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Developing the Critical ESL Learner: The Freire's Way

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Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan Bin Abdullah**

"If I don't get lost, how is it possible to find myself?" - Paulo Freire (1985).

Abstract

This demonstration aims to develop critical ESL learners using the pedagogy of questions. The focus is on the learners and the content of discussion. The content and learners should be seen as an entity and inter-related. Some of the important elements used are problem-posing, "culture circle" (or discussion group), "codification" (bringing the realities and situations of the culture and world into the classroom in the form of pictures, diagrams, photographs, drawings, etc.), "praxis" (action-reflection action-action process/cycle) and "dialogue" (2 way communication between the teacher and learners). These elements are incorporated into a theoretical framework, which leads to a procedure to be used in the classroom. A sample of this procedure is demonstrated.

BACKGROUND

Paulo Freire's views and theories on literacy and in general, education, have been the inspiration for many literacy programmes around the world and for those seeking new approaches to learning and teaching (Sherman, 1980). I, too, was fascinated with his thoughts when I was an undergraduate at University of Science Malaysia (USM), Penang. His arguments of "empty vessels", "banking education", "critical consciousness" and, "culture of silence" captivated me and made me realize that all those while, as a student of the Malaysian Education System from the primary to secondary level, I was "oppressed" in one way or another. That, I would say was my first "critical transitivity"! The USM experience had influenced me to incorporate and practice Freire's ideas especially "critical consciousness" in my teaching of English as a second language (ESL), breaking away from the ever and widely practiced method of "banking education" and "empty vessels".

INTRODUCTION

Critical ESL learners are learners who are able to carefully and deliberately determine whether to accept, reject or suspend judgement about a claim (Moore & Parker, 1986). They also must be able to identify and cite good reasons for their opinions and answers, correct themselves and others' methods and procedures and, adopt and adapt to uniformities, regularities, irregular circumstances, special limitations, constraints, and over-generalizations (Lipman, 1988).

Paulo Freire's pedagogy consists of several vital concepts that require deep comprehension. Understanding these concepts would allow teachers to fully grasp the ideas and framework of developing the critical ESL learner. In this paper, I will not dwell on each and every facet of Freire's pedagogy but I will only clarify the core ones. Those aspects are the components of the theoretical framework to develop critical ESL learners using Freire's approach.

Pedagogy of Questions

Paulo Freire's pedagogy is also known as the Critical Pedagogy (Boyce, 1996), the Pedagogy of the Question (Bruss & Macedo, 1985) or in Freire's own words, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 1970). In his pedagogy, Freire proposed a pedagogy of questions, which involves posing questions to learners and listening to learners' questions. This is a practice that forces and challenges the learners to think critically and to adopt a critical attitude towards the world. On the contrary, Freire strongly objects to the pedagogy of answers whereby teachers provide answers and solutions to learners. The pedagogy of answers reduces learners to "mere receptacles for prepackaged knowledge". Freire feels that this pedagogy lacks profundity of thought and cannot stimulate and challenge learners to question, to doubt and to reject (Bruss & Macedo, 1985). Furthermore, this practice of "feeding" the learners robs them of the opportunity to take responsibility for their action and behaviour (Costa & Marzano, 1987).

Freire stressed that educators in general forget the fundamental questions that stimulate the answers. He encourages and focuses on questions rather than on answers. According to Freire, teachers and parents are sometimes afraid of questions because they are unsure of the answers and also because maybe the questions won't correspond to the answers that they have (Freire in Bruss & Macedo, 1985). They feel much more secure to talk about the answers they already have.

Banking Education

Freire (1970) opposes the banking concept of education where the teacher's primary role is to transmit knowledge to learners, "depositing" information into students as people would deposit money into banks. A true Freirean teacher's role is to facilitate educational changes, progress at an individual level, personal motivation and commitment to develop. Besides that, his roles are also to collect meaningful materials and guide discovery and, to be one with the students in a community of seekers (Timpson, 1988).

Dialogue

Dialogue is a distinctive feature of Freire's pedagogy. Freire (1973) describes it as an "I-thou relationship between two subjects". In a classroom dialogue, the teacher and learner confront each other as knowledgeable equals in a situation of genuine two-way communication (Spener, 1990). It also involves respect (Smith, 1997) and is characterized as a kind of speech that is humble, open and focused on collaborative learning (Boyce, 1996). It is also characterized by an atmosphere of mutual acceptance and trust between the teacher and the learners (Heaney, 1995). Above all, the teacher learns from the learners and, the learners learn from the teacher.

