

Phương pháp giáo dục phản biện cho lớp học tiếng Anh ở các trường đại học Việt Nam

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TÓM TẮT

Với mục đích phát triển tư duy phản biện cho người học, gần đây phương pháp giáo dục phản biện đã phát triển mạnh trong lĩnh vực giáo dục ngoại ngữ toàn cầu. Tuy nhiên, ở Việt Nam, phương pháp này vẫn còn chưa được nhiều người biết đến và vẫn còn rất nhiều hoài nghi xung quanh tính khả thi của phương pháp này. Bài báo này sẽ tập trung khái quát những khái niệm và mục tiêu chủ yếu của phương pháp giáo dục phản biện, từ đó đưa ra lí do cho việc áp dụng tư duy phản biện vào việc dạy và học tiếng Anh ở các trường đại học Việt Nam.

Từ khóa: *Dạy tiếng Anh, phương pháp giáo dục phản biện, tư duy phản biện.*

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Critical pedagogy for university English language classrooms in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Originally derived from critical thinking, critical pedagogy has rapidly emerged as a promising approach in language education worldwide. However, this method appears relatively novel and highly questionable in English language education in non-Western contexts like Vietnam. This paper, therefore, presents an overview of critical pedagogy as a language teaching approach and some arguments for the implementation of this approach to improve teaching and learning English as a foreign language in Vietnam, especially in tertiary classrooms.

Keywords: *critical thinking, critical pedagogy, English as a foreign language, English language education*

1. INTRODUCTION

English as a foreign language (EFL) has been significantly increasing in importance in Vietnam for the past few decades. Teaching English has come into the center focus in the national educational policy since this country sped up its integration into the world market in 2007. As an international language, English is considered as a bridge to the world outside. English is taught at all educational levels, and a certificate in English proficiency is required for all graduates.

Nevertheless, English teaching and learning in Vietnam, especially at the tertiary level is not qualified as expected.¹ After over ten years of learning English at school, the majority of graduates are still unable to communicate effectively in English.² This failure can be attributed to different factors such as the serious shortage of learning facilities, teacher-dominated classrooms, grammar-based

testing and assessment, and a limited relevant curriculum in working for students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.¹ Among these, the curriculum in use appears to exert a profound impact. As a result, there is a strong need for a change in EFL teaching in Vietnam.

Meanwhile, researchers who are interested in meaningful and locally relevant curricula suggest critical pedagogy for an alternative approach in language teaching and learning.³ Taking learners' voice as the center, critical pedagogy in EFL considers English language "as not simply a means of expression or communication but as a practice that constructs, and is constructed by, the ways language learners understand themselves, their social surroundings, their histories, and their possibilities for the future."³

With this critical viewpoint in mind, this paper will argue that critical pedagogy could

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serve as a solution for the current teaching situation in Vietnam. The paper will first present a brief description of critical pedagogy as a teaching approach in general and then in English language teaching in specific. The next two sections provide a review of research studies on the practicality and effectiveness of critical pedagogy in Asia and how this approach is compatible with a Vietnamese national project on EFL teaching. The paper will conclude with some implications to implement critical pedagogy for more improvements in English language education in Vietnam.

2. CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AS A TEACHING APPROACH

First proposed by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, critical pedagogy is based on the premise that the world is always full of contradictions, inequality and unfairly distributed power and privilege.⁴ Even educational institutions, which are generally expected to work on neutral ground, indeed have been long serving as contributors to transmission and reproduction of dominant ideologies that are out of date and thus do not reflect learners' need in real life.⁵

Consequently, critical pedagogy attempts to develop students' ability to think critically about their own problems so that they can act on it and improve their life. Accordingly, a meaningful curriculum should include students' life situations as primary contents and take dialogue as the center of learning process to avoid the one-way transmission of knowledge.⁶ Learners therefore can be empowered to act as agents for social changes.⁷ In other words, this approach to education aims to promote the learners' life with a focus on action.

Obviously, this approach is quite contradicted to the well-established teaching practices in many non - Western contexts, also called the banking model of education. This traditional model defines teaching merely as "transmission of knowledge from teachers to students".⁶ What is taught in banking education

is decontextualized knowledge which does not reflect students' own problems and thus may not become as useful as expected.

