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Referees/Hakemler: Yrd. Doç. Dr. İsmail SANBERK – Yrd. Doç. Dr. Ömer Tuğrul KARA

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VIEWS OF TURKISH EFL INSTRUCTORS ON CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Eser ÖRDEM - Ceyhun YÜKSELİR***

ABSTRACT

This study intends to examine views of Turkish EFL instructors on critical pedagogy. The participants (N=9) were experienced instructors working at two Turkish universities. There were 21 instructors in total. Nine of these instructors participated in the study. This study was designed as qualitative and descriptive including open-ended questionnaire. The participants were informed that they would be interviewed about critical pedagogy. They were given detailed information about the content of critical information. After this stage, they were given open-ended questions. Nine experienced instructors from two Turkish universities were asked whether they used aspects and dimensions of critical pedagogy in their classrooms. The data were analyzed using inductive content analysis. Inductive content analysis allows researchers to discover new concepts while examining the data. In line with this approach, the data obtained from the participants were analyzed in accordance with the aspects and dimensions identified in critical pedagogy. The findings of the study show that the participants avoided using on-the-agenda topics to discuss in classroom settings since certain topics, particularly political issues, were found risky. The participants tended to follow the topics covered in course books. Therefore, some discussion topics on the agenda were consciously framed, primed and selected. Teachers can take initiatives and warm up learners by presenting less risky topics to help them adapt themselves to topics not represented in course books or curriculum. In addition, teachers can show learners videos about how students from other cultures debate risky or taboo topics. This kind of application can help them take these as role models. Teachers should endeavor to create a democratic environment for learners to have the opportunity to discuss topics identified in critical pedagogy. In future studies, critical pedagogy in ELT can be initiated at primary schools so that a democratic culture can be developed at early ages to take action, responsibilities and initiatives.

* Yrd. Doç. Dr. Adana Bilim ve Teknoloji Üniversitesi Mütercim Tercümanlık, El-mek: eordem@adanabtu.edu.tr

** Yrd. Doç. Dr. Osmaniye Korkut Ata Üniversitesi İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı / İngiliz Dilbilim, El-mek: ceyhunyukselir@gmail.com

Adoption of this pedagogical approach may activate new paradigms and parameters for both teachers and learners in foreign language teaching context.

STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

Research into critical pedagogy has been on the rise in recent years. Yet, its importance and implications have not proceeded in a similar way because values adopted in politics and societies tend to affect EFL classroom directly or indirectly. As Turkey is seen as a developing country and encounters serious political and social issues, it seems significant for teachers to help learners become conscious of on-the-agenda topics. Agger maintains that critical theory in general affected social sciences considerably and allowed poststructuralism and postmodernism to emerge. Critical pedagogy is closely interrelated to critical thinking whose specific aspects and dimension have been developed in recent years. Critical thinking can be seen as a subfield of critical pedagogy since dominant political and conventional social values may affect the course of critical thinking. One's developing critical thinking is not equal to improving critical pedagogy that is inherently revolutionary and transformative. It can be said that critical thinking can be profoundly affected by the main principles of critical pedagogy because using critical thinking may not guarantee development of critical pedagogy. Giroux maintains that this process is interpretative and reflective. Freire evaluates this process as meaningful negotiation and interrogation. Giroux stresses the importance of transformation from critical thinking disposition to reflective practice. Falzon interprets that dialogue is a cooperative activity that produces incompatibility because dialogue often challenges stable categories about the world and society. This study was designed as qualitative and descriptive including open-ended questionnaire. The participants were informed that they would be interviewed about critical pedagogy. They were given detailed information about the content of critical information. After this stage, they were given open-ended questions. Nine experienced instructors from two Turkish universities were asked whether they used aspects and dimensions of critical pedagogy in their classrooms. The data were analyzed using inductive content analysis. Inductive content analysis allows researchers to discover new concepts while examining the data. In line with this approach, the data obtained from the participants were analyzed in accordance with the aspects and dimensions identified in critical pedagogy. The number of the participants was composed of nine instructors working at two Turkish universities. The participants were teaching English at preparatory level and had at least five year experience in teaching. The overall findings show that the participants avoided talking on-the-agenda issues in EFL classroom settings since they stated that some topics are risky to discuss. Therefore, they tended to focus on more popular topics that they chose or the topics covered in the course books.

