

## Iranian EFL Teachers' Voices on the Pedagogy of Word and World

Critical pedagogy (CP) with the eventual aim of creating changes in society towards the socially just world rests upon the premise that language learning is understood as a sociopolitical event. Schools and classrooms are not merely seen as the neutral and apolitical sites or oxymoron of transmitting taken-for-granted knowledge and common sense to students but rather as the political and democratic sites in which teachers, through praxis-oriented activities, furnish opportunities for students to critically question oppressive systems, hierarchies, and sociopolitical inequalities. Through the connection of word to the world, or the relationship between classroom learning and students' lived experiences and worlds, teachers can create social transformation and empowerment in the marginalized students' lives. However, teachers as the transformative intellectuals can facilitate this transformative process only if they are equipped with the critical theories, theoretical underpinnings and practical implications of CP. A brief look at the CP literature reveals that most of the researches center on its theories and conceptual dimensions without presenting any pragmatic discourse or practical realizations to critical pedagogues. In fact, this study intends to investigate the problems, concerns, and frustrations that Iranian EFL teachers encounter while enacting this alternative pedagogy. So, the researchers adopted purposive sampling to choose thirty-four EFL teachers from private English language institutes in Tehran, Yazd and Shiraz, Iran; and focused interview as the appropriate data gathering instrument of qualitative research. Finally, the researchers unearthed the relevant themes concerning the practical dimensions as the supplementary components of CP in EFL context of Iran.

### Keywords:

Critical pedagogy; transformation; praxis-oriented activities; transformative intellectuals; Iranian EFL teachers

### 1 Introduction

During the last three decades, due to the absence of a critical view in the ELT profession previously fraught with a large number of monolithic methods, theories, and approaches as the products of the "evangelical zeal" of centers (Pennycook, 1994), many scholars (Auerbach, 1991; Judd, 1987; Peirce, 1989; Pennycook, 1994, 1995; Phillipson, 1992) commenced debates attempting to question and challenge the field of ELT. The discussion centered on the issue of the detachment of language teaching and learning from the cultural and sociopolitical dynamics of language use and wider society. Further, it was argued that some SLA researches saw the language classroom as a self-contained minisociety unable to capture the socialization complexity, sociocultural

perspectives of language learning, and learners' multiple identities. Indeed, none of the SLA theories of language learning suggested an optimum multi-variety approach demanded by various learning conditions (Lantolf, 2000).

These arguments, thus, led to the critical movement in the language teaching profession so that language learning was no longer recognized merely as the acquisition of language systems and communicative competence. This critical shift stressed the necessity of connecting the word to the world and looking at the ideological nature of language. It was also associated with the extension and creation of educational spaces to relate classroom activities to the sociopolitical aspects of students' lived experiences and worlds. Critical Pedagogy (CP), then, as the consequence of this critical shift emerged on the scene of the ELT profession and became the focus of attention of practitioners, educators, and teachers who strived for an alternative approach to create huge change in the language learning atmosphere of classrooms. According to Aghagolzadeh and Davari (2012), the appearance of the critical intellectual movement both challenged the mainstream ELT and introduced CP as an alternative approach to mainstream applied linguistics especially in periphery countries such as Iran where English is used as the second or foreign language in different contexts.

With regard to the sociocultural and political facets of language learning and teaching, many researchers propose the insertion of CP into language teaching as an indispensable essence of language teaching (Sadeghi, 2008). Critical pedagogy, indeed, maintains that both language learning and teaching are regarded as political processes and language learning is not naively taken as a means of communication and expression rather "a practice that constructs the ways learners understand themselves, their sociohistorical surrounding, and their possibility for the future" (Norton & Toohy, 2004, p. 1). McLaren (1993, 1995) defined CP as a mode of thinking, negotiating and transforming the relationship that exists

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among classroom teaching, knowledge production, the institutional schooling structures, and the sociopolitical relationships of the wider society. Kincheloe (2005) also states that the main concern of CP is transformation of power relationships that are oppressive and give rise to the oppression of humans. It means that CP looks at education as a political action in order to uproot inequality from the society and offer the oppressed freedom (Kincheloe, 2004; McLaren, 1995, 1998).

In fact, CP as an educational-political tool seeks to unoppress the subjugated people, and end the different forms of human suffering (Kanpol, 1999). Its most crucial theme is the centrality of politics and power in understanding of how schooling system works (Shakouri & RonaghiFard Abkenar, 2012). CP, thus, attempts to struggle against the power relations and institutional processes circulating in the school system and classrooms. Hence, classrooms are not seen as an oxymoron or "pure pedagogy" within the critical perspective rather as sites of committed social and political encounter between the people struggling for empowerment or emancipation. Riasati and Mollaei (2012) also stated, no education is considered to be neutral, as it should aim at empowering students with a model of critical behavior that can be manifested in students' outside community behaviors and real lived experiences.

In addition, in Sadeghi and Ketabi's sense (2009), CP also seeks the enhancement of students' critical consciousness to challenge the oppression and domination that may constrain or distort their modes of thinking and acting. In other words, according to Riasati and Mollaei (2012), CP requires people to become independent learners, critical thinkers, and doers. As Apple (1999) states, this critical consciousness means the repositioning of a person in the eyes of the dispossessed to struggle against the ideological and institutional processes which reproduce oppressive practices.

Heras (1999) believes that the successes and failures of any educational system rely on the linguistic and sociocultural interaction that people have to challenge the dominant ideology, institutional practice, and social relations. In other words, this process of questioning and challenging the power and oppression in the forms of taken-for-granted facts and commonsense facilitates the path towards social and political transformation leading to emancipation and liberation (Safari & Pourhashemi, 2012). Further, according to Shakouri and RonaghiFard Abkenar (2012), a perfect education should strive for political transformation in order to bring about justice and human liberation.

## **2 A review of related literature: history and core concepts**

Through a cursory look at the literature of CP, one confronts a smorgasbord of different terms and concepts associated with critical pedagogy such as critical theory, critical literacy, critical reflection, critical language awareness, liberatory education, education of equity, empowerment, praxis, and social justice. Historically, CP gained its life in the thinking, works, and pedagogical

practices of Gramsci (Norooziasiam & Soozandefar, 2011) and the key figures from the Frankfurt school of critical theory established in 1923 (Gur-ze'ev, Kincheloe, & Lather, 1998; McLaren, 2003). In fact, Marx was recognized as the major thinker of this school whose views and ideas increasingly influenced the critical theory developed by this school. According to Marx, the most crucial problem of each society was socioeconomic inequality emanating from socioeconomic conditions. In his view, social justice relied on economic conditions in the society (Eisner, 2002). Marx's views and theories concerning schools and education were embraced by a number of critical theorists of Frankfurt school such as Horkheimer, Theodor, Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse. All these critical theorists who paved the way for the development of critical theory believed that schools reproduced and promoted the hierarchical power relationship, dependency, taken-for-granted truths, and a distorted vision of the society operating as an obstacle for transformation and social change (Eisner, 2002).