In contrast, in the problem-posing model of critical pedagogy, teachers are interested in hearing learners' voice rather than perpetuating the power, domination and authority in classrooms. The teachers involve themselves in critical dialogue with their students and work as co-investigators to identify existing problems. These problems will stimulate the process of collaboratively constructing knowledge, and thus the transmitted knowledge is getting not only more relevant but also more engaging. Further, dialogue, as a key to this problem-posing approach, can foster critical thinking and equality among all participants including teachers and students. By striving to resolve the identified problems in dialogue, students are familiarized with making decisions in classrooms, which nurtures their decision-making skills in their own life outside the classroom.⁸ In other words, it can be said that critical pedagogy and its problem-posing model target teaching at "voice, social transformation and agency".⁹

In order to achieve these goals, teachers in critical pedagogy have to adopt two fundamental goals. The first is related to reproduction.¹⁰ Reproduction refers to "how students are conditioned mentally and behaviorally by the practice of schooling to serve dominant ideologies".¹⁰ This condition may be imposed unintentionally but inevitably result in transmission of these ideologies to students, leading to their incompetence in their own life. Consequently, the first task of a critical teacher is to help students recognize this reproductive process to challenge it.

The second related theory is resistance.¹⁰ This theory "explains how there are sufficient contradictions within institution to help subjects resist and subvert such reproduction, gain agency, conduct critical thinking and initiate change".¹⁰ Accordingly, teachers should take the

new role of “Transformative Intellectual” to use their knowledge and skills to challenge structural inequalities in their own classrooms and to raise students’ awareness of current problems to address life situations.

3. CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

When applied into English language teaching (ELT), critical pedagogy has attracted a lot of attention because of its identifying common misunderstandings among English language teachers. As usual, that ELT is increasingly globalized is perceived as inevitable and contributive to the international communication.¹¹ Understandably, English language teachers tend to believe that the acquisition of English is not problematic. However, critical pedagogy advocates have seriously criticized this naive view. Peirce claims that English as a global language is intrinsically political and has become an effective tool for its native speakers to gain power.¹² Hall accuses ELT of “helping to maintain unequal core-periphery relations in the capitalist world-economy, and suppressing diversity of language and thought in the world.”¹³

Since the increasing globalization of English led to the so-called “the international linguistic hegemony of English”,¹⁴ critical pedagogy can take the remedial role to purify and free language classrooms from the linguistic hegemony. Specifically, critical language teachers can raise students’ awareness of dominant ideologies constructed in textbooks designed by native speakers so that they can adopt a positive stance towards both the target language and their native language.

Additionally, most of the current teaching methods in second language education such as Audio lingual, Communicative language teaching or Task-based teaching aim only to help learners communicate in English. They are mainly concerned with what to learn (grammar or communicative competence) and how to learn (methodology).¹¹ This can be attributed to their

belief in “apolitical neutrality of English”,¹⁵ and their view of language classes as isolated from the large historical and social conditions.¹⁵ Accordingly, language teachers and learners are not encouraged to address social issues in classrooms. Critical pedagogy practitioners claim that these current teaching approaches fail to capture “the complexity of language socialization, socio-cultural perspective of learning and learners’ multiple identities”.¹¹

Sharing the same view, Canagarajah adds that methods are not neutral or based on empirical research for purely practical reasons.¹⁵ Teaching methods in use are culturally and ideologically constructed with political economic consequences. Given the mediating role of social, cultural and historical context on the use of teaching methods, Canagarajah shows strong support for pedagogy of post Methodism where no particular method is selected for all language classrooms.¹⁵ Rather, negotiations between teachers and students should be conducted on the most appropriate teaching approach for their own context and learning purpose.

As further clarified by Kumaravadivelu, post Methodism formulates three interacted parameters in language teaching namely particularity, practicality and possibility.¹⁶ Specifically, particularity refers to contextualized pedagogy designed with a deep understanding of local linguistic, sociocultural and political features. It is teachers who are in charge of constructing their own teaching method theories and put it into practice for high practicality. Language learning opens up a wide range of possibilities when tapping learners’ social consciousness for identity information and social transformation rather than confining itself to linguistic knowledge achievements inside the classroom as traditionally practiced. Finally, he emphasizes that students’ linguistic needs are always closely linked to social needs and teachers’ social responsibility for identity formation in language classrooms.

