiries rather than through imposed previously determined social programs.

In this regard, Giroux argues that “the concept of emancipating authority suggests that teachers are bearers of critical knowledge, rules, and values through which they consciously articulate and problematize their relationship to each other to students, to subject matter, and to the wider community” (1997, as cited in Kareepadath, 2018, p. 48). It criticizes the curricula from primary to university levels regarding the education system of marginalized groups which should be shaped by socio-political realities. CP emphasizes the liberation, equal opportunities, and justice to the oppressed people to whom the mainstream authority thinks as lazy, unproductive, savages, barbaric, wicked, ferocious, divided beings, stupid, drunkard, uncultured, uneducated, incompetent, and undisciplined people. Freire (1996) argues that critical pedagogy liberates the oppressed people from the social structure of oppression.

Canagarajah (2005) also argues that critical pedagogy has shifted the paradigm from colonial to post-colonial, structuralism to post-structuralism, modernism to post-modernism, feminism to post-feminism, etc. According to him, knowledge for critical pedagogy is not value-ridden in which knowledge is shaped by the majority of people who are rulers and elite rather knowledge is value-laden in which knowledge is socially constructed. It is argued that classroom practice must have implications in the learners’ life and society since the classroom is a miniature. Self-employed generated education is more important than a job-seeker education system to change society. Therefore, critical pedagogy should be compatible with changing global educational and political changing scenarios. Classroom pedagogy addresses the changes in society in terms of employment, social, moral, and political. In the second language teaching, it focuses on language learning as well as social changes because language learning is not only a means of communication but also a means of understanding the learners’ social surrounding, educational histories, and social dynamics. Social relationships and social practices, in this way, are conveyed through language since language and cultural practices are inseparable. CP also focuses on a better understanding between writers and readers, teachers and students, test-makers and test-takers, teacher educators and student teachers, and researchers, and experts.

Similarly, Norton and Toohey (2004) state that critical pedagogy scrutinizes the way government provides teaching materials, textbooks, and teacher training to teachers and assessment systems, to marginalized/disadvantaged groups: ethnic groups, untouchable class, disabled groups, as well as far and wide people across the country. It observes the main causes of disempowerment of the cultures and the languages of marginalized groups by the mainstream education system. The marginalized learners are sensitized regarding their culture, linguistic awareness, the notion of liberation, and their vernacular languages, and they are made aware of killer/genocide languages in their respective societies. Critical Pedagogy, thus, aims to raise students’ consciousness

about unjust social practices and helps them become proactive agents for social changes through classroom practices. It advocates that whole social construction and social reality can be shaped and transformed by classroom practices. Critical pedagogical practice, in this sense, supports and critiques classroom practices in terms of their social visions. For example, it argues that there should be gender-free education. All genders and learners from diverse groups and all of the students regardless of their grades should have been provided equal opportunities to study any subject without any conditions. Scholarships and stipends, therefore, should be provided on the basis of quality, but not in terms of gender, caste race, class, and location of geography.

Inclusive Education (IE) is one of the domains of critical pedagogy that has been defined as a learning environment that promotes full personal, academic and professional development of all learners regardless of their race, class, color, gender, disability, sexual preference, learning styles and languages. It welcomes all learners without any discrimination. It provides education with capabilities as an equity-based. In this respect, Groenke (2009) argues that social inequalities can be corrected through classroom practices. The society, thus, can be reconstructed through the teachers' critical pedagogy in the classroom. It not only concerns theoretical perspective; but also emphasizes classroom practices for addressing and responding to the diversity, and the needs of all the learners in the classroom, in the school, and in the society.

Social Constructivism

Vygotsky (1978) claims that cognitive development and learning originate in a social context. More importantly, he argues, children's cultural, mental, and social development takes place on two planes, viz. the social plane and the psychological plane. Children usually get knowledge regarding various things firstly through the social plane, subsequently in the psychological plane. According to social constructivism, learning is possible through social interaction in the social context. Children acquire language and cognitive activities through interpersonal activities particularly in the social context like the classroom scenario. The children's mental function and cognitive development need adults' scaffolding before they become self-regulated learners.

Vygotsky's 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD) means that children who reach higher or more abstract ground via interaction with the teacher become capable learners of solving any problem independently. He opines that "I will discuss one study of preschool children to demonstrate that what is in the zone of proximal development today will be the actual development level tomorrow (p. 87)." Children can solve any problem in the actual development level independently when they reach ZPD.