The concept of CP can be seen in the works of a number of critical pedagogues including Freire (1972), Apple (1995; 2003; 2004), Giroux (1988; 1999), Darder (1991), Bellhooks (1994; 2003), Kincheloe (2004), and Zinn (1995). However, in reality, CP was rooted in the seminal works and groundbreaking writings of Paulo Freire who was a Brazilian educator and the inaugural philosopher of CP, also known as the father of critical pedagogy (McLaren, 2000). In his significant publication, *Pedagogy of the oppressed* which was centered on literacy of education, he asserted that schools and educational institutions were oppressive and dehumanizing and reproduced unequal status quo. The publication of his book was actually the result of the critical projects and personal experiences that he had with the Brazilian impoverished people, seeking to emancipate and empower them to challenge the oppressive and unfair conditions in their lives.

The term *critical* which is central in CP refers to how dominant ideologies drive the construction of meanings and understandings so that certain groups of people are privileged whereas others remain marginalized (Hawkins & Norton, 2009). Researchers and scholars have examined this reality of how language can shape and reproduce the power relationships in society. As Fairclough (1995, p. 219) states "It is mainly in discourse that consent is achieved, ideologies are transmitted, and practices, meanings, values and identities are taught and learnt." It means that texts and language use are shaped and reshaped by discursive practices and relationships that lead to the advantage of some individuals over other humans. It is through this process that unequal power relationships are produced and reproduced in the society, interactions, social relationships, and learning practices.

One of the central tenets associated with Freire's work was the concept of *praxis* which means the locus at which theory and practice are connected to lead social and political transformation and change. In other words, it refers to a give-and-take relationship occurring between theory and practice (Shakouri & RonaghiFard

Abkenar, 2012). Freire (1985) alerted us about the fact that where theory is cut off from practice, it simply becomes rhetoric. Thus, separation from theory leads to nothing but blind activism. Monchinski (2008) highlighted that it is perceived as a complicated activity through which people construct culture and society and change into critically conscious human beings. He also stated that rationality and self-determination are taken as the features of praxis.

Freire (1973, 1974) also advocated *dialogue* by which students in a dialogic process make visible the ideologies, power relationships, and the ways through which individuals are situated. As Kincheloe (2005, p. 21) puts it, "all knowledge is socially constructed in a dialogue between the world and human consciousness". Freire (1988) holds that dialogism is the foundation of critical education since it is a tool of actively engaging students in their own education. He also believes that no communication exists without dialogue, and when there is no communication, no true education exists. According to Shakouri and RonaghiFard Abkenar (2012), dialogue restricts teacher's talk, provides opportunities for both teacher and students in that teacher listens more while students question oppression, social inequalities and a myriad of sociopolitical injustices in society. Thus, through the process of dialogism, a rapport is created between students and teacher through which each side is freely able to interpret and negotiate the other side's intentions and purposes.

For Freire (1970), CP is linked to the development of *conscientisation*, translated as "*critical consciousness*". A central goal of CP is, thus, to enhance people's *critical consciousness* by which individuals are given a voice to challenge the unfair status quo of a society. Freire acknowledged the significance of a dialogic method of learning and teaching in that both students and teacher are mutually engaged in the production of knowledge leading to the development of their critical consciousness. From Freire's perspective, the task of CP is to bring the oppressed group to a critical consciousness of the situation as the initiation of liberatory. As highlighted by Aliakbari and Faraji (2011), educators can also help students to engage in critical consciousness through empowering them to reflect on their own worlds which is defined as self-evaluation in reality.

Another concept used in Freire's critical pedagogy, is *banking model of education* which locates at a stark contrast to *problem posing*, *dialogical theory of education*, or *transformative education*. Based on banking education, predetermined information and deposits of knowledge are transmitted from teacher as the transmitter to students as the receivers who have not found any chance in their lives to engage, challenge, and question this futile and irrelevant knowledge. Drawing on problem posing education, teacher's and students' lived experiences are shared in a non-hierarchical way leading to their sociopolitical development. Actually, through this non-authoritarian process of shaping and reshaping of meanings and understandings based on participatory interaction, learners can find the opportunity to express their own voices and

liberate themselves from the oppressive sociopolitical inequalities and injustices. So, teacher's role is not a transmitter but a transformative intellectual or a reflective scholar who helps students develop critical consciousness and become the social agents of change through transformation. Each student becomes a critical thinker who does not simply accept the common sense rather he or she attempts to interrogate and investigate the nature of truth.

## 2.1 Purpose and significance of the study

Over the past dozen years, the issue of CP as an alternative approach has been hotly debated and discussed among scholars in the academic settings. Drawing upon the main figures in this area (Freire, 1970; McLaren, 1994, 2003b; Giroux, 2001; hooks, 1994; Darder, 1991; Kincheloe, 2004; Shor, 1992), its advocates argue for its fruitfulness as a panacea for language education. Thus, to justify it as an honorable and attainable pedagogy in EFL contexts, they bring so many various reasons. It is argued that CP is grounded in the experiences of the marginalized and oppressed people; it is on the basis of a critique of economic and social oppression; it has a focus on empowering the people to become the agents of social transformation; and it uses dialogue as a way of emancipating people from the oppressive chains.

These are a few reasons among a vast amount of justification for the use of CP as the best choice to salvage the marginalized groups in society. However, when it is put into practice, its realities become much more complex and are associated with concerns, frustrations, and challenges. Some critical thinkers (Bowers, 1987) believe that the so called critical pedagogy has been articulated with abstract critical theories and political vision; hence, it should be called "*critical educational theory*" rather than "*critical pedagogy*". In this regard, Keesing-Syles (2003) contends that a central issue is that the potential for application of CP in educational settings has not been considered in its literature so that it has not yet found a convenient home.

