29. Critical approach in English language teaching: Developing learners' critical thinking skills

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Abstract

Although coursebooks publishers for English as a foreign language claim their contents to be culturally neutral, this does not exactly reflect the reality, as even a cursory glance demonstrates cultural elements promoting mostly the culture of English speaking countries. It is thus imperative that education policy makers embrace critical perspectives in teaching English to help shift the focus to local cultures, experiences, and histories, as well as to move foreign language education beyond behaviorist ideologies to include forms of social difference such as gender, culture, racism, and religion among many others, as topics of study. It is even more pertinent that critical approach becomes a priority in higher education, considering that learners reach cognitive maturity at this stage and are immune to the risks of indoctrination. It is important that in geopolitically sensitive regions, such as Turkey, for example, young generations learn not only how to communicate in English but also how to *critique* and be *critical* in English. As future agents of social improvement, without experiencing *criticality* could it be feasible for them to effectively engage in discussions on matters of social, cultural and political importance to their real worlds, while communicating with the outside world? Based on inferences and insights from literature review, this study aims to highlight some of the important points in critical ELT in connection to local contexts, offering a better understanding of critical approach for EFL teachers, material designers, and teacher trainers.

Keywords: Critical ELT, critical thinking skills in EFL instruction, English teaching

İngilizce öğretiminde eleştirel yaklaşım: Öğrencilerde eleştirel düşünmeyi geliştirmek

Öz

İngilizce ders kitaplarında içerik incelemesi sonucu hegemonya kültüründen bağımsız olduğunu iddia eden bu kitaplar tam olarak gerçeği yansıtmamaktadır. Bu kitaplarda, dolaylı da olsa, İngilizce dilinde konuşan ülkelerin kültürünü tanıtan güçlü bir kültür bileşenin ortaya çıktığı görülmektedir. Bu bağlamda yabancı dil eğitiminde yerli kültür, tarih, yaşantı ve hatıralar odaklı yeni bir eğitim anlayışı sağlamak amacıyla yetkin karar organlarının desteğiyle eleştirel pedagojinin meşru bir yöntem olarak müfredata dâhil edilmesi gerekmektedir. Bununla birlikte, geleneksel ders kitaplarının benimsediği davranışçı ideoloji çizgisinin ötesinde, cinsiyet, kültür, etnisite, din ve benzeri farklılıkları dikkate alacak şekilde işleyen konuların da müfredata dâhil edilmesine ihtiyaç duyulmaktadır. Türkiye'de özellikle üniversite düzeyindekiler başta olmak üzere eğitim kurumlarının, eleştirel pedagojiye öncelik tanımaları büyük önem taşımaktadır. Türkiye'nin içinde bulunduğu hassas jeopolitik konumundan dolayı Türk öğrencilerine yabancı dili sadece iletişim amaçlı değil, dış dünya ile iletişim kurduklarında gerek eleştiri yapabilen, gerek yöneltilen eleştirilere karşılık verebilecek donanımda yetiştirmeyi hedefleyen eğitime

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ihtiyaç duyulmaktadır. Öğrencilerin eleştirel İngilizce becerisi olmadan sosyal, kültürel ve siyasi alanlarda muhtelif konuları içeren bu tür tartışmalara aktif ve etkin bir şekilde katılım sağlamaları mümkün müdür? Bu çalışmada İngilizce öğretimi kapsamında eleştirel yaklaşımı yerel bağlama bağlayan kılavuz ilkeler önerilmektedir. Bu amaçla, gerek alan yazın gerek saha çalışmalarında elde edilen kabuller temelinde böyle bir pedagojinin kıstaslarını içeren bir kontrol listesi oluşturulmuştur. Böylece, program geliştirme uzmanları, öğretmen eğiticileri ve İngilizce öğretmenleri meslek hayatlarında ve sınıf içi uygulamalarında eleştirel pedagojiyi daha iyi anlamak ve kavramak için bu listeden faydalanabilirler.