Evidently, critical language pedagogy is aimed both at language learning and at social change. Critical English teaching takes joint goals, developing both English communicative abilities and a critical awareness of the world.¹⁷ Accordingly, critical English language teachers use the same themes as critical pedagogy practitioners when using learners' issues as prompts and targets to learn speaking, writing, reading and listening in English. That is to say, critical language pedagogy neither ignores nor replaces the well-developed teaching methods. Instead, it adds the critical quality to the existing practice.

The critical quality in ELT can be best identified in its view about language and culture choice in classrooms. It has been the case that English-only classrooms are increasingly desirable since they sound more authentic and reflect the usefulness of first language immersion in second language acquisition.⁸ However, critical pedagogy advocates provided empirical evidence for the effectiveness of bilingual instructions in second language teaching.⁸ They argue that abandoning learners to use their mother tongue is a form of linguistic imperialism and a sign of disempowerment in language classrooms.¹⁴ Further, English-only practice can violate the formation of learners' identity, which results in their feeling inferior to the target culture.¹⁸ Therefore, the use of the first language can help maintain English language learners' own cultural identity.

Cultural maintenance is another important view of critical pedagogy in ELT. Because of the inseparability of language and culture, language learners tend to be assimilated into the cultures of English native speakers such as Britain or America. It is obvious that the tendency of monoculturalism merely aims to serve the English natives and highly likely to downgrade learners' own cultural values and beliefs.¹⁶ Therefore, critical pedagogy sets its face against this tendency and advocates the integration of first language culture into English

language classrooms. Once learners' culture is paid enough attention in the classroom, they can have opportunities to think critically about the negative and positive aspects of their own life as well as the foreign life. Students' critical awareness will arise, generating social transformation and bringing about positive changes in their life.¹⁹

4. CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN ACTION IN ASIA

Notwithstanding these innovative orientations of critical pedagogy, the mismatch between this Western approach and the sociocultural context in Asia may cast serious doubts on its implementation in Vietnam. As widely acknowledged, ELT in Asian countries such as Japan, Vietnam, China or Taiwan, etc. has long considered learners as passive recipients of knowledge, teachers as the center of all activities and authority in classrooms, and the banking model as the most effective approach. These mismatching features that have been documented to lead to the failure in implementing the communicative language teaching, another well-known Western teaching approach.²⁰ Despite these doubts, this approach, indeed, has been successfully put into practice in different Asian countries, especially at the tertiary level.

Typically, in Iran the problem-posing approach of critical pedagogy was implemented in an EFL class by Sadeghi.¹¹ His study aims to find out how this approach helps maintain discussions and develop students' critical consciousness. Accordingly, his students were engaged in learning activities that could increase their awareness of social justice and their willingness to make more contribution to the society. After one semester, feedback from student participants show majority support for this approach and their strong preference for daily life topics raised by themselves and the teacher over decontextualized topics presented in the textbooks.

Working towards the same goal, Sekigawa and his colleagues studied three different groups

of EFL university students in Japan.²¹ They were nursing students, international students and those majoring in leadership. The main aims of the study are both to improve students' speaking skill and to encourage them to express their own opinions for a higher critical consciousness. Findings reveal that at first the participant students felt anxious about this newly - introduced teaching method due to their low English proficiency, but later they could convey their ideas in English effectively on topics related to their own problems.

Revealing the similar positive results, a study in Taiwan by Yang and Gamble used an experimental design with two freshman EFL classes to examine the practicality and effectiveness of activities enhancing critical thinking.²² While the experimental group took part in debates or peer critiques, the control group was involved in familiar activities such as group presentations and writing process. Data were collected from General English Proficiency Tests and content-based achievement tests for both groups as well as group projects and attitudinal questionnaires for the experimental group. Analyzing all the data shows that the experimental group outperformed the control group in both tests and demonstrated a higher critical-thinking skill.

More recently, Kuo designed a critical thinking activity for non-English majors in Taiwan based on the theory of critical literacy.²³ The activity engaged students in using a picture book in different learning tasks and then evaluating it from different perspectives. In order to clarify the effectiveness of this activity, the researcher analyzed data from classroom observation notes, participants' reflection papers and assignments as well as follow-up interviews. Results indicate that learners acquired critical competence when investigating multiple perspectives and re-examining their real world.