According to Akbari (2009), the practical realizations of CP have not been explored and most of the references to the concept of CP have been restricted to the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings. In the same vein, Gore (1992) expressed concerns about its realities for practitioners and the tendency of many critical pedagogues such as Giroux and McLaren to produce abstract theories that were devoid of any applicability. They believed that the most important issue was the failure of CP to prescribe practical implications for use in language classrooms. The consequence of this deficiency would lead to the limited number of its audience having time, energy, and tendency to struggle with it. Accordingly, Johnson (1999) also states that in ESL contexts, CP is criticized due to its limited work on tangible educational practices.

Thus, with respect to the fact that CP is highly saturated with critical implications, theories, and concepts but a dearth of applicable knowledge and pragmatic discourse for teachers, the present study makes an attempt to shed light on the practicality of CP

in the EFL context of Iran. It is intended that the insights gained through this study should assist EFL teachers, educators, textbook developers, and higher order policy makers. It is further hoped that the study contributes to the process started by highly prominent figures like Paulo Freire who spent invaluable time and inexhaustible efforts to create a revolution in the EFL profession.

### 3 Method

This qualitative study which is interpretive in nature aims to investigate the constraints, problems, and frustrations faced by EFL teachers when putting critical pedagogy into practice.

#### 3.1 Context

Teaching English in the EFL context of Iran happens in two different settings, as public schools and private language institutes. On the one hand, in public schools, language program is totally under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. The English teachers as the employees of the ministry work in one or many schools in order to teach English on the basis of the pre-determined textbooks provided by the ministry. The nature of the system is banking education through which the passive students receive information transmitted from the teacher as the authority in the classroom. The teachers themselves pursue the principles and orders dictated from the principals of schools or the education organizations located in each city of Iran. In fact, this authoritarian relationship which exists in the system does not allow English teachers to have any autonomy or creativity since they are obliged to stick to the textbooks and foisted syllabi on them to cover the materials.

On the other hand, in language institutes which have recently mushroomed in each city of Iran, students can gain communicative skills and hence they can compensate for the deficiency of the public educational system to be competent and fluent users of English language. The EFL instruction in most private language institutes is based on CLT which is claimed as the best method for teaching English to students. Although the traces of banking education are somehow seen in these institutes, the roles of teachers and students seem to be much more flexible than their rigid roles in public schools. This can be due to the further participation of students in classroom activities, the interactive nature of the classes, a variety of activities and tasks used by the teacher, and the nature of the textbooks and materials including audio- and visual materials.

To investigate the problems and constraints associated with the application of critical pedagogy in the EFL context of Iran, the researchers chose language institutes in Tehran (11 participants), Yazd (12 participants) and Shiraz (11 participants). The reason for this choice was the nature of the instructional system in the institutes which fundamentally differed from that of the public schools.

#### 3.2 Participants

One of the researchers who was working as the supervisor in EFL institutes selected thirty-four (twelve

males and twenty-two females) teachers as the participants based on purposive sampling or judgment sampling. This method is a nonprobability sampling by which the researcher selects participants on the basis of his or her experience. According to Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003a, p.713), purposive sampling involves the selection of cases or units "based on a specific purpose rather than randomly". In fact, this method which includes homogenous selection counts as a method of sampling in qualitative research (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorenson, 2010). Thus, the participants of the study were selected based on the main purpose of the research which was teachers' views about the applicability of CP. Their EFL experiences and familiarity with the EFL theories and teaching methodology in addition to their willingness for participation were the researchers' criteria for selecting the participants of current research. In English language institutes, these thirty-four EFL teachers were all teaching English to the adults at the advanced level and had the experience of English teaching with the average of five years. Ten of these teachers held M.A in TEFL, five were M.A students in TEFL, four M.A. in English literature, and the rest were B.A graduates in English literature. At the outset of the project, the researcher assured all the participants that ethics would be observed and confidentiality ensured. Name and identities were not revealed.

#### 3.3 Instrument

The researchers used focused interview as the appropriate method of collecting the qualitative data for this research study. Participants who were free to respond in their own words briefly or at length, interacted not only with the researchers but also with their colleagues. The interaction in focused interview revealed much more about participants' points of view and understandings than a researcher-dominated interview (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorenson, 2010).

In this qualitative study, although the researchers had less control over the interview in the focus group and it was much more difficult than the individual interview to analyze the data, the researchers preferred it to the individual interview. The reason behind its use was the socially oriented nature of the activity which provided this chance for the researchers to hear their different ideas, thoughts, experiences, and voices on the topic at the same time and how the participants incorporated other participant' viewpoints to restructure their own perspectives.

#### 3.4 Procedure

As previously highlighted in the beginning sections of the text, the main theme of current research was to find the practicality of CP in educational system of Iran as an EFL context. The teacher participants were already aware of the main underpinnings of CP (they have passed courses on CP in their graduate studies, and those whom we found might have not be acquainted with the pertinent ideologies of CP were asked to read some textbooks prior to the research, and take notes of some lectures by scholars of the field available on YouTube, such as *Critical*



*Pedagogy and Revolutionary Praxis in the Age of Imperialism* by Peter McLaren; *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: A Conversation with Profs. Noam Chomsky, Howard Gardner, & Bruno della Chiesa*; *Occupying Critical Pedagogy: Reclaiming the Legacy of Freire* by Peter McLaren; and *The End of Education Schooling: Late Capitalism & New Directions* by Peter McLaren), meantime, they had the chance of correspondence with researchers of the study. So, they were completely aware of the CP and its pertinent ideologies needed for current theme of research to talk and provide feedback on the raised issues in our interviews. As illuminated in the introduction and literature review, CP is used to empower students and language users with a tool to learn the hidden ideologies of society and read between the lines, they are also supposed to learn not to be just the users of teachers' and practitioners thinking and they need to unravel the inequalities. Therefore, students are considered as members of society that political and cultural issues will affect their lives and experiences. Therefore, the participant teachers were not supposed to talk about current controversial topics and issues, though they were given the chance to voice their inner thoughts concerning implementation of CP in their classes, students' feedback, the textbooks, policies of the government, and their experiences of pre-service and in-service courses.