Problem-posing

Problem-posing is based on the life situations and realities of learners whereby their life situations are made into problem-posing situations. It concentrates on showing people that they have the right to ask questions. The process of problem-solving begins when the teacher listens to learners' issues. Next, the teacher selects and brings familiar situations

to students in a codified form. Then, the teacher asks series of inductive questions (from concrete to analytical) regarding the discussion of the situation. In that discussion, the learners will experience 5 steps of the problem-posing methodology (Nixon-Ponder, 1995):

1. Describe the content of discussion
2. Define the problem
3. Personalize the problem
4. Discuss the problem
5. Discuss the alternatives of the problem

Codification

Freire (1983) describes codification as "pictures imaging real situations". It represents the learners' day-to-day situations and, it could be in the form of a photograph, a picture, a drawing, a newspaper cutting, an advertisement or even a word. Freire (1973) believes that discussion of codification could lead the learners move toward critical consciousness.

Culture Circle

Culture circle is a discussion group in which the teacher and learners use codification(s) to engage in dialogue about the reasons for their existential situations or realities (Heaney, 1995). Culture circle is a platform for learners to voice their ideas and opinions and participate actively in the leaning process. More primarily, it is also a stage for them to practise their interpersonal skills - arguing, listening and speaking, working collectively, respecting other peoples' views and trusting in others.

In this culture circle, the dialogue is attempted through group debate, either to clarify situations or to seek actions arising from that clarification. Freire (1970 & 1973) suggested culture circle because he viewed school as "a traditionally passive concept" and, as an alternative to the already existing school institutions and its elements.

Culture of Silence

The culture of silence means that people in power or the oppressors overwhelm the people in their control or the oppressed with their norms and values. The imposed norms and values effectively silence the oppressed people in many ways - their view of themselves, view of their world and view of their roles in the society. The oppressed people become dependent on the culture of the oppressors, who are regarded as "experts" and "specialists" in their society.

To make things worse, the knowledge and needs of the oppressed are considered as inferior, worthless and not important. Eventually, this culture of silence will strip learners of their self-confidence and place their action and behaviour in the hands of the "experts" of the society. In order to break away from this norm, Freire suggests that learners confront their insistence on quiet and control and, participate actively in learning situations (Timpson, 1988).

Praxis

Praxis comprises a cycle of action-reflection-action by which individuals create culture and society. It enables individuals to iterate the process of consciousness, practice, and reflective practice in their experience. Learners armed with praxis are well equipped to actively participate in collective actions especially in culture circles (Boyce, 1996). Some invaluable characteristics of praxis include self-determination (as opposed to coercion),

independence (as opposed to dependence), self confidence (as opposed to timid), creativity (as opposed to homogeneity) and rationality (as opposed to chance) and, trusting others (as opposed to suspecting).

Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness is the core of Freire's pedagogy. Freire (1973) distinguishes 3 different levels of consciousness:

1. Magical consciousness

This is the lowest level of consciousness. A person with magical consciousness simply "apprehends facts and attributes to them a superior power by which it is controlled and to which it must therefore submit". People with magical consciousness accept their lives as they are and do not question the injustices done to their lives

2. Naïve Consciousness

Naïve consciousness is a level above the magical consciousness. People with this consciousness become aware and gain insights into their own problems. However, they fail to make connections to the outside world. Problems are seen as "accidents" and "is deceived in its perception".

3. Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness, also known as critical transitivity, is the highest level of consciousness. People with critical consciousness view problems as structural problems. It enables interpretation of problems and therefore, must involve "analysis" and "integrated with reality". To achieve this level of consciousness, learners must reject passivity with the use of praxis and, work and struggle collectively (not individually) (Heaney, 1995).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I have divided this framework into 3 stages, which I have translated into a model. The 3 stages are:

1. Forming

In this first stage, the teacher needs to form culture circles or discussion groups. Teachers need to use their own discretion and justifications to form culture circles. It may depend on several factors such as objective(s) of the activity(ies) and, the "praxis" involved.

2. Listening & Knowing

At this stage, the teacher listens to the learners in order to know what are the issues, realities, situations or problems faced by the learners in the outside world. It could also be current issues in the society, which draw attention, highly debatable, and entice the learners thinking ability.

Without listening, and a practice of "banking education", the learners are not given the chance to prove to themselves that they know something. Thus, the learners are doomed to be "empty vessels" who know nothing, and consequently, become passive learners who are silenced by the oppressor's culture - the teacher! Therefore, when the teacher knows the problems, he should realize them and confront their learners

(Note: Listening to learners could occur at any point of time. This also enables the teacher to prepare for their next culture circles, which include defining problems, collecting materials for the purpose of codification and, preparing questions.)

3. Realizing & Confronting

When the teacher knows that there exist certain issues, realities, situations or problems of the learners connected to the outside world, he needs to realize them in the culture circles or discussion groups. Knowing that there exists an issue or problem but does nothing about it, as it is "accidental", just illuminates the naïve consciousness that the teacher has. The teacher needs to pose the problem (in the form of codification) in the culture circles, and discuss with the learners (the action). Then together, the learners and teacher should "analyze" and "integrate it with reality" (the act of reflecting of our action) Then, both the teacher and learners will achieve critical transitivity. However, the praxis does not stop here. To complete it, the teacher and learners need to make another action based on the reflection i.e. the social or cultural changes in terms of behaviour, attitude and lives.

