

93. Critical pedagogy and language teachers` language proficiency: Towards critical language proficiency

Eser ORDEM¹

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Abstract

Studies on language proficiency of foreign language teachers have evoked considerable interest in recent decades. However, only mainstream core skills have been propounded in line with the framework of conventional approaches that have ignored critical perspectives. Although critical theory emanating from the ideas of Marx has produced critical pedagogy that aims to enable individuals to approach any subject or issue from a socio-political perspective, its applications have been insufficiently observed in the realm of language teacher education. This study aims to help language teachers improve critical language proficiency by providing them with an example of practice with a tentative syllabus. The benefit of using such an example might enable them to perceive language as an aim in itself rather than merely a tool that is devoid of criticality. Therefore, adding the dimension of criticality to mainstream language proficiency composed of core skills may produce critical language teachers as intellectuals attempting to transform their immediate social circles and create meaningful changes with an emphasis on the adoption of intrinsic motivation. The incorporation of critical literacy and critical consciousness into the content of language proficiency can empower language teachers in that they can address authentic socio-political issues that provide authentic, meaningful and comprehensible input which can turn into output. In this sense, criticality and reflection can be two indispensable elements of language proficiency for language teachers.

Keywords: Critical pedagogy, language proficiency, language teacher education, criticality

Eleřtirel pedagoji ve dil öğretmenlerinin dil yeterlilięi: Eleřtirel dil yeterlilięine doęru

Öz

Yabancı dil öğretmenlerinin dil yeterlilikleri üzerine yapılan çalışmalar son yıllarda büyük ilgi uyandırmıştır. Ancak eleřtirel bakış açılarını göz ardı eden geleneksel yaklaşımlar çerçevesine uygun olarak sadece ana akım temel beceriler öne sürülmüřtür. Marx'ın fikirlerinden kaynaklanan eleřtirel teori, bireylerin herhangi bir soruna veya konuya sosyo-politik bir bakış açısıyla yaklaşmasını sağlamayı amaçlayan eleřtirel pedagoji üretmiş olsa da, dil öğretmeni eğitimi alanındaki uygulamaları yeterince gözlemlenmemiřtir. Bu çalışma, dil öğretmenlerine geçici bir müfredatla uygulama örneęi sağlayarak kritik dil yeterlilięini geliřtirmelerine yardımcı olmayı amaçlamaktadır. Böyle bir örnek kullanmanın yararı, öğretmenlerin dili yalnızca eleřtirelilikten yoksun bir araç olarak deęil, kendi içinde bir amaç olarak algılamalarını sağlayabilir. Bu nedenle, temel becerilerden oluşan ana dil yeterlilięine eleřtirelilik boyutunu eklemek, eleřtirel dil öğretmenlerini, yakın sosyal çevrelerini dönüřtürmeye ve içsel motivasyonun benimsenmesine vurgu yaparak anlamlı

¹ Doç. Dr., Adana Alparslan Türkeş Bilim ve Teknoloji Üniversitesi, İnsan Bilimler Fakültesi, İngilizce Mütercim Tercümanlık Bölümü (Adana Türkiye), eserordem@gmail.com, ORCID ID: 0000-0001-9529-4045 [Arařtırma makalesi, Makale kayıt tarihi: 14.11.2022-kabul tarihi: 20.12.2022; DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.1222344]

değişiklikler yaratmaya çalışan entelektüeller olarak üretebilir. Eleştirel okuryazarlık ve eleştirel bilincin dil yeterliliğinin içeriğine dahil edilmesi, dil öğretmenlerini, çıktıya dönüşebilen otantik, anlamlı ve anlaşılır girdi sağlayan otantik sosyo-politik meseleleri ele alabilmeleri açısından güçlendirebilir. Bu anlamda eleştirelilik ve yansıtma, dil öğretmenleri için dil yeterliliğinin vazgeçilmez iki unsuru olabilir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Eleştirel pedagoji, dil yeterliği, dil öğretimi eğitimi, eleştirelilik

Introduction

Critical pedagogy aims to emancipate both teachers and learners from what is given to them as a part of normalized discourses that dictate that teachers and learners should behave in a certain manner by excluding collective action and critical reflection (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 1988). What is often expected from foreign language teachers is to mainly teach several skills composed of reading, writing, speaking, listening, vocabulary and grammar which are often seen as the core skills excluding the skills that foreground critical literacy and critical consciousness. The mainstream applied linguistics and other established organizations such as TESOL, TEFL, CELTA and DELTA impose certain skills on language teachers and learners so that they can reach the level of native speakers, although there have been new approaches including ELF awareness and World Englishes that have opposed these conventional ideas. However, they still preserve the idea of Anglo-Americanism that imposes only certain skills on English teachers and learners. If teachers happen to step into classroom settings with critical lens, then organizing tasks around the theory of critical pedagogy might enable them to prepare integrated skills that gainsay what is already prepared for them.