As mentioned earlier, teachers were all acquainted with the principles of CP and how it can be implemented in the EFL classes, based on their prior undergraduate/graduate courses, study of textbooks, and their notes based on the above mentioned lectures. The researchers formed two focus groups in each institute involving both male and female participants who were selected according to purposive sampling. The researchers in the first focus group session familiarized the participants with the critical pedagogy, its history, concepts, and theoretical underpinnings. During this two hour session, the participants had an opportunity to dialogically interact with the researchers and other participants. In case any ambiguity was raised, the researchers would clarify the issue with further explanations, illustrations, and examples. Then, each teacher was supposed to devote two sessions of his or her class to teaching English on the bases of the principles of critical pedagogy. As teaching cycle in public schools has its own rigid structure and all taught policies of Ministry of Education in pre-service and in-service should be observed, these two sessions will provide insightful hints and clues emanating from students' feedback and teachers' comments on implementation of CP in the classes.

The teachers already had some classes in English language institutes where they tried principles of CP, as policies of Ministry of Education are not taken into account. It means, materials are selected based on the policies of institute, students' needs and their current language proficiency, and available updated textbooks, so they can freely engage students in class activities. However, teachers' previous experiences of teaching in public schools, implementation of CP principles in English

language institutes, and their current experience of teaching two sessions in public schools in accordance with CP principles are acknowledged to find teaching barriers and obstacles teachers might have in implementing CP in classes where materials, teaching syllabi and curricula are prescribed and foisted on teachers by Ministry of Education.

The next focus group which took place two weeks after the first session concentrated on teachers' voices about the implementation of CP in their classes. The researcher used a cell-phone and field notes to accurately keep the record of voices. All the participants took part in the discussion triggered by the researchers' opening questions. Through dialogic and interactive discussion with all participants, the researchers attempted to fully gain their ideas, opinions, and understandings of the issue. There were some other four brown bag meetings, each for two hours in a week after the interview session. So, each participant had the chance to elaborate and illuminate the points they might have missed to point out during the interviews. The process of data collection was stopped when it reached the level of data saturation and no new information was forthcoming.

### 3.5 Data analysis

The process of transcribing and analyzing the data immediately began after the researcher collected the saturated data. Drawing on Strauss and Corbin's (1998) constant comparative model, the researcher pursued three steps of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to analyze the data. During the first stage, the data were chunked into small units. Then, the codes or core categories were attached to the units. Axial coding as the subsequent step was used to develop concepts and categories around the core. Finally, through the use of selective coding, the researchers could develop and find the themes which expressed the content of the groups and categories. As desired data were collected through interview session and four meetings we had with participants, the researchers applied member checking as a method of triangulation to establish the credibility of the data at the end of data analysis to gain further clarification, meaning, and accuracy from the participants. The emerged themes highlighted the problems, constraints and obstacles that the Iranian EFL teachers were faced while applying critical pedagogy approach in their classes.

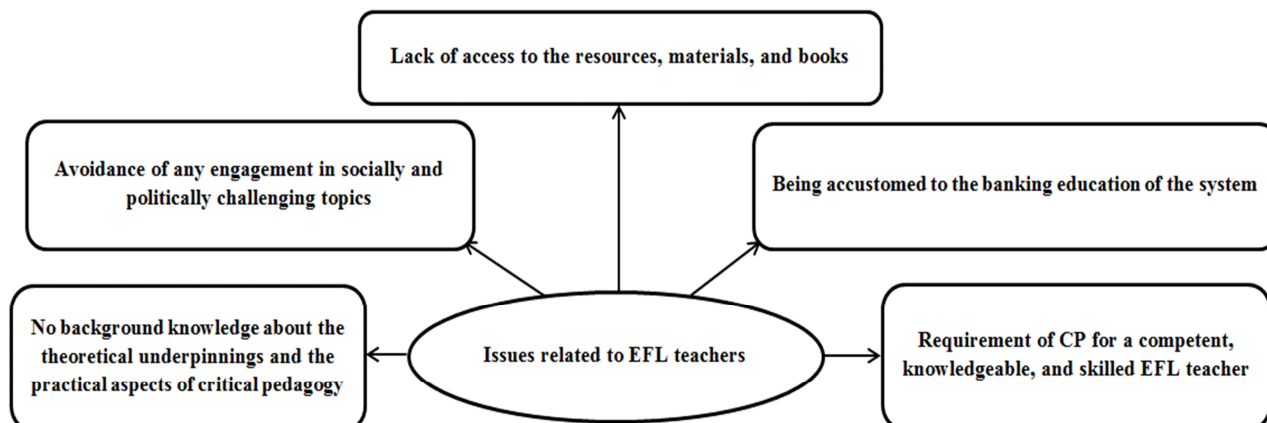
### 4 Key findings

The researchers could disclose the relevant concepts after the process of transcription and codification of the data in the current research. The emergent themes concentrate on the practical realization of CP in the EFL context of Iran. The themes are sorted into two categories. The first assortment of concepts deals with the practical considerations, constraints or problems related to Iranian EFL teachers. The second deals with the practical problems of CP related to the students when EFL teachers attempted to implement such principles in classes.

#### 4.1 Issues related to EFL teachers

Each of the following themes has a focus on Iranian EFL teachers' practical problems or constraints of implementing CP in their English classrooms.

Fig 1: Issues related to Iranian EFL teachers in CP classes



##### 4.1.1. No background knowledge about the theoretical underpinnings and the practical aspects of critical pedagogy

To effectively apply CP, EFL teachers are in an urgent need of possessing the knowledge base of this alternative approach concerning the theoretical and conceptual aspects of CP as well as its practical considerations. In fact, teachers cannot become agents of social change unless they have an idea about what a transformative intellectual is, what goal CP pursues, how the ordinary classroom activities can be changed into transformative social activities through which students achieve emancipation and liberation, and how the classroom site can be a democratic space leading to the liberative transformation of both teacher and students. The development of students' critical perspectives to interrogate and act upon the sociopolitical inequalities, undemocratic injustices and oppressive control is gained when teachers themselves possess the necessary critical skills to challenge the unfair status quo, deep-seated knowledge and assertions transmitted through an oppressive schooling system, reproduction practices, and the hegemony of education. It means lack of foundational theoretical knowledge, essential practical skills, and information pose challenges and problems for teachers who attempt to introduce and incorporate CP in their classes. In this project, a teacher explained this issue as:

I think I can't use CP perfectly in my class because I have no basic knowledge about it. The satisfactory outcome from the application of CP is gained when I participate in teaching training programs concerning CP teaching. Or at least I'm supposed to read many papers and books to have an idea about it.