The term "confronting" may sound aggressive but it is both needed and essential. Firstly, the teacher needs to "wake up" the passive learners who have been in the magical spell of magical consciousness. Posing problems alone might not be sufficient. The teacher needs to challenge their present and existing norms and values, and perceptions of themselves. Therefore, learners must be injected with strong praxis characteristics - self-confidence, independence and creativity. This could be done implicitly or explicitly. Secondly, the confrontation is essential as the teacher and learners need to be knowledgeable parties in a situation of two-way communication during the dialogues. It should not be a one way communication; teacher to learner but, teacher to learner and, learner to teacher.

PROCEDURE

A step by step procedure would be:

1. The coordinator (teacher) form culture circles (discussion groups). 3-5 participants (learners) in each culture circle.
2. The coordinator (teacher) introduces the problem he wants to pose or discuss. (Note: the problem introduced might have been highlighted by participants (learners) earlier)
3. The coordinator (teacher) poses questions to group participants (learners) - to know their opinions.
4. Realize the problem (posing the problem) in culture circles and confronting the participants (learners) using DIALOGUE (mainly asking questions-on the part of the participants and coordinators, and using 2 way communication), CODIFICATION (use of pictures, drawings, photographs etc) and, PRAXIS (interjecting strong characteristics and values, and action-reflection-action cycle).

A SAMPLE OF PROBLEM-POSING: "Irresponsible" and "Ignorant Road Users"
The codification shows vehicle X 'parked' in front of the bank. The problem is the vehicle should not and cannot be parked there because of the yellow line. It showcases an "irresponsible" and "ignorant" road user. (Note: This issues was chosen because the participants were drivers/road users).

Procedure:

1. Culture circles are formed. Group participants are adults who are drivers/road users.
2. The issue of irresponsible and ignorant road users is posed to the participants.
3. The coordinator asks questions and participants respond. Participants are also given the chance to ask questions or give opinions.

4. The problem is posed in the form of CODIFICATION. The codification is discussed using DIALOGUE- coordinator interacts with participants, participants with coordinators and, participants with participants (within their own culture circles and, from other culture circles). 4 questions can be posed for the participants to discuss:

- Q1. Why is vehicle 'X' "parked" there?
- Q2. What might be the effects of "parking" vehicle 'X' there?
- Q3. What can we do to ensure no vehicles will be parked there again?
- Q4. In your opinion, what is the best solution? (based on Q3).

(Suggestion: Each question should be completed and discussed before moving on to the next question. A time limit should be given for each question)

When the participants discuss the 4 questions posed to them, they will describe the content (irresponsible and ignorant road users), define the problem (vehicle 'X' being "parked" there), personalize the problem (give reasons and solutions based on their experience and knowledge in that situation), discuss the problem and, discuss the alternatives of the problem (provide various alternatives, reasons, answers and opinions to Q1, Q2, Q3 and Q4).

The PRAXIS concentrated in this problem are creativity (done implicitly), rationality (also done implicitly) and, working collectively (done explicitly), The creativity aspect is embedded in Q1, Q2 and Q3 i.e. thinking of various reasons, solutions and alternatives. The rationality can be found in Q3 and Q4. Here the participants need to "argue, reject or accept", "analyze" and, "integrate the problem with the reality" in order to find the best solution to the problem. As for working collectively, the participants work together to solve the problems in their respective culture circles. All the above are the actions made by the participants.

The coordinator discusses with the participants the process of realizing and confronting, and the aspects involved in the issue (This is a reflection action process). This will correct or strengthen and cement whatever impression(s) the participants experienced in the culture circles. As a result, based on their reflection action process, participants may want to make certain changes concerning the issue of irresponsible and ignorant road users. Subsequently, it will lead participants into a complete praxis - a cycle of action-reflection-action (Appendix 1).

CONCLUSION

It should be mentioned here that this method primarily aims to develop critical ESL learners and not competent ones. Thus, the focus is on the content of discussion and not the language. ESL teachers need to understand that they need to teach the English language and not about the language. I believe this is a way of developing critical ESL learners - developing their thinking abilities and potentials. When ESL teachers give them the chance to think creatively and critically, they are actually giving the learners the opportunity to learn the language in context and to use them in the real world with real people and, with real situations and problems. Eventually, when they achieve the critical transitivity, becoming a competent ESL speaker might just be a stone throw away!

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About the author: Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan Bin Abdullah teaches at University Technology MARA, Kedah, Malaysia. He is interested in the internet's role in ELT, teaching styles, creative and critical thinking in ELT.

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