Anahtar kelimeler: İngilizce öğretiminde eleştirel yaklaşım, eleştirel düşünme becerileri, İngilizce öğretimi

Introduction

When it comes to defining the ultimate goal of teaching English as a foreign language, major stakeholders tend to agree that languages are not learned just for the sake of languages. Social aims underscored in curriculums, projecting the wider institutional goals, have a special focus on societal improvement, as one of the responsibilities of language education. The need to cultivate in learners a free-thinking, democratic mind to help them pose and solve complex societal problems is strongly emphasized. However, as recent research shows, social aims, although foregrounded at the highest levels, are not really followed through in actual classroom implementations (Seker & Komur, 2008). In fact, English teachers, for the most part, seem to lack the knowledge of practical enactment of these aims (Allan, 2012; Khan, 2020; Petek & Bedir, 2018).

In this respect, theoretical frameworks of critical pedagogy (CP) and critical thinking (CT) approach have been suggested as the most suitable ways for achieving social aims in EFL education. To meet these aims, English teachers need serious training on theory- and practice-related aspects of critical approach (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2016; 2019; Ordem & Yukselir, 2017; Seker & Komur, 2008).

The need to incorporate critical approach in ELT has been signaled by the growing discontent among practitioners and educators with the current ELT industry, harshly criticized, on many occasions, for being ideologically exclusive, culturally biased, and imposing a behaviorist ideology on language education all around the world. The submission of the exam-oriented systems to the traditionalist methods in ELT, like grammar drills and vocabulary memorization, has been contended to be the main cause of learner passivity and culture of silence, still dominant features of EFL classes today (Abednia & Izadinia, 2013, 340). Abednia and Izadinia (2013) affirm that ELT cannot stay neutral to social, cultural, economic and political realities surrounding the learning environment. Considering the constant interaction of these realities with educational systems, critical perspectives shine light on the need to reconfigure ELT and focus rather on the development of learners' critical consciousness as the first step towards societal improvement.

Teacher education and teaching profession need to be reformed and move towards inclusion of critical perspectives in language education. This study is an attempt to synthesize some of the most up-to-date ideas on the subject of critical ELT with the aim to promote the concepts of critical language pedagogy and critical language teaching. It sets to provide a framework of main points as reference for teachers and teacher educators willing to commit themselves to teaching English with a critical perspective.

Mainstream ELT

Mainstream ELT is a highly controlled domain, with course programs set on high-stake exams in which content and objectives are pre-determined and preselected so much so that it leaves no room for teachers

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to introduce any critical content in the classroom. Conventional ELT focuses on the technical aspects of language teaching prescribing such decontextualized and neutral topics as travel, sports, health, family and hobbies (Banegas, 2011).

EFL course programs currently used in schools have been often questioned for their appropriateness to teach the language with a critical perspective. Their inadequacy reveals itself through the apparent mistreatment and even dismissal of higher order critical thinking skills, represented in the revised Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive levels (Figure 1) (Thornbury, 2013; Saricoban & Kazakoglu, 2012).

Although the concept of teaching critical thinking skills was introduced almost two decades ago and widely studied ever since, it still does not seem to gain a widespread acceptance as a method of teaching. As much as it is valued for its own educational worth, learners are usually left on their own to figure out what critical thinking is (Gustin, 2001, 45).

In Turkey, although CT-oriented instruction is supported by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE, 2006, 2013) declaring it as a major teacher qualification, practice shows that mostly lower order cognitive skills are targeted so far, while teachers lack a field-based knowledge of what exactly they need to do to incorporate critical approach in the classroom (Petek & Bedir, 2018). British Council's (2015) report found inadequacy of critical thinking instruction in ELT programs at Turkish universities. This finding has been corroborated by the Program for International Students Assessment (PISA) that explored Turkish students' abilities to use critical thinking skills in problem solutions and decision making tasks, concluding there was an important retrograde of critical thinking skills (OECD, 2016).