Multiple Intelligence Theory

In a similar vein, Gardner (1983) claims that individuals possess eight or more relatively autonomous-intelligences which CP addresses through teaching and learning strategies.

CP, thus, helps the learner develop their intelligences by identifying learners' multiple intelligences enhancing them in the classroom (Fleetham, 2006). There are eight types of multiple intelligences viz. linguistic intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, spatial intelligence, musical intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, naturalistic intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, and intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner, 1983). Some learners are very good at holding interaction and dialogue whereas others are good at contemplating, or at music, mathematics, and so on. The English language teachers, as practitioners of CP, identify each of the learners' intelligence in class. They teach on the basis of their students' individual differences focusing on their intelligence.

Equitable Pedagogy in ELT Classroom

Equitable pedagogy is necessary to provide strong support to all diverse learners in the classroom. In the equitable classroom, students are enforced not only to develop basic skills but also to apply those skills to become an agent for social transformation (Blanks & Blanks, 2009). CP based teaching, thus, develops students' self-concepts and respects their ideas and values. To create an equitable classroom, the teacher generates a work-centered optimum interactive, and equitable classroom environment. Meaningful and contextualized learning strategies are employed for equitable pedagogy which strengthens democracy and social justice in the classroom (Tutak, Bondy & Adams, 2011).

The existing literature provides an abundant discussion on how teachers can practice critical pedagogy in English language classrooms. However, there is a dearth of literature on how teachers perceive and practice CP in developing contexts such as Nepal. The present study addresses the gap in the existing literature by studying and providing insightful discussion in English language teachers' perceptions of critical pedagogy and their experiences on critical pedagogy at the secondary level in Nepal.

Statement of the Problem

As it is common knowledge, in the traditional system, students record, memorize, repeat and regurgitate in the examination without perceiving and internalizing what they mean. They receive, memorize, and repeat passively without any two way of interaction and negotiation constructively. The traditional classroom is teacher-centered and authoritative in which every learner from a diverse society is given chance to construct knowledge without collaboration. Learners are rarely made aware of active members of mainstream society, equal education, freedom, and justice. Teachers' own perception of CP and the ways in which they experience it play an important role in how they practice CP in English language classrooms. The study explores secondary English language teachers' perception of CP and their experience of practicing it. The study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the secondary teachers' perceptions of critical pedagogy in ELT classrooms?
2. What are secondary English language teachers' experiences in practicing inclusive pedagogy?

Methodology

Based on a phenomenological research design, this study applied critical approaches to find out teachers' values and beliefs that underpin their seemingly natural teacher-centered classroom roles (Taylor, 2008). A critical perspective is introduced to stimulate teachers' thinking about designing and assessment that are more student-centered inquiry-oriented, culturally sensitive, community-oriented, and socially responsible (Taylor & Medina, 2013). Six English teachers, 2 each from 3 community schools located in Kirtipur Municipality of Kathmandu were selected using purposive sampling. The study also employed semi-structured interview protocols to conduct in-depth interviews the duration which lasted for 30 minutes approximately.

In order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, respondents were given pseudonyms as T1, T2, T3, T4, T5 and T6. I recorded and transcribed the interviews in English. I was always aware of my researcher's biases. I prepared the guideline questions for employing in-depth- interviews with the respondents. I transcribed the recorded interview into written text. To maintain the authenticity of the raw data. I followed the ethical procedure for administering interviews.

Results and Discussion

To address the research questions, five global themes out of 12 basic themes were developed, which are analyzed and interpreted thematically as follows:

ELT and the teacher-directed culture

Pedagogy of English at the secondary level is teacher-directed. The classes were still dominated by teacher-centered techniques rather than the learner-centered ones in the classroom. One of the respondents, T1 argues that -

students are asked to share their understandings with each other but they are reluctant to share their opinions regarding the issues of the topic and arguments in the text. All of the learners are passive, introverted, and lazy in the classroom. They cannot construct ideas through peer talking and group discussion. I should follow the lecture method, time and again Grammar Translation Method, and teacher-centered techniques to make them understand the subject matter. The classroom is absolutely teacher-directed, but not learner-self-regulated.