The overall findings show that most of the instructors avoided discussing certain topics, particularly political issues. In addition, they preferred to discuss the topics covered in the curriculum since they found

Turkish Studies

other topics very risky. The participants seem not to mention risky topics on account of traditional, cultural and social values. Gray stated that course book publishers do not want to cover risky topics such as LGBT topics because of marketing concerns and other countries' possible reactions. Similarly, Nelson stated that teachers have concerns about the discussion of gender and sexual diversity in EFL classrooms. However, there are few studies in Turkey that discuss risky topics such as LGBT. Sariçoban and Kazazoğlu also indicated that the English course books chosen from three Turkish universities did not mention LGBT even in the list of taboo topics. Their study did not find any clue about sex or sexuality-related topic. Thornbury states that course books may hinder teachers from helping learners gain critical thinking skills because course books are generally based on pre-selected and pre-determined topics that may form a specific and narrow frame for learners and teachers.

Taking these studies and results into account, the aspects and representation of critical pedagogy in EFL classrooms are of paramount importance to interpret reality, discuss the real and critical issues with students and evaluate the current issues objectively. The conceptual and pedagogical areas of critical pedagogy enable the researchers to revise and improve the language curriculum in its real sense although it is rarely mentioned in EFL environment. However, when we think of the findings of our study, this is not the case. The participants are allowed not to speak problematic issues in a classroom environment, especially political ones. This situation probably stems from the oppression, confusion, stress, social and political concerns. In this sense, the study shows similar results with the previous ones in the literature. As a result, for the betterment of EFL classes, applying critical pedagogy in various language classes with various levels is important and fully involved in course books and curriculum. Importance of critical pedagogy along with its dimensions and aspects can be gained through seminars and conferences. Adoption of this pedagogical approach may activate new paradigms and parameters for both teachers and learners in foreign language teaching context.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, critical thinking, reflection, language teachers

TÜRK OKUTMANLARININ ELEŞTİREL PEDAGOJİ ÜZERİNE GÖRÜŞLERİ

ÖZET

Eleştirel pedagoji yirminci yüz yılın başlarından beri gelişmeye başlamasına rağmen İngilizce öğretmenliği alanında yaygınlaşmamıştır. Kuramsal olarak çok güçlü olmasına rağmen uygulamada istenilen düzeyde sınıf ortamında bir yaklaşım olarak benimsenmemiştir. Bunun muhtemel nedenlerinden biri ders kitaplarının, programların ve müfredatın kuramların önüne geçmesi eleştirel pedagojinin yaygınlaşmasının geciktirmiştir. Kurs kitaplarının, müfredatın ve öğretmenlerin belli bir konuyu anlatırken çerçevelemesi öğrencileri belli

Turkish Studies

konulardan uzak tutmaktadır. Çünkü müfredat ve kurs kitapları seçilirken konuların içeriği riskli konulardan kaçınmayı gerektirebilir. Böylece, bazı konular hem uygulayıcılar hem de öğrencileri için tabu ve riskli hale getirilmektedir. Bu sorunsalın Eleştirel pedagojinin İngilizcenin yabancı dil olarak öğretildiği sınıflarda Türkiye’de ortamında incelenmesi önemli görünmektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı Türkiye’de iki üniversitede İngilizce dersleri veren okutmanların eleştirel pedagoji üzerine görüşlerini araştırmaktır. Eleştirel pedagoji, küresel ve bölgesel bağlamda sorunların ifade özgürlüğü çerçevesinde tartışılmasını içerdiği için bu çalışma okutmanların sınıf ortamında eleştirel pedagojiyi ne ölçüde kullandıklarını araştırmıştır. Çalışmanın diğer bir amacı da katılımcıların ders kitapları ve içeriği hakkında düşüncelerini eleştirel pedagoji çerçevesinde ele almaktır. Çalışmanın ikincil amacı okutmanlara açık uçlu sorular sorarak farkındalığı arttırmaktır. Bu çalışma, İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğreten okutmanların eleştirel pedagoji üzerine görüşlerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Katılımcılar (N = 9) iki Türk üniversitesinde deneyimli okutmanlardan oluşmaktadır. İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğreten deneyimli İngilizce okutmanlarının eleştirel pedagoji üzerine görüşlerini araştırmak üzere tasarlanan bu çalışma nitel bir araştırma yöntemi olarak tasarlanmıştır. Altı sorudan oluşan açık uçlu bir anket formu oluşturulduktan sonra veriler, tümevarım içerik analizi incelenmiştir. Katılımcıların her bir cümlesi eleştirel pedagoji kavramları ve tanımları çerçevesinde incelenerek kodlama yapılmıştır ve belli kavramlar ön plana çıkmıştır. Sorular eleştirel pedagojinin tanımları ve özellikleri göz önünde bulundurularak hazırlanmıştır. Elde edilen veriler araştırmacılara yeni kavramlar ortaya çıkarmada yardımcı olan tümevarım içerik analizi yöntemiyle analiz edildi. Çalışmanın bulguları, katılımcıların belirli konularda, özellikle de siyasi konularda, riskli olduklarından, sınıf ortamında tartışmak için gündemde yaşanan konuları kullanmama eğiliminde olduğunu göstermektedir. Katılımcılar daha çok ders kitaplarındaki konuları takip etme eğilimindeydi. Bu nedenle, bu çalışma gündemle ilgili bazı tartışma konularının bilinçli olarak çerçvelendiğini, hazırlandığını ve seçildiğini bulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: eleştirel pedagoji, eleştirel düşünme, refleksiyon