Unfortunately, traditional methods in EFL education, targeting four language skills, continue to dominate the teaching profession with disregard to the need to develop learners' critical cognitions. Jeyaraj and Harland (2019, 4) contend that, for mainstream ELT programs, critical pedagogy is relevant only so far as 'a minority activity in many corners of the world', stating that the contents and materials of traditional courses are selected mostly on the principle of neutrality.

As appears, methodology of critical approach in ELT is 'not easily understood by university academics [who are not] comfortable with the aims of critical pedagogy', probably because of the lack of proper training and different ideological values (Jeyaraj and Harland, 2019, 4).

The alleged neutrality of English language coursebooks remains a controversial issue to date as some serious critique is launched against EFL programs of predominantly Western orientation. Not only they are criticized for being dismissive of local cultures, but, what is worse, they are seen as displaying, in Khan's (2020, 406) terms, 'colonial practices' of imperialist orientation suggesting 'a romanticized image of British and American culture' (Appleby, 2010; Banegas, 2011, in Jeyaraj & Harland, 2016). It has been noticed that some native speakers employed as EFL teachers might be sometimes perceived as culturally biased against non-native learners (Lowe, 2020, 10-11). As Allan (2012, 5) points out, 'these ultimately are curriculum questions about whose version of culture, history, and everyday life will count as official knowledge.'
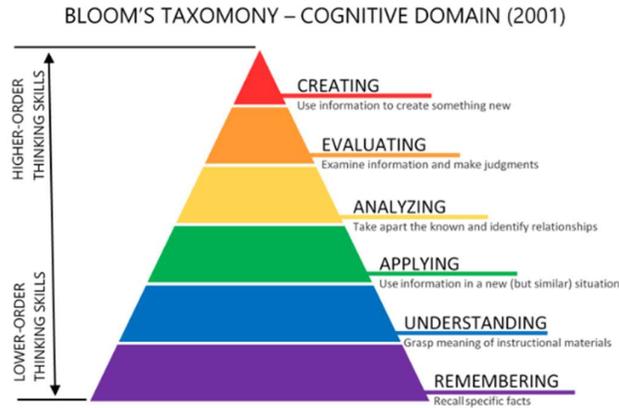
Critical thinking

Research shows that English teachers and teacher educators have rather ambiguous ideas about the concepts of critical pedagogy and critical thinking (Seker & Komur, 2008, 308). According to the APA definition, critical thinking is

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a form of directed, problem-focused thinking in which the individual tests ideas or possible solutions for errors or drawbacks. It is essential to such activities as examining the validity of a hypothesis or interpreting the meaning of research results.

Critical thinking implies the ability of learners to ask thought-provoking questions (Elder & Paul, 2003). Progress is considered possible only if people are challenged and start asking and seeking for answers themselves. Critical thinking is vital for development of cognitive skills and abilities: inquiring, conceptualizing, problem posing, problem solving, evaluating, analyzing, synthesizing and creating. It also helps develop metacognitive skills, which marks quality learning. Learners need to be challenged to connect new knowledge to larger contexts, for instance, their life experiences. Classroom activities based on dialogues, debates, and discussions are an ideal ground for this kind of learning and the best way to stop learner passivity. The key to critical thinking is that not only teachers, but students too, can ask questions. It is important that teachers master higher order thinking skills themselves, so that they can provide quality guidance on teaching these skills. Otherwise, learning will be restricted to the lower levels of thinking, such as understanding and remembering knowledge, for example (Seker & Komur, 2008). The quality of learning is directly related to the order of critical thinking levels that are targeted, from lower to higher levels (Brown, 2001).

For many years now, teachers and educators have been designing instruction, striving at the appropriate levels of learning and assessments as they referred to the cognitive domain of Bloom's educational goals (Figure 1). The revised Bloom's taxonomy displays the whole spectrum of educational objectives classified into six main categories of thinking skills and abilities. Bloom's taxonomy is a practical guide for educators who want to design CT-related instruction that aims at reaching the higher levels of analyzing, evaluating and creating skills.