ELT at three secondary schools at Kirtipur is traditional and teacher-directed. English language teaching, therefore, does not develop students' critical thinking. This is in line with Freire's (1970) argument that a teacher-dominated education system is the banking concept of education. The learners cannot develop their critical and creative thinking through such a traditional banking system. Acknowledging this in this regard, T3 states that -

the learners should share their own opinions and experiences on a particular topic with their colleagues. They are to be rather critical in the classroom instead of depending on teachers' lectures. They should be able to make meaning and understanding through their own reflections.

It can be inferred that there is no self-regulated learning culture in secondary schools of Kirtipur. Dewey (1933) states that social and cultural values might be learned by individuals through their own reflective inquires rather than through imposed previously determined social programs. In such inquiries, learners are proactive in the course of learning in sharing their understandings on the topic to each other through group discussion and peer talking which promotes critical pedagogy in the classroom.

The existing provisions and practices, and the issue of inclusion

The curricula of compulsory English at the secondary level have been modified to promote critical practices as they are prepared for learner-centered classrooms. One of the respondents, T4, for example, claims that "the textbook of grade 9 has been modified and implemented across the country recently. The teaching and learning materials of the textbook are learner-centered, inclusive and gender-unbiased". Similarly, T5 argues that -

I have been adopting Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), and beyond method incompatible with the teaching items of the textbook. The textbook of grade 11 is also in the process of revision. I think it will be implemented from the upcoming academic session.

The textbooks of compulsory English as well as major English have been modified in accordance with the level of proficiency of the learners and changing political context, socio-economy, and dominance of information communication technology (ICT). This was necessary because the textbook of English of grade 11 was prepared approximately three decades ago. The contents in the existing textbooks have now been updated (see moe.gov.np). The prescribed stories, essays, poems, and grammar are not compatible with the present socio-political context of the learners. These textbooks, however, need to be inclusive. For example, the major English textbooks contain only British literature and Commonwealth literature, and American literature is excluded.

Similarly, the textbooks of grades 9 and 10, which are prepared in line with CP, focus on language functions avoiding exclusions, such as marginalized, differently-abled, and minority learners. According to Norton and Toohey (2004), critical pedagogy scrutinizes the way government provides teaching materials, textbooks, and teacher training to teachers and assessment systems, to marginalized groups such as ethnic groups, disabled groups, untouchable as well as far and wide learners across the country. The teachers agree that the textbooks and teaching strategies and pedagogy are focused on marginalized groups. The Nepalese classroom is diverse in terms of caste, religion, language, and ability of the learners. The teachers are to be very sensitive and professional with sound knowledge to make the ELT classroom inclusive. The teachers are prepared not to focus on the mainstream learners and bright learners in the class only, but other groups in class also. In this regard, one of the respondents, T6 argues that ~-

after the promulgation of the new constitution of Nepal in 2072, the ELT paradigm has changed. All of the learners are treated by each respective teacher equally and fairly in course of teaching and learning in the classes. The low and marginalized learners are settled and arranged in the first and second rows in the class to promote their learning.

T2 also states that the scholarship and stipend are allocated to those marginalized learners by the government, non-governmental organizations, and private organizations to facilitate their learning. Teachers, as Groenke (2009) argues, can address social inequalities through teachers' critical pedagogy. The environment of the classroom is interesting and inviting for all students. SSDP (2016-2023) has focused on access of free and compulsory education in order to increase the relevancy of education, social inclusion, and equity issues (moe.gov.np, 2016). The current pedagogic practices and arrangements allow all members of the class to participate in listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities equally regardless of their current achievement levels and belonging to the marginalized community.

Critical Pedagogy in the ELT Classroom

Critical pedagogy in the classroom is essential in the changing political context of Nepal as well as the world. The classroom is the right platform to make the learners aware of the right of marginalized people in society. The secondary ELT teachers are aware of the fact that classroom dynamics should change in the changing role of teaching. In this regard, one of the respondents, T3, states that *"the learners are the prospective pillars of the country for every walk of life. If the learners get practices of equality, inclusiveness, and democratic spirit in the class through the classroom pedagogy, they will be good citizens in society."* In fact, the classroom is the miniature through which injustice, inequality, malpractices, and the undemocratic culture of the society can be transformed into social justice and democratic society.