Introduction

Development of critical pedagogy has been slow in certain countries and widespread in others since macro social stratum tends to affect what topics or issues should be covered in EFL classrooms. Research into critical pedagogy has been on the rise in recent years. Yet, its importance and implications have not proceeded in a similar way because values adopted in politics and societies tend to affect EFL classroom directly or indirectly. As Turkey is seen as a developing country and encounters serious political and social issues, it seems significant for teachers to help learners become conscious of on-the-agenda topics. Agger (1991) maintains that critical theory in general affected social sciences considerably and allowed poststructuralism and postmodernism to emerge. Detailed discussion related to critical theory, poststructuralism and postmodernism helped applied linguistics to revise second language teaching approaches as well.

Turkish Studies

International Periodical for the Languages, Literature and History of Turkish or Turkic
Volume 12/14

Studies on postmodernist and poststructuralist theories that helped post-method era arise in recent years have been incremental since the typical language teaching approaches and methods have been constructively criticized (Auerback, 1995; Pennycook, 1999; Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Social nature of communication and dialogues has been greatly emphasized because critical perspective towards language teaching as well cultural and social issues has gained importance in ELT (Atkinson, 2002). Vygotsky (1962, 1978) also stresses the importance of social and cultural aspects in learning a language. In line with this theoretical basis, participatory approach in language teaching also endorses similar ideas referring to reflection and action by discussing on-the-agenda issues (Berlin, 2005). Critical pedagogy aims to transform society rather than teach only language and focuses on the significance of dialogue and discourse. Teachers and learners intend to argue topics not framed by course books because it is known that topics to be discussed in ELT are politically selected and identified by taking social and cultural values into account. Critical pedagogy is not perceived as a pragmatic instrument to be used in classroom settings. Rather, critical pedagogy is viewed as the essence of teaching and learning. A more theoretical idea developed by Falzon (2006) who maintains that dialogue itself is transformation and challenging because our stance is changed through dialogues (Shor & Freire, 1987). Critical pedagogy and thus dialogue involve conflicts and tension because dialogue includes risks as well (Freire, 1994, 2000). One of the main tenets of critical pedagogy is to bring authentic and critical issues into classroom environment.

Critical pedagogy is closely interrelated to critical thinking whose specific aspects and dimensions have been developed in recent years (Ennis, 1996; Facione, 1990). Critical thinking can be seen as a subfield of critical pedagogy since dominant political and conventional social values may affect the course of critical thinking (Giroux, 1994; Kanpol, 1997). One's developing critical thinking is not equal to improving critical pedagogy that is inherently revolutionary and transformative. It can be said that critical thinking can be profoundly affected by the main principles of critical pedagogy because using critical thinking may not guarantee development of critical pedagogy. Giroux (1997) maintains that this process is interpretative and reflective. Freire (2000) evaluates this process as meaningful negotiation and interrogation. Giroux (1981) stresses the importance of transformation from critical thinking disposition to reflective practice. Falzon (2006) interprets that dialogue is a cooperative activity that produces incompatibility because dialogue often challenges stable categories about the world and society.

The robust theoretical and methodological background of critical pedagogy enables ELT research to approach EFL classrooms with critical lens. In line with the assumptions and dimensions of critical pedagogy, this study also endeavors to dwell on the use of critical pedagogy by analyzing the views of Turkish EFL instructors.