Critical pedagogy can be used as an approach in critical language proficiency to help student-teachers and teachers to revise their skills so that they can express their ideas in the realm of socio-political issues because when teachers encounter international agents, they are often faced with the social-political problems that they experience in their own countries or target cultures. They are expected to discuss these issues accurately and fluently by using the related collocations, colligations, collostructions, lexical phrases, lexical bundles and idiomatic expressions (Hoey, 2012; Lewis, 1993; Stefanowitsch & Gries, 2003). Thus, critical pedagogy meets critical language proficiency when language proficiency skills are taught or learned around the current socio-political issues emerging in the source or target cultures. In this sense, critical pedagogy is used as a valuable and beneficial approach to equip student-teachers or teachers with skills that lessen their burden on a linguistic, social, cultural and political level. Providing only anodyne topics or skills on a superficial level may hinder teachers from negotiating socio-political issues that they encounter every day. Therefore, in this study, what is strongly emphasized is that the tenets and principles of critical pedagogy can empower EFL student-teachers and teachers by raising awareness of the importance of discussing socio-political issues and gaining these skills in a meaningful manner.

The importance of foreign language teachers' language proficiency has been repeatedly emphasized in various countries in recent decades. However, regulations, procedures and tools developed to enhance non-native language teachers' language proficiency still remain controversial. Therefore, more concrete and applied studies need to be carried out in this specific field by incorporating critical literacy and critical consciousness within the framework of critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy in teacher education

EFL education in Turkey has ignored critical pedagogy because of policies dictated by educational institutions and the adoption of Anglo-American applied linguistic perspectives. However, critical pedagogy aims to enable teachers and learners to approach any skill, task or text from a political perspective since no teaching is neutral in accordance with the principles of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1998) . Thus, core skills in language proficiency for language teachers need to be deconstructed and instead be integrated with liberatory practices. Social and political change is demanded in each step of teaching in critical pedagogy which opposes those that dictate certain so-called skills. Superficial teaching of these skills is critically questioned in this pedagogical perspective (McLaren, 2020). In this view, core skills for language proficiency are transformed into praxis. Critical pedagogy endorses critical literacy related to self-awareness and critical consciousness regarding understanding the world from a socio-political perspective and taking action against any kind of mechanisms that may oppress or subjugate individuals. By focusing on the challenges that teachers and students encounter in the real world, critical pedagogy in language education encourages students and teachers to be more engaged participants in the learning process, both in and out of the classroom. The artificial and monotonous nature of textbooks and classroom exercises highlights the importance of placing societal issues that real people must negotiate at the forefront of education.

Teachers are viewed as transformational intellectuals in the framework of critical pedagogy. Together with their learners, they negotiate the hidden curriculum by concentrating on socio-political issues (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 1988). Because of this, a dialectic interaction between teachers and students is created, as themes that are covered or not covered in the curriculum, which is formed by those in power, are continuously discussed and criticized (Au, 2017; Giroux, 1988). Schools are perceived as sites where ideology is prevalent (Au, 2017). As a result, the very concept of culture is called into question due to the fact that it can no longer be considered a blameless entity. Schools, on the other hand, tend to indoctrinate children with the ideologies of particular cultures, which always need to be deconstructed through dialogue.

In an effort to emancipate and free learners and other actors in educational contexts, critical pedagogy seeks to address themes not handled in mainstream education (Au, 2017). Issues of society, culture, or politics are regarded as risky and dangerous. As a result, educators frequently focus on what are arguably non-controversial, fluffy themes (Apple, 2011). Recently, a participatory approach that aims to involve all the agents of teaching and learning in the preparation of syllabi has been created by keeping with the principles of critical pedagogy.

Mainstream perspectives regarding language proficiency

The age-old dichotomy created between native speaker and non-native speaker teachers has often raised the problem of language proficiency that has also been critically crucial for both teachers and learners (Medgyes, 2001). However, acquisition of language proficiency by language teachers seems to be more important than students who will acquire certain proficiency in language teaching. Therefore, a teacher equipped with high and sophisticated subject and content knowledge will feel more flexible in classroom environment and tend to add a lot to their students (Murdoch, 1994). Therefore, it has been often stressed that it is substantial for foreign language teachers to be competent to present effective and efficient teaching. In the absence of advanced language proficiency, serious problems may emerge in classroom settings such as following the coursebook strictly or behaving prescriptively (Farrell and

Richards, 2007). These attitudes and behaviors may stem from the lack of language proficiency (Kamhi-Stein, 2009). Several researchers note that English language teaching programs often focus on the development of teachers' methodological and pedagogical knowledge and tend to ignore their language proficiency and competence (Cullen, 1994; Farrell and Richards, 2007; Medgyes, 2001; Tsui, 2003).