Based on this teacher's view point, the possession of conceptual and practical knowledge is necessary for a critical practitioner. According to Aliakbari and Allahmoradi (2012), Iranian EFL teachers are in need of a breath of information and knowledge on CP, critical skills, content

and the pedagogical guidelines to teach on the basis of principles of CP. As Safari and Pourhashemi (2012) also stated, this deficiency can be compensated through universities, private language institutes, pre-service and in-service programs in which teachers can obtain the necessary knowledge and skills regarding the theoretical and practical aspects of CP. However, these researchers also assert that in EFL context of Iran, there exist a few universities in which CP as a component of the course syllabus is taught and researched. Meanwhile, few university instructors and lecturers showed interest in the theme of critical pedagogy.

##### 4.1.2. Avoidance of any engagement in socially and politically challenging topics

The issues addressed through CP should be the ones that are directly linked to students' cultural and sociopolitical lives and experiences. That is, teachers as the transformative agents are required to use the challenging hot topics in order to connect language class to the social community outside the walls of the classroom. In effect, the teachers' mission in the journey of creating the transformative and liberating education is to shift students' attention to the sociopolitical and economic inequalities and injustices hidden in the form of taken-for-granted knowledge and assumptions which are central in students' lives. Further, to foster spaces in classrooms in which learning as the social activity is not artificially distinct from the society, teachers should engage students with the broader society in a dialectic and transformative manner. Hence, the pursuit of transformation, social emancipation, and justice in the lives of marginalized students depends on teachers' investigation of those topics and materials which Freire and Macedo (1999) conceptualized as the relationship of word to the world. Thus, through the use of controversial issues and activities, students' minds and awareness are exploited towards the social change and transformation.

However, in regard to our EFL context, these questions might be posed that whether the discourse produced

through the pedagogy can be as liberatory as possible. In countries with traditions, ethnic cultures, and religious principles, at what cost the social change gained? Is it at the expense of losing and jeopardizing teachers' professional lives? Are teachers able to blindly apply the principles of CP without taking into account the risks endangering their lives and jobs? A teacher referred to this problem as the following:

Oh, I didn't know CP involves working through socially and politically challenging topics. If I knew before, I would never ever like to apply it in my classroom. I don't like to lose everything at the cost of CP. Let's continue with the CLT that I worked with before, at least, my life would be safe and sound.

Another teacher said:

Actually, while teachers apply CP principles in the classroom, they should consider the traditional society, too. We live in a country with the ethnic traditions, local customs, and religious culture. It is not easy to use the social and political topics in classroom. I think it leads to a lot of resistance and disagreement. In my opinion, CP cannot be applicable in our society due to the political, cultural, and social limitations.

These teachers believe that as there are risky situations for the application of CP, nobody dares to put it into practice. As Sadeghi and Ketabi (2009) claim, most Iranian EFL teachers do not exhibit any interest towards the politically and socially challenging issues. They consider it as something taboo jeopardizing their personal and professional lives. It does not mean Iranian EFL teachers are ignorant of political and social issues of their lives, but according to Safari and Pourhashemi (2012), they do not want to involve themselves with such matters. Thus, the movement from the theoretical principles of CP towards practice is not feasible. In this regard, Aliakbari and Allahmoradi (2012) state that CP can be embedded into the EFL context of Iran if it does not contradict with the tradition and culture of our society. Accordingly, based on the present study, it is suggested that EFL teachers be wary of the political, social, and cultural constraints and limitations of their own context before doing any critical activities.

#### **4.1.3 Lack of access to the resources, materials, and books**

Teachers' awareness can be enhanced if they have access to the books and materials whose contents include introduction to CP, theoretical cornerstones, and practical dimensions. The availability of books on CP and internet can be greatly helpful leading to the development of teachers' critical understandings and perspectives. Through a simple searching on a modern search engine like Google or Google advanced search, teachers can find a huge amount of information on the issue of CP. Accordingly, one of the Iranian EFL teachers explained:

Nobody can find the books on critical pedagogy in the Iranian bookstores. I visited some bookstores in the city to find a book but I didn't find any. Maybe, publishers have no interest in such books or maybe this issue is not appealing even for the academic people. However, luckily, I could find so many papers and books on the internet which gave me a lot of insights on CP.

According to this teacher, although the books and materials are not available on the market, teachers can surf the internet to find sufficient information. Regarding the issue of the ELT materials, whereas CP suffers from poor materials, it discourages the use of commercially published instructional materials and textbooks (Rashidi & Safari, 2011). In the context of Iran, one can hear EFL teachers' complaints and concerns about the kinds of textbooks used in the institutes since the topics and contents of such textbooks are not appropriate for CP. One teacher commented as:

In my opinion, the topics and issues in the EFL textbooks that we use to teach are not suitable at all. I think they are socio-politically and culturally unbiased so that they do not make any connection between students' social experiences and the learning in the classroom. Maybe, there have been some deliberate attempts to make them neutralized.

In this regard, Akbari (2008a) states that many of the textbook materials used in the EFL settings of Iran are neutralized and sanitized in order not to lose the market potential. Thus, in this process, many topics of the instructional textbooks are eliminated. He believes that the textbook materials available on the market include safe topics which do not allow for political consciousness raising and social transformation. According to Safari and Pourhashemi (2012), most of the instructional course books accessible on the markets of Iran are politically and socially neutral including topics not relating to students' social lives and larger society. They are also saturated with a great amount of taken-for-granted knowledge and assumptions which are irrelevant to Iranian students' sociopolitical worlds and experiences. Actually, this type of information embedded in the textbooks prepares the grounds for teaching English based on the banking model of education. Thus, in this process, teachers become just the transmitter of the futile information and sterile knowledge to students who are treated as the passive objects.

Based on this study, topics and contents of the textbooks should be meaningful and locally situated relating to students' sociopolitical lives in the society. Therefore, Iranian materials developers and textbooks writers are suggested to include challenging and controversial topics in the instructional materials to furnish opportunities and life chances for students to "read world" before "read word" (Freire & Macedo, 1999). Norooziasam and Soozandefar (2011) also indicated that such concepts emphasized that teachers

are required to relate the language classroom to the community and consequently, activate their minds in order to go towards solving problems and transformation. In sum, raising challenging hot topics can change the atmosphere of the classroom towards students' further socializing and transformation through which they can gain consciousness awareness of the power relationships, sociopolitical inequalities and oppressive injustices covered in the taken-for-granted reproducing practices.