Figure 1. Revised Bloom's taxonomy (University of Florida)

Critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is closely related to critical thinking, particularly to higher order thinking skills, which are critical evaluation, analysis and critique of knowledge. According to Freire (1994, 2000), critical pedagogy focuses on society transformation through language teaching, stressing the significance of dialogue and discourse. Authentic issues and topics of fundamental importance and immediate relevance to the society are addressed during language teaching. Freire (1972, 29) saw language teaching in parallel with teaching life itself, stressing the importance of connecting the word to the surrounding world, and stating that

'human word [is] more than mere vocabulary – it is word-and-action'. In his critique of the educational systems centered on exams and tests, he argues against 'banking approaches to education [in which] learners are considered passive recipients of pre-selected knowledge' (1972). Critical language pedagogy recognizes that words are not neutral and have power to change the world through conscious choices. English language teaching is considered to be a subject where critical pedagogy can be implemented in much easier ways than in other subjects, due to the inherently flexible content (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2019, 4).

Teachers who identify themselves as critical pedagogues encourage learners to express freely their opinions 'on the agenda' topics, in other words, topics pertinent to the country's political and social life, as well as to learners' own life experiences (Ordem & Yukselir, 2017). Critical pedagogues in ELT address various complex social, and at the same time problematic, issues as a driving force, a vehicle, for teaching language. Thus, Khan (2020) speaks out of the need to introduce gender, women and sexuality into ELT programs. This way, teaching becomes inclusive and helps break certain stereotypes, cultivates tolerance and empathy, fosters critical consciousness, and may even change some deep-seated attitudes and beliefs. As Khan (2020) asserts, 'this is essential to sustaining a more peaceful, post-conflict society' (403). Different models incorporating critical approach in ELT have been implemented at schools. Social studies closely investigate these models to reveal the most frequent concerns related to the implementations of critical approach and to offer possible solutions (Morgan & Ramanathan, 2005).

Critical approach in language teaching stimulates deep-lying cognitive processes, boosting intellectual and moral development of learners, as it heavily relies on interactions of learners's background knowledge with the learning content.

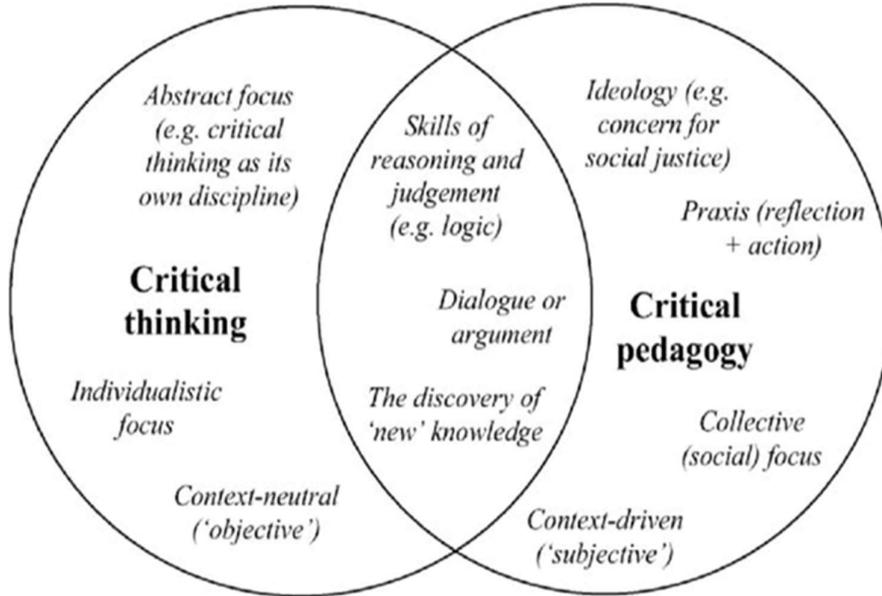**Interaction between critical thinking and critical pedagogy**

Figure 2. Intersection between critical thinking and critical pedagogy (Johnson & Morris, 2010).