It can be seen from these studies that critical pedagogy has proved practicality and

efficacy in various ELT contexts for higher education in Asia. Although similar research remains hard to locate in literature in Vietnam, these studies have provided support for critical pedagogy implementation there given its comparable learning culture. Another favorable condition can result from the correspondence between critical pedagogy and the goals of the National Foreign Language Education Project launched by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training.

5. CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND THE NATIONAL FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROJECT IN VIETNAM

In an attempt to improve English language proficiency in Vietnam, a project called National Foreign Language Education Project was set up in 2008 in order to renovate the teaching and learning of foreign languages within the national educational system. The project mainly aims to enable Vietnamese university students to reach a globally recognized level of English language.²⁴ Noticeably, this national project has some targets for the 2017 - 2025 period in accordance with critical pedagogy.

Specifically, the ultimate goal of this project is to explore new approaches to make ELT more relevant, efficient and productive and to satisfy a variety of learners' needs.²⁴ As previously mentioned, critical pedagogy views learning as a contextualized and personalized process, so the teaching curriculum and materials in use have to be relevant to the target students to provide meaningful education.¹⁰

Another criterion of the target teaching approach in the Project is its capability to enable language learners to reflect students' own values and prior learning experiences.²⁴ Again, these aims are compatible with an important orientation of critical EFL pedagogy that considers learning as a means to tap on students' previous knowledge and to maintain their identity as well as to respect their culture.¹⁰

Last but not least, the desired teaching approach has to enhance students' autonomy, creativity and critical thinking.²⁴ These are central concepts of critical pedagogy as it states learning is based on critical dialogue and learners actively taking part in constructing knowledge.

As can be seen above, critical pedagogy is not in conflict with the development goals of language education in Vietnam. Therefore, critical pedagogy appears to be more situated to implement in ELT in Vietnam than ever before.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IMPLEMENTATION IN EFL CLASSROOMS IN VIETNAM

In the following section are some research-driven implications for EFL teachers and educators for more effective and successful implementation of critical pedagogy in EFL classrooms in Vietnam.

Firstly, critical pedagogy should be included in EFL teacher education programs. According to Canagarajah, teachers have to be critical thinkers and know how to facilitate learning rather than merely transmit content knowledge.¹⁰ However, this mission is no doubt very challenging on the part of teachers since they have long acted as passive learners and received no training on the problem-posing teaching model. Indeed, Rashidi and Mozaffari provided evidence for EFL teachers' professional concerns as the main reasons for their reluctance in critical pedagogy implementation.¹⁹ Therefore, training courses in critical pedagogy should be first offered in order to engage teachers in this newly-introduced approach.

Secondly, using Vietnamese should be allowed in low-level EFL classes. This practice can not only engage students effectively in critical dialogue but also assist their acquisition of a foreign language and maintain their cultural identity.⁸

Thirdly, semi-negotiated syllabus should be employed at the initial implementation stages. According to Clarke, the negotiated syllabus "allows full learner participation in

selection of content, mode of working, route of working, assessment, and so on".²⁵ This practice can help shorten the power distance between teachers and students and promote learner-centered classrooms, which are the heart of critical pedagogy. However, it seems to be so challenging to use the full negotiated syllabus in the Vietnamese context given long-existing institutional constraints, traditional beliefs and the importance of exams. Therefore, it may be more feasible to use the semi-negotiated syllabus at the tertiary level in which students can choose their topics, supplementary learning materials or the mode of mid-term assessment.

Last but not least, codes should be used to promote critical thinking and dialogue. According to Wallerstein, codes are "concrete physical expressions that represent all of the aspects of a theme surrounding a problem".¹⁷ They can take the forms of photographs, stories, movies, songs, etc. Teachers can use codes to engage students in critical dialogue where they "name the problem, understand how it applies to them, determine the causes of the problem, generalize to others, and finally, suggest alternatives or solutions to the problem".¹⁷ Accordingly, students can increase their critical thinking, which is the target of critical pedagogy.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Evidently, critical pedagogy appears to be a viable ELT method that could be exploited in Vietnam. This approach would not only make ELT in Vietnam more relevant to language learners and hopefully improve their language proficiency but also foster students' awareness of problems arising in their daily life. Critical pedagogy is feasible in Vietnam because it has been realized in similar English teaching contexts in Asia, and it is in accordance with the aims of the current national project on foreign language education. These aims can be achieved by offering training courses and using the negotiated syllabus, codes and the native language to assist English language teaching and learning in university classrooms.

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