#### **4.1.4 Being accustomed to the banking education of the system**

Critical pedagogy as a new approach to language teaching and learning assumes an equal relationship between teacher and students according to democratic principles and social justice. Actually, as Kanpol (1999) puts it, CP challenges those views and disciplines which presume conventional relationships between these two parties and convey an oppressive authority in the form of a master and a slave or in Freire's (1970) sense the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. Further, CP promotes a broad academic role; in addition, it depicts teachers as liberating and transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 2004). The teachers as the transformative agents struggle for the promotion of students' social agency, voice, and change through creating democratic spaces for dialoguing and open communication.

Hence, a teacher working through CP which is dialogic, liberatory or interactive in nature in Freire's (1999) terms not only teaches but also is taught through the dialogue with students who not only are taught but teach in this process of dialogic interaction. According to Freire (1972), all the people are at the same time learners and teachers. It means their roles are continuously shaped and reshaped in a process that leads to the growth of both sides. In a dialogic approach, the transformative role of the teacher and the democratic space of language learning classrooms as the sites of dialogue contribute to learners' emancipation from any negative consequences of the authoritarian structure and the institutionalized schooling system which has oppressively imposed on them. In a nutshell, as Hones (2002) states, teacher and students through interactive dialogue can exchange ideas and views about their lives, different social, political, economic, and cultural issues, and a chance is also provided to challenge the power relationships in the community.

Dialogic or liberatory education is opposed to the banking model of education or ant-dialogical method suggested by Freire (1970). Based on the banking education, students in the classroom are assumed to be passive objects receiving knowledge and information transmitted from an authority figure into their empty accounts. Indeed, the asymmetrical power relationship between teacher and students which is of undemocratic nature leads to students' further passivity, oppression, and the perpetuation of authoritarian structure of the education. In this dehumanizing process, learners blindly

obey whatever is dictated from the authority in the form of predetermined facts and knowledge without having a chance to question, challenge or reconstruct the practically irrelevant information and unproductive knowledge.

As Safari and Pourhashemi (2012) say, in the EFL context of Iran, English teachers seem to unlikely give up their authority figure to pursue the principles of CP since they are so accustomed to being the sole authority and the main source of knowledge and information in the traditional schooling system as these features have become the basic components of a good teacher. Actually, these taken-for-granted role relationships are so deeply ingrained in the texture of our education that any abandonment of the presumed roles looks peculiar and counts as the weakness of the teacher in managing and controlling the class. Students are also obliged to unquestioningly and submissively accept their roles since any disobedience causes punishment and dismissal from the class for several days. This issue is described by a teacher as:

Teaching based on CP demands the change of teacher role and the atmosphere of the class. I'm supposed to be like a student, to create each opportunity for students to hear their voices, to do my best not to be the authority who decides on everything. I do my best to do so but it is impossible. What strategy I use, I can't... Because I've been used to having this role and activities for so many years, it has become a part of my personality. It is 'I' who decides, teaches, assigns homework, and gives tests. I can't allow students to interfere in my job. I think abandoning all these things is impossible.

Reflecting on the statements of this teacher makes it clear that the education system in Iran is bound up with the banking model in which one authority figure decides on everything, silencing is an indispensable part of the classrooms, passivity is not regarded as something unusual, and no voices can be heard behind the doors of the classrooms. Students in this kind of system, as Shor (1992) believes, are seen as the passive recipients of teacher's knowledge having no sense of agency to transform their lives. Thus, the consequence of this banking education is nothing but the maintenance of the status quo and silencing atmosphere which in turn legitimates the perpetuation of the existing system. In sum, a hurdle standing in the way of applying CP is attributed to the teachers' instinctive habit of sticking to the banking model.

#### **4.1.5 Requirement of CP for a competent, knowledgeable, and skilled EFL teacher**

One of the major demands of CP is EFL teachers' competence and knowledge in order to handle an interactively and dialogically based language classroom. Unless teachers are equipped with fluency, interactive-based skills, language competency, and the knowledge of CP and its implementation procedures, they are





incapable of tackling demanding and challenging language teaching situations created in CP classes. In effect, a teacher can persuade learners to interactively participate in dialogue and praxis-oriented activities when he or she possesses professional skills and expert knowledge bases including competency in fluent speaking, knowledge of CP terms and concepts, the ability to guide students in problem solving dialogue and discussions emanating from learners' lived experiences, managing the class in the case of raising any provocative topics, the ability to build rapport with students, the awareness of sociopolitical, historical, and economic aspects of students' lives, and the ability to adeptly connect the language classroom to the wider social milieu.

In addition, teachers cannot provide any assistance for students to perceive the sociopolitical inequity in the society if they have not developed "political clarity" (Bartolomé, 1996; Freire & Macedo, 1987). By this term, Bartolomé (1996) means that the "process by which individuals achieve a deepening awareness of the sociopolitical and economic realities that shape their lives and their capacity to recreate them" (p. 235). According to Degener (2001), the achievement of political clarity is gained when teachers understand what happens in the larger community has a crucial impact on what happens in school. Schools are not distinct from sociocultural realities, and, thus the subordinated students' achievement can be seen as a by-product of what occurs at the societal level. Teachers who are armed with political clarity possess the knowledge that the sociopolitical and cultural atmosphere of their classrooms must be transformed so that schools do not reflect the inequalities of the society.

Hence, open communication and critic dialoguing can perfectly smooth if teachers ensure that their teaching is embellished with such vital characteristics; otherwise,

language class becomes sterile to integrate critical reflection and action of the outside world or praxis towards social transformation. Thus, a language teacher who wishes to run the class based on CP is necessarily required to devote time and energy in order to enhance his or her essential professional skills, personal abilities, competency, and knowledge demanded by CP. A teacher explained this issue as:

Before the class, I really didn't know how demanding CP class was. But when I experienced this class, I understood that teaching based CP is not something each teacher is able to handle so. I think, to teach well, a teacher should know a wide range of skills and knowledge. For instance, fluent speaking, vocabulary knowledge, the ability to manage the class, general information about political and social issues and students' lives seem to be the most important characteristics of a good CP teacher.

Thus, this study suggests that EFL teachers who aim at teaching on the bases of the principles of CP should develop a mastery of the professional qualifications, skills, knowledge of language, and general information of daily based events related to the sociopolitical and cultural issues of students' profound experiences, lives, and worlds. As a result, to appropriately undertake critical curriculum choices, construct language teaching liberatory practices and democratic activities, facilitate students' critically understandings of their worlds and lives, teachers should take the possession of the above-cited features into account.