The concept of critical thinking is certainly more familiar to EFL teachers than critical pedagogy, as critical thinking skills have become a common feature of English coursebooks, placed at the end of the units.

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However, there is no doubt these parts of syllabus are often omitted from real-time teaching, unless occasionally addressed when classroom time is available.

Context neutrality and individualistic focus are some of the features that constitute points of difference between critical thinking and critical pedagogy. However, as Figure 2 shows, the interaction between critical thinking and critical pedagogy at such points as skills of reasoning, logical judgement, dialogue, argument, and finding of new knowledge reveals a clear overlap of critical pedagogy with higher order thinking skills of the Bloom's taxonomy, creating thus the basis for critical approach. One might infer from here that teaching with critical perspective is predicated on teaching higher order cognitive skills, such as analyzing, evaluating, synthesizing and creating knowledge.

Risks of CT- and CP-related instruction

Nowadays, critical thinking and critical pedagogy, in different scopes and range of possibilities, are being practiced almost everywhere worldwide in various socio-cultural and political contexts: Canada, USA, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, Malaysia, Columbia and Iran among others (Abednia & Izadinia, 2013; Jeyaraj & Harland, 2016; Khan, 2020). Although the discipline of language teaching is considered to be an ideal ground for practicing critical pedagogy (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2016) and critical thinking (Janks, 2013), scholarly opinion seems to be divided between those who believe that English teachers should assume the role of active agents with a responsibility to serve the higher aims of society, and those who contend that mainstream ELT should keep a neutral, uncritical position (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2016; Snowden, 2008). Studies show that even university academics sometimes find it hard to conceptualize critical pedagogy and, even when they do, not everyone seems to be keen on embracing it wholeheartedly (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2019, 4).

There is no doubt that certain risks are indeed involved, particularly with critical pedagogy, as it has been noticed that in some countries teachers consciously avoid addressing what might seem as politically sensitive issues, as topics of dialogue and discussion (Ordem & Yukselir, 2017; Saricoban & Kazakoglu, 2012). Gray (2013) points out that topics, often politically nuanced, such as LGBTI, gender, sexuality, racism and religion are almost never included in English coursebooks as publishers might be afraid of getting a backlash from their clients and lose a profitable business. EFL teachers voice out a concern that addressing some sensitive topics could put them and their students 'in trouble' (Seker & Komur, 2008).

Literature shows that, indeed, concerns exist about the ethics and morality of CP-related classroom implementations. The risk of indoctrination – 'ideological imposition' – associated with critical teaching in ELT has long been the focus of heated arguments among scholars. As such it draws attention to the need for a balanced, toned-down approach 'to manage the risk inherent in this form of teaching' (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2016, 589). What is more, researchers state that so much acclaimed 'neutral [and] free of ideology' education is not so neutral as it claims to be. They argue that there is no evidence that neutral stance is truly unbiased, unprejudiced, and better than the critical. Some studies argue that it is not possible to claim neutrality in language teaching, as even the very statement of neutrality clearly sends a political message (Giroux, 2007).

Caution is particularly required with some instances of practicing critical pedagogy when it leads to provocative and confrontational moments, entailing, inadvertently though, deeply-felt and strong emotional reactions from learners (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2019, 9). Researchers urge teachers 'to reflect critically on their own practice so that such impacts can be safely managed (9). As Khan (2020, 416) points out, the role of teachers is not to change social values of learners, but to help them keep an open mind and

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understand that these values are only 'social constructs' that can be discussed and, if necessary, questioned too. To prevent undesirable outcomes of a misused critical pedagogy, like imposition of teachers' own understanding of social justice on learners or too much strong emotional responses from learners, some strategies could be developed – self-reflection, peer-reflection, peer-reviews, teacher accountability, teacher refraining from giving personal opinions, psychological counseling, and setting rules for critical discussions among others.