Turkish education system also experiences the same problems since language teachers tend to perceive their language level as low or unsatisfactory (Kömür, 2010; Köse, 2010; Şallı-Çopur, 2008; Topkaya & Yavuz, 2005; Yılmaz, 2005), although some studies found that language teachers view themselves as competent in language proficiency (Yüksel, 2014). However, none of these studies used any standard test such as TOEFL, Michigan, Pearson Test of English or IELTS to see these teachers' actual language proficiency. Although Turkey has striven to integrate European Union regulations to develop teacher education starting from 1999 and ending in 2006, little progress has been made to endorse pre-service student teachers' language proficiency. In 1999, the Higher Education Council (YÖK) in Turkey aimed to develop four important knowledge areas from the teachers majoring in education. These areas were content and pedagogic knowledge; planning, teaching, classroom management and communication; monitoring, assessment and reporting and lastly other professional requirements such as reflectivity, flexibility, objectivity.

Cullen (2002) and Kamhi-Stein (2009) note that an intensive language proficiency training programme may be overwhelming and unrealistic because it might take a lot of time to sustain the programme. However, they also maintain that lack of language competence and emergence of linguistic insufficiency may lead to affective problems and loss of sense of professionalism. Thus, in order for teachers not to lose sense of professionalism and ground in classroom settings, language teachers need to be well equipped in terms of subject and content knowledge that will armor them with advanced skills (Medgyes, 2001; Shin, 2008). Müller and Nel (2010) showed that the language proficiency of the student teachers was poor, although the participants tended to perceive their proficiency as sufficient. A four-year project called Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLE) that took place between 2006 and 2010 showed that it was important for language teachers to be proficient in the target language if they aim to produce successful young learners (Enever, 2011). The project results found a significant relationship between proficiency language teachers and successful students. In European context, these results can be perceived as unsurprising since they have better opportunities to interact with each other to communicate in English and other languages as well. However, in countries where it is almost unlikely for teachers to have the chance to establish face to face dialogue, language proficiency gains more importance, and more concrete solutions need to be found to tackle this issue.

Recent studies regarding pre-service foreign teachers' language proficiency have been quite prolific and fertile through descriptive and qualitative studies. However, there remains a lot to be done in this area because applied research has been hardly conducted. Policies, in-service training programs, national and international professional development schedules composed of various stages, projects and recommendations regarding reflective practice have been developed and fulfilled so far (Farrell and Richards (2007: 57) and supported by others (Borg 2001; Edge and Garton 2009; Ellis 2005; Kim and Elder 2008; Tsui 2003). This line of research tradition also continues in Turkey (Alptekin, 2002; Kırkıgöz, 2008; Kızılaslan, 2011; Kömür, 2010; Köse, 2010; Şallı-Çopur, 2008; Topkaya & Yavuz, 2005; Yılmaz, 2005; Yüksel, 2014). Yet, applied research into concrete language proficiency training has been ignored owing to possible methodological considerations. In addition, fossilization develops in teachers' language proficiency over the course of time based on various reasons such as lack of motivation, absence of academic encounters and paucity of face to face communication with native and international

speakers of English. Therefore, it still seems crucial to elaborate on language proficiency by using mixed method research to obtain more reliable and valid results so that foreign language teachers may have the opportunity to foster their language proficiency in a concrete way.

Practice as tentative syllabus

Language teachers can approach their development of language proficiency by asking critical questions that may transform their mindset. The syllabus should focus on questions rather pure definitions and aims. In each step of the syllabus, teachers can form questions that motivate discussions, collaboration and criticality. They can ask the following questions in the syllabus that they will prepare:

