

The Applicability of Critical Pedagogy in Adult English Language Teaching (ELT)

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Abstract

This paper explores the applicability of critical pedagogy in adult ELT, emphasizing its role in fostering social awareness and change. Critical pedagogy encourages learners to critically examine their social reality, engage in meaningful dialogues, and become active agents for social justice. However, incorporating this approach into adult ELT faces some challenges. This study addresses four major obstacles to critical pedagogy implementation. The four challenges are a) lack of teacher preparation, b) potential risk of misguiding learners, c) cultural barriers in certain countries and regions, and d) insufficient infrastructure for aligning materials and assessment with critical pedagogy. Despite these challenges, evidence from literature and existing successful case studies suggest that critical pedagogy can be integrated into ELT with thoughtful adjustments. The current paper provides insights for adult English program leaders to overcome such challenges and implement critical pedagogy effectively, thus empowering learners to achieve both linguistic proficiency and social transformation.

Keywords: Critical pedagogy, Applicability, Adult education, English language teaching

1. Introduction

Critical pedagogy is an educational approach that challenges dominant ideologies and allows learners to think critically and act toward achieving liberation, equality, and justice (Freire, 2018, 2020; Shor, 1993). This pedagogy involves raising students' awareness of social realities, engaging in meaningful dialogue about these realities, reflecting on social issues, and promoting critical thinking (Freire, 2020). Adult English language program leaders are required to implement critical pedagogy in English language programs as there is a strong relationship between English language learning and social change (Floyd, 2022; Riasati & Mollaei, 2012). Based on Riasati and Mollaei (2012), language is not simply a tool of expression or communication; instead, it is a byproduct formed through the ways language learners recognize themselves, their social surroundings, and their potential for the future. Therefore, it is highly likely that critical pedagogy, if implemented in adult English language programs, helps language learners to develop a critical consciousness and become active agents of social change.

Nevertheless, incorporating critical pedagogy into English Language Teaching (ELT) settings poses numerous challenges, leading educators and administrators to believe that applying critical pedagogy in adult ELT settings may be exceedingly difficult (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2016). However, an analysis of the relevant literature (Crookes, 2010; Drissat, 2022; Jeon, 2009; Larson, 2014) reveals that the existing challenges can be appropriately addressed and resolved with the necessary attention and time dedicated to the challenges. This study is aimed at adult English language program leaders responsible for equipping adult learners with the best knowledge and skills. It also outlines four potential obstacles in implementing critical pedagogy in adult ELT classes and provides evidence to support the feasibility of applying critical pedagogy in today's adult programs. The challenges discussed and addressed in this study are teachers' expertise and knowledge of political theories, the potential risks for students being misdirected, the lack of infrastructure for applying critical pedagogy in specific cultural contexts, and the necessity of developing materials and assessment strategies.

2. Critical Pedagogy

As mentioned earlier, critical pedagogy is an educational approach that raises learners' awareness of prevailing social challenges, barriers, injustices, and inequalities, empowering them to stand against these issues and actively advocate for social justice, liberation, and equality (Freire, 2020; Shor, 1993). The three most significant principles of critical pedagogy, upon which many critical scholars, such as Giroux, McLaren, Delpit, Ladson-Billings, Dillard, and Hooks, have reached a consensus (Riasati & Mollaei, 2012), are as follows: a) Learners are provided with the opportunity to reflect on their culture and lived experiences, b) Learners are encouraged to develop their voices by critically examining the world and society and engaging in dialogues with one another, c) Learners are motivated to actively participate in democratic imperatives and effect positive changes that lead to greater equality for all citizens (Riasati & Mollaei, 2012).

Considering the significant role that critical pedagogy can play in adult English language

programs, one can conclude that it is worthwhile to invest the necessary time and effort in addressing the challenges that currently hinder the application of critical pedagogy. The following sections will clearly explain the four challenges and their respective solutions.

3. The Applicability Challenges

3.1 Teachers' Expertise and Interests

Teachers recruited to teach English in adult English language programs are expected to have a proficient command of English since the primary goal of English Language Teaching (ELT) classes is effective communication in English. However, a common challenge many ELT instructors face when asked to implement critical pedagogy in their classes is their lack of expertise in effectively addressing their learners' social and political needs (Jeon, 2009; Jeyaraj & Harland, 2016). While an English language teacher may possess the knowledge to guide learners in language acquisition, they might not be sufficiently familiar with applying critical pedagogy in their classrooms to appropriately address and navigate social and political issues (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2016).