Although concerns about the appropriateness of certain topics in critical ELT, politically or culturally sensitive as they might be, partly explain why some educators and teachers choose to abstain from using the approach at all, coupled with fears of administrative sanctions, theoreticians, practitioners and researchers usually give a favorable view on using critical perspectives in foreign language education in a variety of socio-cultural and political contexts (Crookes, 2013).

Main points in critical English

This study aimed to identify some of the aspects of critical approach that it sees as relevant to teaching English as a foreign language. It availed itself of the findings of research studies on this issue, particularly the ones connecting critical thinking and critical pedagogy to ELT and EFL instruction. Two checklists emerged as a result of this inquiry: in-class observation checklist and document analysis checklist (Table 1 and Table 2). However, these are only some of the generalizations that need to be further detailed, explained and specified into relevant subcategories.

Although national education blueprints keep emphasizing the importance of using critical perspective, particularly at university levels, there is an obvious lack on the follow-up in real-time practices. The following checklists have been compiled as a rough draft to inquire on the range of teaching practices associating with the concepts of critical approach in EFL classrooms.

Table 1. In-class observation checklist

N	CLASSROOM ACTIONS	Yes	No
1	Inclusive participation		
2	Teacher monopolizing behavior		
3	Learner monopolizing behavior		
4	Dialogic exchange/discourse/discussion		
5	Explicit instruction of CT/CP		
6	Critical content/topics		
7	Teacher feedback		
8	Student feedback		
9	Teacher modeling		
10	Teacher personal involvement		
11	Learner personal involvement		

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12	Peer-review/peer-critique		
13	Indoctrination management		
14	Emotional challenge management		
15	Classroom and time management		

Table 2. Document analysis checklist

N	LESSON PLANNING	Yes	No
1	Teacher-student contribution/negotiation		
3	Critical content/topics		
4	Dialogic culture components		
5	CP/CT-based activities		
6	CP/CT-based techniques		
7	Local contextualization		
8	Institutional/administrative approval		
9	Pre-service/ in-service training		

Conclusion

The importance for English teachers and educators to embrace critical perspective has been dictated by the ongoing developments in a variety of areas: high tech, security issues, climate change, migration, international and domestic terrorism, systemic racism, human rights violations and so on. To keep up with fast changing world dynamics, EFL education has to take a new focus and reconsider teaching based on four language skills as the means to teaching higher order thinking, encouraging thus both teachers and learners to assume critical perspectives.

To teach critical English, English teachers need to be empowered with the authority of intellectual educators, socially engaged agents, who have 'a faculty of representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, a philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public' (Said, 1996, 11).

It is important that EFL teachers are familiar with theory and practice of CT- and CP-based education and are able to incorporate it into teaching. English language programs, particularly at high school and university levels, need to be reconfigured to allow in-class discussions of a range of critical issues, as this can have a long-term impact on learning outcomes, not so much in terms of English proficiency but in terms of learner upbringing as critical thinker.

Language teachers may not be in control of textbook selections, but they can decide which cognitive modes, designs, genres and tools to use and apply in teaching English with a critical perspective. Although there might not be ready-made and immediately available CT- and CP-based textbooks to incorporate local

cultural contexts and critical agenda, adjusting, adapting, complementing and developing content and materials can be an important skill for teachers and educators to use in the English class.

In conflict-prone regions, like the one surrounding Turkey, embracing a critical perspective in education and encouraging the critique as a teaching and learning mode is morally imperative to keep the new knowledge coming from local experiences as building blocks for a post-conflict society. As far as content flexibility allows, English language teaching needs to be deeper involved in matters of social justice, adopting critical approach to meet wider social aims, and promoting social change, if necessary.

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