Research Questions

This study intended to examine the views of Turkish EFL instructors on critical pedagogy in EFL classroom settings. Answers to the following questions were sought:

1. What issues do you generally talk about in your classrooms?
2. What issues do your course books guide you to talk about in your classrooms?
3. Do you have any ideas about critical pedagogy?
4. Do you discuss political and social problems in your classrooms?
5. What do you think about the discussion of on-the-agenda issues in EFL classroom to help learners gain awareness and take even action?

6. What are some reasons why you discuss or do not argue about these issues in your classrooms?

Method

Research Design

This study was designed as qualitative and descriptive including open-ended questionnaire. The participants were informed that they would be interviewed about critical pedagogy. They were given detailed information about the content of critical information. After this stage, they were given open-ended questions. Nine experienced instructors from two Turkish universities were asked whether they used aspects and dimensions of critical pedagogy in their classrooms. The data were analyzed using inductive content analysis (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2015). Inductive content analysis allows researchers to discover new concepts while examining the data. In line with this approach, the data obtained from the participants were analyzed in accordance with the aspects and dimensions identified in critical pedagogy.

Participants

The number of the participants was composed of nine instructors working at two Turkish universities. The participants were teaching English at preparatory level and had at least five year experience in teaching.

Findings

The overall findings show that the participants avoided talking on-the-agenda issues in EFL classroom settings since they stated that some topics are risky to discuss. Therefore, they tended to focus on more popular topics that they chose or the topics covered in the course books.

Findings related to general topics

The findings indicate that the participants preferred to talk about leisure time activities and general as well as daily issues such as family, friendship, social activities, current news and important events. However, they avoided talking their personal problems. Some excerpts were chosen about general topics:

We generally talk about free time activities such as shopping and sports. However, sometimes we also discuss certain problems such as family issues. We also choose topics about other cultures. I give them examples from my own experiences.

I usually ask them about their typical activities and plans about the future. In addition, we talk about cultures and family issues as well. I want my students to talk about situations such as airport, cafes and restaurants. These are the topics that I often raise in the classroom.

Students often give examples from their lives which are related to topics we have covered in books. On the other hand, more personal problems of students aren't usually mentioned during class.

Findings related to course book topics

The participants stated that the course books generally guide them to talk about environmental issues such as pollution, protection of animals and alternative cultures. They also explicated that the course books generally aimed to help learners gain awareness of various alternative cultures and environmental issues. One of the participants made the following remarks:

The students like some of the topics in course books because it gives information about alternative countries such as Zimbabwe. Besides, they learn a lot of things about nature, environment

and biodiversity. However, some topics may be boring them. For example, they had no interest in space and galaxies but we have to cover it.

Apart from these course topics, the participants put forward that popular culture, interesting issues, intercultural awareness and technological advances are generally included in most of the course books, and they cannot avoid talking them. They also claimed that unusual things about nature, life and wildlife are mostly available in these course books, for example one participant made remarks:

Course books tend to choose popular and interesting issues like unusual things within culture and nature around the world or technological advances that may catch students' attention easily.

Findings related to critical pedagogy

The findings demonstrate that the participants had some superficial information about the critical pedagogy. However, they stated that their knowledge of critical knowledge was insufficient since they did not study at the university. They also noted that what they generally covered during the university was composed of various teaching approaches and methods that did not mention critical pedagogy in detail. Quite a few participants claimed that they had information about critical pedagogy but not sufficient. Some of the participants said:

We often focused on communicative approaches at the university but I know that communicative approach is not related to critical pedagogy. I also remember that some approaches such as grammar translation method were not useful. In addition, we did not study critical pedagogy at all.

It may be a subfield of critical thinking strategies which are indispensable parts of 21st century skills that every learner must acquire and be aware of. They need to be taught learners in an appropriate way. Thus, I assume that critical pedagogy instruct teachers how to teach critical thinking in classes.

Findings related to political and social problems

All of the participants mentioned that they discussed some social problems experienced both in Turkey and across the globe. However, these discussions were very superficial since they stated that they had to cover the topics in the course books. The participants also stated that they never raised the political problems in the classroom environment, because they thought discussing political issues could cause problems in terms of classroom management and other things. The participants mentioned these issues as below:

I tried to talk about social problems such as Syrian immigrants and poverty in Turkey. However, I never told them to talk about political problems because these issues are really risky in our country and did not want to create confusion in the class. I did not want my students to feel separated because of the political issues.