The teachers interviewed viewed that critical pedagogy was against the traditional, teacher dominated educational system. T2, for example, argues that *“I ask the learners to personalize some of the events in the text. I frequently encourage them to use their critical thinking skills and creative thinking skills instead of rote learning and memorization of the grammatical patterns and contents delivered by the teachers.”* They acknowledge the fact that critical pedagogy is very useful even to develop the learners’ own critical thinking skills and self-monitoring skills to be regulated, learners. Such skills enhance their augmentative abilities through the classroom discussion. According to the teachers, every learner is the source of knowledge so the learners can accumulate an abundance of information on the particular issue in the classroom.

Equity Pedagogy

Equity refers to positive discrimination for social justice. For the equity of ELT classes, teachers provide strong support and keep high expectations for all learners regardless of their grading, religions, classes, castes, etc. One of the respondents, T2 argues that *“inequity pedagogy, all of the learners who are from diverse cultures are encouraged to foster their learning abilities. In the classroom, each student enjoys the equal opportunity and equitable treatment by the teachers in learning”*. This is in line with Tutak, Bondy, and Adams (2011) who argue that the aim of equity pedagogy is to strengthen democracy and social justice in the classroom. In other words, every learner, including, the marginalized learner, has to be given equal opportunity to share his/her opinion without consulting potentiality, caste, class, and gender in the class. In this regard, T6 claims that

I do not discriminate the learners in terms of their genders, castes, ethnic backgrounds, and proficiency level of English as well as their grades. I treat everyone in the ELT classroom equally and democratically to upgrade their learning and insights. I will be free from any type of prejudices and biases in course of providing teaching materials and affording them marks based on their reflection on the answer papers.

According to Blanks and Blanks (2009) in an equity classroom, teachers must enforce students not only to develop basic skills but also to apply those skills to become active agents for social transformation. The main essence of critical pedagogy is to promote the marginalized students in learning proactively as the mainstream ones in the ELT classroom. Specifically, marginalized learners, such as girl learners, learners from the underprivileged community, and ethnic community as well as differently-abled learners have to be made the center of teaching and learning. One of the respondents T5 argues that -

those marginalized learners are encouraged to share their understandings of each particular learning item freely. The classroom is a miniature of society. If the learners actively participate in the classroom liberally, they will reflect the classroom experiences in society when they become social workers, politicians, employees, and employers in their adulthood.

Freire (1996) argues that critical pedagogy liberates the oppressed people from the social structure of oppression. The respondents of my study suggested that the majority of the teachers attempt to promote the marginalized learners in the ELT classroom despite their limited training.

Lack of training for equity pedagogy

In order to consolidate critical pedagogy and address the learning unique needs of the multi-dimensional learners, the teachers need the training to recognize their special abilities and treat them accordingly in the course of teaching. They need to observe and diagnose the multiple intelligences of the learners and design their teaching accordingly to address their learning needs. In this respect, Fleetham (2006) argues that classroom pedagogy should help the learners to develop their varying intelligence. However, teachers are not provided enough opportunity to train themselves. One of the respondents, T4 argues that -

our educational management system has not practiced teaching the students as per their multiple intelligences. I have not got such training and induction from any formal workshop, seminar, and conference to apply the theory of multiple intelligences of Gardner. All of the learners are taught and behaved using the same style of teaching and learning strategies. In fact, learning strategies are to be applied according to, matching the personality and style of the learners. However, there is a lack of special teaching and learning in terms of the learners' multiple intelligences and personalities and styles.

In school education, due to the lack of adequately trained ELT teachers, there is no teaching and learning based on the individual differences of the learners. The ELT of the secondary level lacks emphasis on the teaching of multiple intelligence.

Conclusion and implications

English language teaching in Nepal needs a new approach and a new direction. Critical pedagogy, as an emerging approach can help revamp the ELT situation of the secondary level in Nepal. This new paradigm can transform all English language teachers into professional pedagogues through the spirit of critical pedagogical practices. The study explored what secondary level teachers of English think about an effective execution of critical pedagogical practices in teaching and learning, materials development, and ICT; and what their experiences have been in using inclusive methods for teaching. The study found that most teachers are aware of the CP approach; however, their own practices have been severely limited due to the lack of adequate training. The implications of the findings are that the local authorities should be made accountable for the implementation of the practices of critical pedagogy in schools. Teachers and material developers should be adequately trained to develop and use inclusive and

equitable teaching practices and learning materials. This study has limitations of being conducted on a small-scale population. Further research can be conducted on a larger scale involving the public (community), institutional and private schools.

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