- Which types of vocabulary can I learn to express myself in order to address socio-political issues?
- Which reading passages would contribute to me to make changes for a more just and equal society?
- Which grammatical constructions would help me express myself to emphasize transformative practices?
- Which audios and videos should I be exposed to develop my critical perspective?
- How can I write critical, analytical and argumentative essays or articles to voice my ideas from a critical perspective?
- How can I equip myself with receptive and productive skills to create changes in my immediate settings from a critical perspective?
- Which discourses are excluded in reading passages that I read?
- Which political stance is prioritized in any input that I am exposed to?
- How can I deconstruct anodyne topics that I am exposed to?
- What theoretical perspective is adopted in any put that I receive?
- How can I reflect upon any input that is given to me by researchers or authors?
- Am I aware of the tenets and principles of critical theory and critical pedagogy to transform my core skills while developing my language proficiency?
- Am I aware of socio-political issues that criticize topics such as race, gender, ethnicity, social injustice, religion and immigrations while developing my language proficiency?
- Am I motivated enough to deal with socio-political issues which might contribute to my language proficiency so that I can negotiate them where necessary?
- Am I aware of participatory action research and critical research paradigms that could inspire me to carry out research with my student-teachers in order to produce small changes in my social circle?

The abovementioned questions may enable language teachers to develop critical language proficiency and motivate them intrinsically. By doing so, they may enhance their potential to express themselves to create changes in the society for both themselves and students in their immediate settings as well as administrators and policy-makers. Thus, the definitions of conventional language proficiency are deconstructed and changed based on critical pedagogy because language teachers need to use the target language in order to express an aim and should not use these skills merely as a tool to teach students. They should collaborate to realize an aim such as negotiating a socio-political issue. Core skills in mainstream language proficiency models and approaches have been produced and propounded without criticisms in applied linguistics and language teacher education. In the context of Turkey, language proficiency of language teachers is reinforced and adopted to teach students certain skills devoid of socio-political issues. Language proficiency is taught or motivated to prepare students for exams which are also political in nature because it takes either teachers or learners nowhere in the sphere of language. If language proficiency teaching is political in this sense, a new political stance should be adopted

instead. Critical pedagogy incorporating critical literacy and critical consciousness open up a new space for critical language teachers as intellectuals. They can oppose what is given to or even implicitly imposed on them so that they can use language proficiency for a higher level thinking system, that is, critical paradigm.

Towards critical language proficiency

Considering the conventional definitions that omit the tenets of critical pedagogy, language proficiency has been defined from different perspectives. Bachman (1990: 16) defines language proficiency as 'knowledge competence or ability in the use of a language'. Awareness of receptive and productive understanding regarding language systems by foreign language teachers need to be raised. Similar to this idea, Shin (2008:59) notes that a good command of the target language is one of the most important features of non-native language teachers. By going further, Murdoch (1994:254) states that 'language proficiency will always represent the bedrock of their professional confidence'. The problem regarding language proficiency is clearly expressed by Farrell and Richards (2007) who maintain that any shortcoming in language proficiency may affect certain spheres of their teaching practice. Therefore, this field needs more concrete studies to develop foreign language teachers' language proficiency. Some researchers insistently put forward the idea that developing and supporting language proficiency will possibly affect various teaching areas considerably positively (Farrell and Richards, 2007; Lightbown and Spada 1999; McNamara 1991; Tsui, 2003). It has been often stated that foreign language teachers with less subject knowledge are often more adversely affected than those with better subject knowledge since the former may have to follow a stricter teaching approach. Therefore, any attempt to develop language proficiency will provide flexibility and ease in classroom environment. These definitions clearly lack critical literacy and critical consciousness.

Based on the abovementioned ideas that emphasize the critical importance of language proficiency, this study aims to produce a concrete approach by training pre-service student teachers. This study also intends to present a model task regarding how to integrate the skill of critical literacy into the sphere of language proficiency by focusing on core skills composed of reading, writing, speaking, vocabulary, listening and grammar. The importance of raising questions has been emphasized while preparing a syllabus to develop language proficiency of language teachers at higher education.

Conclusion

The main of the study is to show how foreign language teachers can develop their critical language proficiency based on critical pedagogy. In addition, the study mainly intended to make concrete recommendations regarding critical language proficiency by enabling pre-service teachers to reinforce critical literacy in achieving the target language that they will teach with critical lens. Instead of finding answers to how to develop language proficiency, it is more important to raise critical questions that may allow them to critically reflect upon receptive and productive skills that they will acquire. Before language teachers begin their journey of improving their language proficiency, it would be better to adduce reflective questions that may help them to produce some changes in socio-political realm. In so doing, they can be involved on the discussions of cultural elements such race, gender, ethnicity, ideology and religion while learning and teaching core skills. Thus, critical language proficiency turns into an aim rather than a tool. In this sense, perceiving language as a tool of communication is transformed into an aim to make changes in the society, which may also provide intrinsic motivation for both language teachers and learners.

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