#### 4.2 Issues related to Iranian students

In the pursuing figure, the issues related to Iranian students in CP classes have been raised by EFL teachers.

Fig 2: Issues related to Iranian students in CP classes



##### 4.2.1 No knowledge about how to think critically

A democratic space in schools which fights any subordination, subjugation, and suppression can be feasibly created if critical thought has been shaped among students. That is, critical thinking as the vital element of CP helps students become critical in thought and action, liberate them from any forms of oppression, and enables them to operate on social inequalities and injustices. Equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge for critical thought, students can open-mindedly question

any unfair status quo, taken-for-granted common sense, and myths. Hence, students need to develop critical thinking in order to meet up the growing challenges in the world (Siddiqui, 2007).

With respect to the characteristics of a critical person, Burbules and Burk (1999) believe that a critical thinker becomes empowered to investigate justice and emancipation. The person who has internalized critical thinking not only is adept to recognize injustices but is also moved to change them in real life experiences and

society. In other words, the critical person is so perceptive that he or she can recognize hasty arguments, faulty generalizations, inauthentic assertions, unreliable truth which underpin everyday actions and practices.

As Patry (1996) claims critical thinking is not advocated and instructed in the classrooms and schools. He presents some main reasons for this deficiency which include: (a) teachers have not been educated in critical thinking, (b) there exist few books available on market based on critical thinking, and (c) teachers' lack of time and other instructional resources to integrate critical thinking into their daily teaching (Astleitner, 2002 & Petri, 2002). Regarding the inclusion of critical thinking into language classrooms, Mirman and Tishman (1988) and Scanlan (2006) propose that critical thinking skills should be integrated into the subject matter and woven into the language curriculum.

With regard to the EFL context of Iran, critical thinking has not yet found its way into the education system. The absence of critical thinking in Iranian educational settings, in spite of teachers' support, may be linked to the features of the education system and negligence of critical thinking in teacher education programs in Iran (Aliakbari & Allahmoradi, 2012). A teacher referred to this issue as the following:

My students don't know how to think critically. I think it is natural because any development begins from school, instruction and teaching. I myself have no idea about critical thinking. I'm sure most teachers don't know. When I myself as a teacher don't know what critical thinking is, how it is developed, how can I expect my students to be critical thinkers? Actually, in my opinion, this process should begin through the instruction of teachers in teacher training programs then should be taught to students in school. But another problem is that in teacher training programs, everything is taught but critical thinking. We are just exposed to a great amount of knowledge about grammar and how to teach it.

As this comment suggests, Iranian students are ignorant of critical thinking since its culture has not been promoted among the people in our education. In the education system of Iran, critical thinking and the culture of critique have not developed yet since the system of our education is on the basis of banking model in which critique is accepted as a rude behavior. The teacher in the banking model makes an attempt to control and manage the class in order to bring about silencing atmosphere. When students criticize about some aspects of teaching or instruction, teachers adopt defensive positions defensive positions to protect their selves against this disruptive behavior. This can be seen in one of teachers' words:

I think the main reason that our students don't know how to think critically is that we as teachers do not allow this behavior to develop among them. Because

we think it is an impolite behavior which needs to be managed.

Thus, as Safari and Pourhashemi (2012) state, it is a futile effort to operationalize CP without any realization of creating the culture of critical thinking and critique in our education.

#### **4.2.2. Resistance against any challenges to their beliefs, identities, and values**

One of the roadblocks that restricts the application of CP and the development of critical consciousness is the critical language teacher's confrontation with students' dissent and resistance against any challenges to their religious beliefs, national identities, and values. Actually, the necessary condition for emancipatory engagement and praxis is to create spaces for students to critically examine their own life stories. But is it possible to do so if there exist eyes in classroom looking at you as if you committed a great sin? In an EFL country like Iran, students possess strong religious beliefs and culture, hence, any issue or discussion which counters their own identities and values cannot be tolerated at all. Even students show severe reactions towards such provocative issues. A teacher who had this experience in her EFL class during this critical project said:

Sometimes raising some issues led to demanding situations that even I myself was not able to manage it appropriately. Students showed no interest in issues and topics which challenged their identity and beliefs. The experience of this class taught me not to choose any topic for discussion. Next time, I should choose the topics which have no contradiction with my students' identity and cultural and national backgrounds.

Accordingly, another teacher explained:

I don't like to apply CP any more in my class because each time I raise the topic for discussion, I confront with negative reactions on the part of students. Sometimes, the discussion is changed to the clash of ideas and a great amount of struggle which I don't like at all. I think CP and the hot topics have no place in our context. I myself prefer to choose another pedagogy which does not deal with my students' beliefs and ideologies".

What is understood from these teachers' statements is that pushing CP from theory to practice is so demanding that many teachers may even dismiss it midway. Perhaps those developing the theoretical underpinnings of CP have never thought about its practicality in different contexts with students with students who have different cultures, identities, ideologies, and values. In fact, in the EFL context of Iran with its totally different and distinctive national identity, religious ideologies, cultural issues, and value systems among other EFL contexts, it seems implementing CP is associated with impediments



that Iranian EFL teachers should meticulously consider prior to taking any action towards the critical practice.

#### 4.2.3 Lack of foundational knowledge, information, and interest in the topics

Another noteworthy consideration is that critical language pedagogues as the social agents of change and liberating intellectuals can critically engage students in the sociocultural and political practices if students have the foundational knowledge, information, and interest in the raised critical issues in class discussions. When students are not aware of the topic, vocabulary, and the content of the discussion, how are they expected to interactively participate in collaborative dialogue to submit their own lived stories, histories, and experiences? How are they able to be liberated from the oppression imposed by the oppressively traditional structure of the classroom and school? And how can they take an active role towards political and social inequalities in the society through the process of transformation when they are devoid of any critical information about the praxis-related issues and activities?

Therefore, to strive for “democratic dreaming” (Giroux, 2006) in language classrooms as democratic political sites, critical teachers should cultivate and enhance students’ awareness about the topics, issues, and discussion of CP classes. This can indeed be achieved through assigning different projects or researches to students. The act of researching and looking for the relevant materials and information not only highlights the level of their knowledge and understandings but also increases their interests towards the critical issues. A teacher opined as:

I chose a socially based issue to engage students in the discussion. However, when I began introducing the issue, I felt most of the students didn’t have the related knowledge to contribute to the discussion. I think we’d better get students to do some projects to investigate about the issue if we want to have a lively class based on interaction. Actually, this kind of information and knowledge about the topic, the related vocabulary, and the language of the issue is very important.