Generally, students are supposed to have enough maturity to express their ideas without insulting anybody but this may not possible most of the time. As a result, I try to avoid politics in class to not to cause hot debates between students.

Findings related to on-the-agenda topics

The findings point out that the participants chose certain on-the-agenda topics because they stated that they had to filter some topics in order not to create stress and discussion in the classroom. However, some important topics such as crime and immigration were covered in the classroom

setting because these topics were not found risky by the participants. Some of the participants made the following statements:

I regularly follow on-the-agenda topics in my daily life. However, I do not bring all the topics that I peruse into classroom environment because some topics are taboos in Turkey. As a teacher I have to be careful while choosing the topics for my learners. In my opinion, all teachers should be careful while selecting on-the-agenda topics.

In recent times, young people care less about what is happening around them as far as I observed. Unfortunately, they even do not care giving bloods to save people's lives. Before discussing politics in classes, we should encourage them to read every kind of books they encounter. Students should have enough knowledge of history, geography and even philosophy before opening their mouths to comment on politics. Otherwise, it will not be long that those discussions turn to fights.

Findings related to reasons for (non-) debatable topics

The participants listed various reasons for the choice of some topics. Confusion, separation, ambiguity, political interests, personal choices and academic and administrative concerns were among the reasons. They tended to avoid covering some topics such as LGBT, queer people, politics, evolution, religion, sex, discrimination and system criticism. It was stated that these topics could have put them and their learners into trouble. One of the participants stated:

My students are not ready to discuss political issues or LGBT in the classroom because I doubted whether they could discuss these topics in a respectful manner. These topics are even risky for the teachers. We may know where it may go.

The main problem is due to the chaos it can create in the classroom. So the difficulties in classroom management can be an explanation for this question.

Discussion and Conclusion

The overall findings show that most of the instructors avoided discussing certain topics, particularly political issues. In addition, they preferred to discuss the topics covered in the curriculum since they found other topics very risky. The participants seem not to mention risky topics on account of traditional, cultural and social values. Gray (2013) stated that course book publishers do not want to cover risky topics such as LGBT topics because of marketing concerns and other countries' possible reactions. Similarly, Nelson (2002, 2008) stated that teachers have concerns about the discussion of gender and sexual diversity in EFL classrooms. However, there are few studies in Turkey that discuss risky topics such as LGBT (Tekin, 2011). Sarıçoban and Kazazoğlu (2012) also indicated that the English course books chosen from three Turkish universities did not mention LGBT even in the list of taboo topics. Their study did not find any clue about sex or sexuality-related topic. Thornbury (2013) states that course books may hinder teachers from helping learners gain critical thinking skills because course books are generally based on pre-selected and pre-determined topics that may form a specific and narrow frame for learners and teachers.

Taking these studies and results into account, the aspects and representation of critical pedagogy in EFL classrooms are of paramount importance to interpret reality, discuss the real and critical issues with students and evaluate the current issues objectively. The conceptual and pedagogical areas of critical pedagogy enable the researchers to revise and improve the language curriculum in its real sense although it is rarely mentioned in EFL environment (Thornbury, 2013). However, when we think of the findings of our study, this is not the case. The participants are allowed not to speak problematic issues in a classroom environment, especially political ones. This situation

probably stems from the oppression, confusion, stress, social and political concerns. In this sense, the study shows similar results with the previous ones in the literature (Canagarajah, 1999; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Pennycook, 1999). As a result, for the betterment of EFL classes, applying critical pedagogy in various language classes with various levels is important and fully involved in course books and curriculum.

The implication of this study is multilayered. Teachers can take initiatives and warm up learners by presenting less risky topics to help them adapt themselves to topics not represented in course books or curriculum. In addition, teachers can show learners videos about how students from other cultures debate risky or taboo topics. This kind of application can help them take these as role models. Teachers should endeavor to create a democratic environment for learners to have the opportunity to discuss topics identified in critical pedagogy. In future studies, critical pedagogy in ELT can be initiated at primary schools so that a democratic culture can be developed at early ages to take action, responsibilities and initiatives. Importance of critical pedagogy along with its dimensions and aspects can be gained through seminars and conferences. Adoption of this pedagogical approach may activate new paradigms and parameters for both teachers and learners in foreign language teaching context.

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