To address the issues related to teachers' expertise, it is suggested that teacher education, teacher re-education, and teacher in-service programs be employed to equip educators with the necessary strategies and knowledge of critical pedagogy (Crookes, 2010; Ukpokodu, 2020). These programs aim to enlighten English language teachers about the potential for effective and constructive changes they can implement in their classrooms and communities. Furthermore, such initiatives emphasize establishing institutional networks and connections with parents and other interested individuals to form a supportive community that supports critical alternative approaches, the foundation of critical schools, and critical programs (Crookes, 2010; Ukpokodu, 2020).

Another essential role that teacher education, teacher re-education, and teacher in-service programs can play is in addressing leadership. This entails recognizing the significance of leadership in advancing critical language pedagogy and striving to ensure that all individuals involved in language education can assume leadership roles when equipped with the appropriate orientation and skills (Crookes, 2010; Struyf et al., 2022). Additionally, these programs serve as valuable platforms for fundraising, which involves collecting funds and other resources to support educational initiatives, engaging in direct action, which means taking practical steps to achieve goals rather than relying on conventional political methods, and facilitating shifts in perspective and self-image (Crookes, 2010). Self-image, as Crookes (2010) described, refers to the way people perceive their abilities, capabilities, qualities, skills, and values. The shifts in perspective and self-image are imperative for promoting critical practice in language pedagogy. This implies that teachers can work towards cultivating a more critical and sociopolitical perspective, enabling them to understand the limitations of existing educational practices and envision alternative possibilities for language education. Simultaneously, teachers can develop a more positive self-image by recognizing their agency and potential to bring about change in their classrooms and communities (Crookes, 2010).

In addition, teachers may need certain qualities, such as the ability to run classes in unconventional ways and include ideas from cultures, ideologies, and traditions beyond the dominant ones in their country. To further explain the distinction between conventional and unconventional methods of teaching languages, Sathwara (2016) defines conventional approaches as traditional approaches that focus on the teaching of grammar rules, explicit instruction of language components and structures, students' passiveness in the class, and giving the full authority to the teacher. It is opposed to unconventional approaches through which communication and interaction between class members are centralized, and language is learned through learners' active engagements and conversations in various interactive activities. They should also be engaged with the current political system and be interested in it (Crookes, 2003; Freire, 2020). An instructor who promotes dialogue, maintains political awareness, and encourages students to question the broader social context and its impact on their lives is best suited for this pedagogical approach. Therefore, it is important to remember that not everyone is well-suited for teaching with critical pedagogy.

It is significant to note that adult educators need not only to develop and attain the necessary expertise in teaching the English language with the principles of critical pedagogy but also to show interest in cultural, political, and social issues. This involves adopting a critical approach and implementing the principles of critical pedagogy in the classroom (Crooks, 2003; Nelson & Chen, 2023). In sum, Instructors must meet specific criteria to qualify for implementing critical pedagogy in their classrooms and adult language program leaders should consider that instructors do possess such criteria which are: a) showing interest in learners' cultural, political, and societal issues, b) having a critical approach to cultural and sociopolitical aspects of the content of ELT course books, and c) showing interests in fostering critical thinking skills of the learners (Mahmoodarabi & Khodabakhsh, 2015).

3.2 Potential Risks for Students

The tenets of critical pedagogy include engaging in dialogue, critiquing, and assessing social systems. Teachers should create an environment where students can freely discuss their ideas. They must balance their participation during discussion sessions, enabling learners to analyze issues critically and independently (Freire, 2020; Riasati & Mollaei, 2012). However, this critical openness in discussions presents a potential vulnerability. It may expose learners to the risk of being misguided by new ideologies or emotionally hurt when their deeply held assumptions are challenged, and they lose the support of friends who may no longer understand their new ideas. Also, both teachers and learners should take the role of other students' perspectives in critical conversations into account in that learners and teachers should ensure they are not hurting each other with conflicting perspectives and viewpoints.

Such risks lead teachers to challenge their teaching activities toward minimizing potential risks in the class. They can be regarded as the other challenges in applying critical pedagogy in adult English language programs (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2016). The possibility of such risks leads English teachers to assume a delicate responsibility in guiding students, striking a balance that encourages critical thinking with the most negligible possible risks for students.

Based on Jeyaraj and Harland (2016), the challenge for adult English language program leaders and teachers is to provide the students with enough guidance, understanding, and support without risking and to make them feel guided without imposing ideologies on students (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2016).