#### 4.2.4 Preconceptions, long-held Expectations and Beliefs

While experiencing the new pedagogy, teachers sometimes face with students’ false-shaped expectations and beliefs on the bases of the banking education of their previous language classes. In fact, most Iranian students expect to passively sit in rows, see and listen to the teacher at the front of the class writing on the board, holding the textbooks in hands, and transmitting knowledge and information. That is, they expect teachers to be the same as technicians or in Sadeghi’s (2008) sense, *ignis fatuus* who places information in students’ minds. Thus, in this scenario, teachers operate as the sole authority through this drab mechanism that controls everything from students’ learning to classroom management while students as the passive objects play

the role of robots that are submissively obedient of teachers’ orders. According to Safari and Pourhashemi (2012), this can be due to the fossilized roles of people which are hardly changeable in our education. They are so accustomed to possessing such roles that even the imagination of adopting new roles seems to be awkward. A teacher said:

When I wanted to teach based on CP, my students expected me to follow the principles of the previous classes such as to have a teacher who controls them, teaches them based on the textbooks, assigns them homework; to have textbooks to follow and do the exercises, to sit silently and note down what I say.

This teacher believes that Iranian students bring the bitter experiences of the banking education into CP classes which seem to be highly demanding for teachers to deal with in their teaching cycles. Another teacher stated:

Most of my class time wastes because I should justify some students who expect me to teach them as much the same as the previous classes. If they are not appropriately convinced, they do not take the issues raised in class seriously, or do not follow the lesson.

According to this teacher, while meeting students’ false expectations in CP classes, teachers are required to convince them that CP is totally different from the kind of education they have ever encountered. However, CP teachers require a great amount of time and energy to change students’ expectations towards the right orientations of critical pedagogy to effectively implement CP in English language classes.

### 5 Conclusion

Critical pedagogy or transformative education was commenced in the realm of language learning and teaching due to the urgent requirement for a reforming education characterized by the influence of sociopolitical, historical, and economic elements of educational contexts. Education, thus, was not regarded as apolitical rather as a sociopolitical process to empower and liberate the marginalized students and the minorities from any dehumanizing oppression and subordination of their everyday lives. The individuals through this ongoing dialogic process bestowed by liberatory education challenge the sociopolitical actions to (re)produce and reflect power dynamics, ideological assumptions, and the hierarchical system transmitted from the wider society to education.

Further, CP in fact looks at teachers and learners as the social agents of change who can take critical actions towards their liberation, emancipation, and salvage. In this liberatory process, teachers can create democratic spaces in language classrooms through the provision of praxis-oriented activities and problem posing liberative dialogues in which students’ voices are feasibly heard, giving rise to their social transformation. They are, no



more, seen as individuals or automatons who blindly accept anything, but as the transformative agents who challenge the unequal status quo, information, and orders no matter who dictates them. This challenging behavior that is the result of their critical consciousness also provides the grounds for their transformative role in the wider society. Thus, the ultimate aim rests upon social justice, liberation, and a democratic society removed from any unfair oppression and power domination, as it is illuminated in different research studies conducted around the world. For example, Bruen (2013, p. 43) concludes that narrower forms of civic education result in more passive citizens rather than empowering them to critically analyze and transform the status quo. Her study highlights the importance of broader forms of civic education for more democratic socialization. In a second study concerning the interwoven effects of cosmopolitanism on higher education, Crosbie (2014) finds that they

...lie in a desire to have students critically engage with their social worlds, being able to critique different social discourses and practices and to envision a life of flourishing based on notions of hospitality and social translation; challenging, partial and provisional though these may be. (p. 37)

Bryan and Bracken (2012) investigate the features of development education as a tool to empower learners to change the social, cultural, economic, and political structures of their lives to identify the strengths and weaknesses of implementation of such a theme in post-primary education levels in Ireland. Such transformative education counters the banking model of education which is the characteristic of the traditional educational systems of many countries across the world. This model assumes a passive role for students who are not taken as living creatures capable of thinking, acting, and, doing. Knowledge as a commodity which students take for granted is then transferred as efficiently as possible from sender to receivers. Students simply take in the common sense and deep-seated information without being given any chance of interrogating the oppressive system and sociopolitical and economic inequities of the society. Thus, through this process, the status quo remains which in turn leads to further marginalization of the oppressed people.

With respect to the characteristics of CP as an alternative pedagogy, any teacher might tend to operationalize its principles and concepts to benefit its outcomes. However, when reviewing most of the literature, one can gain a great amount of theories and concepts without any practical considerations and guidelines. In fact, this project suggests insightful findings regarding the applicability of this new approach in the EFL context of Iran which is currently dominated by the banking education. The findings of this study derived from Iranian EFL teachers' voices show that the implementation of CP is not a simple job since, due to the sociocultural context of Iran, it is associated with

certain concerns required to be appropriately met. It does not mean it can be inapplicable in the EFL classrooms of Iran; rather, teachers are required to cautiously know all the practical aspects of CP prior to its enacting and implementation in educational contexts. In case of full awareness, they can be well-prepared to accost the problems and handle the classes based on CP principles. They can also avoid those aspects whose applications are associated with various risks. For instance, in the case of discussing the political issues which jeopardize their professional lives or topics which challenge the religious culture of the students, Iranian EFL teachers are advised to cautiously behave in order not to become socio-politically and economically disadvantaged.

In sum, CP cannot have fruitful outcomes for the education of countries unless the sociopolitical constraints related to the different contexts are meticulously taken into account. Although CP should be contextualized regarding its applicability, it has valuable benefits for students, teachers and society which cannot easily be ignored. The critical consciousness of CP grants our students critical power to enhance and broaden their level of thinking and acting. Thus, this educative process produces a generation of individuals who looks at everything with acutely critical eyes which attempt to change the outside community into a socially just society. In the case of our teachers, although it is somehow difficult to operationalize CP in our EFL context due to the shadowing of banking education over the system of education and its epidemic nature, teachers can make any efforts to apply the principles of CP associated with other pedagogic practices. Actually, the change of teachers' role from a mere technician towards the transformative intellectual, the critical consciousness and the reflective nature of CP, in addition to the sort of pedagogic practices in the form of praxis or the amalgam of reflection and action all go hand in hand to lead to the teachers' professional development and growth.

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