To address this challenge, learners in the classroom need to gradually learn how to have safe critical conversations about each other's concerns, perspectives, and issues toward making social changes within the classroom context (Murcia Quintero, 2012; Riasati & Mollaei, 2012). Nurturing such critical learners is among the responsibilities of teachers who must constantly reflect on their teaching (Ukpokodu, 2020). Engaging in safe and supportive critical conversations and accepting and respecting other students' perspectives and concerns minimizes all the potential risks learners may face in the class. Such a supportive critical environment also deepens learners' learning and understanding of the language as they use language in their real-life critical conversations that matter to them (Murcia Quintero, 2012; Nelson & Chen, 2023).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that a critical, yet supportive environment requires constant reflective practices from language program leaders and instructors. Self-reflexivity of English teachers and peer reviewing are the keys to minimizing the potential risks and establishing a safe critical learning environment for students (Giroux, 2007; Heinemann, 2019). Self-reflexivity involves examining one's biases and considering how they might impact one's approach to teaching. This entails recognizing personal biases and being open to questioning them to establish a more inclusive educational setting. (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2014; Jeyaraj & Harland, 2016). Peer reviewing also plays its part. It is suggested to form a sense of accountability and community among adult English language program leaders and teachers that goes beyond the context of institutions. A trusted colleague is invited to the classroom through peer reviewing to address specific issues, potential risks, and indoctrinations. This helps teachers recognize and address their weaknesses to provide a safer learning environment for language learners (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2016). Assuming that institutional connections and networks of interested individuals are established and everyone collaboratively strives to create a safe environment for critical language learning (Crookes, 2010; Nelson & Chen, 2023), adult English language program teachers have the necessary motivation to engage in self-reflection and enhance their teaching methods to become professional practitioners in a critical English language program (Crookes, 2010).

3.3 The Incorporation of Critical Pedagogy in Eastern Countries

Coleman (1996) noted that teaching and educational methods are culture-specific. This would mean that cultural conventions influence educational policies and teaching methodologies. For example, China follows a conventional culture in which people are respected based on their social and occupational positions. Similarly, educational systems in China are teacher-centered and conventional (Larson, 2014). Some scholars have claimed that applying critical pedagogy in English language settings would be extremely difficult in Asian and Eastern countries due to the mismatches between critical pedagogy principles and these countries' sociocultural contexts (Hu, 2002; Larson, 2014). To elaborate, the principles

of critical pedagogy necessitate that the educational system remains open to criticism and does not confine itself to traditional norms (Riasati & Mollaei, 2012). However, the existence of conventional teacher-centered and banking approaches in Eastern societies, in which students passively receive knowledge from the teacher (Freire, 2018), has led some scholars to argue that critical pedagogy might not be feasible in Eastern contexts (Hu, 2002). As the purpose of the present study is to provide adult English language program leaders with sufficient evidence concerning the applicability of the tenets of critical pedagogy in adult English language learning programs, it is significantly important to reinforce the feasibility of its application in all adult English language settings, including Asian and Eastern settings with conventional teaching approaches.

To address this challenge, with a brief review of the literature on critical pedagogy, one can understand that there are several examples of successful application of critical pedagogy in Asian and Eastern countries (Flowerdew, 2005; Larson, 2014; Shin & Crookes, 2005; Ünalı & Yüce, 2021). For instance, Shin and Crookes (2005) have examined the applicability of critical pedagogy in Korean EFL (English as a foreign language) contexts by incorporating critical issues into communicative activities to provoke thought and action at the intersection of language, culture, and curriculum. The result suggests that English learners were by no means resistant to the critical approach and could generate critical dialogues, although raised and taught as passive individuals and with conventional teaching approaches (Shin & Crookes, 2005). Also, Larson (2014) has noted that critical pedagogy has been successfully implemented in Indonesia. According to Larson (2014), critical approaches are not only consistent with the objectives and culture of the Indonesian Ministry of Education, but they also provide teachers with the initial steps to establish an ideal critical learning environment. These studies demonstrate that tenets of critical pedagogy can be implemented in Eastern educational frameworks, although having conventional teaching approaches. Even in countries with traditional teaching policies, modifications and adjustments can be made to accommodate critical pedagogy tenets in the curriculums. However, when integrating critical pedagogy into teaching environments, all aspects of teaching and learning, material development, assessment, and evaluation must align with the principles of critical pedagogy.

3.4 Materials and Assessments

To apply critical pedagogy in English language learning environments, course materials should align with critical pedagogy's key tenets. Failure to do so will likely hinder attaining the goal of social change (Crooks, 2010; Fajardo, 2015). Scholars claim that one of the challenges in English language learning settings within a critical pedagogy framework is that materials are not local. This means that materials do not discuss learners' social and local issues, such as poverty or discrimination, but instead focus on subjects such as holidays, vacations, sports, restaurants, and other daily matters of middle-class individuals (Ooiw-Yoshizawa, 2018; Rashid & Safari, 2011; Riasati & Mollaei, 2012).

Creating local materials means developing educational resources that include the learners' cultural, historical, and real-life concerns. This may consist of using local literature, music,

art, and other cultural elements as educational tools and addressing social issues impacting learners' lives. Such materials that reflect learners' culture and local issues aim to equip learners with the critical skills needed to question dominant power, preconceived social norms, and cultural biases in their society (Mahmoodarabi & Khodabakhsh, 2015). Based on Mahmoodarabi and Khodabakhsh (2015), such materials that do not consider learners' local culture and issues do not provide learners with opportunities for critical reflections and dialogues. Although many coursebook and textbook developers fail to consider the localness of the materials, Sandy and Kelly (2009) have developed a series of English-teaching student books while considering the localness and engaging critical thinking of the learners in the classroom.

In addition, most characters in course materials are White middle-class people. There are few characters from different races, cultures, colors, and ethnicities or their people with the same culture (Ooiw-Yoshizawa, 2018; Rashidi & Safari, 2011). Such materials may distance learners from the purpose of critical use of language and do not allow them to communicate about social issues actively and critically, and this is because including only Western characters with a certain culture and race reduces the degree of localness of materials (Crawford, 1978, as cited in Rashidi & Safari, 2011). The degree of the localness of materials can affect the efficiency of critical pedagogy in ELT classes because critical pedagogy considers the local context of learning (Norton & Toohy, 2004).

A negotiated syllabus can solve this lack of attention to the degree of localness in materials. Negotiated syllabus is not a textbook or coursebook that language learners are required to buy and follow. Negotiated syllabus is created and made by the learners in the class (Larson, 2014). It means that language learners in the class are the ones who decide about the content and materials of the class by bringing their local issues, problems, and interests to the class with the aid and support of the teacher (Larson, 2014). There is also the option of semi-negotiated syllabi for students to bring parts of their local cultures to the curriculum. Learners' local issues and concerns can be integrated and incorporated into the existing teaching materials (Mahmoodarabi & Khodabakhsh, 2015). A collaborative effort between English teachers and their learners might be needed to develop such materials. English language teachers can work with their learners to identify local cultural concerns that can be integrated into the teaching materials. This can include conducting research, collecting data, and analyzing the findings with the learners (Mahmoodarabi & Khodabakhsh, 2015).

Materials need to be congruent with the principles of critical pedagogy, and other aspects of the curriculum, including the assessment and evaluation system, should also be enacted within the framework of critical pedagogy. The efficiency of an ELT class with a critical approach needs all the materials, teachers' roles, students' roles, assessment and evaluation, monitoring, and management to be congruent to have students think critically about social issues.

Assessments also need to be congruent with the fundamental tenets of critical pedagogy. Akbari (2008) stated that the evaluation system in a class where critical pedagogy has been applied must assess the students' creative thinking, argumentative skills, and critical

thinking. However, teachers may have to follow mandated evaluation processes. The solution to this obstacle can be found in the post-method condition (Al-Kadi, 2020; Kumaravadivelu, 2003), in which teachers are given complete control over their teaching contexts in all aspects of teaching, including the evaluation system. Based on post-method conditions, teachers are regarded as the authority of their classrooms as they are the best individuals who know about their students' specific features, needs, and wants in the class (Al-Kadi, 2020; Kumaravadivelu, 2003). The post-method condition has placed premiums on the role of teachers to decide about the policies of the class, including teaching, assessment, and evaluation policies, concerning the needs of the students (Al-Kadi, 2020; Kumaravadivelu, 2003). The application of post-method conditions is a solution to the problem when teachers are forced to follow institutional policies.

However, for teachers who may not be able to apply post-method conditions due to organizational restrictions, there are different ways through which teachers can assess learners in English classes to make sure their assessment process is inclusive, empowering, and meaningful for the learners (Javadianmehr & Rashidi, 2011). Encouraging learners to critically reflect on their learning experiences in the class, assessing learners through their critical conversations and engagement throughout the course, letting learners participate and have a say in each other's assessment, and using problem-solving activities through which learners are encouraged to analyze and solve the problem are the other assessment methods all teachers can apply to align their assessments with the principles of critical pedagogy (Javadianmehr & Rashidi, 2011; Van Helden et al., 2023).

4. Conclusion

To conclude, the importance and significance of implementing the principles of critical pedagogy in ELT settings can be reinforced through the profound link between English language learning and societal transformation (Riasati & Mollaei, 2012). Critical pedagogy raises adult learners' awareness about cultural, political, and social issues around them and gradually nurtures them as change-makers in their lives and society. Although English language learner leaders may encounter challenges in applying critical pedagogy to ELT settings, the problems found in the literature about applying critical pedagogy in ELT settings are thoroughly soluble. To best apply critical pedagogy in any setting, including ELT, teacher training programs must be redirected toward recruiting and preparing teachers interested in and concerned about local and worldwide social and political issues. Also, it is paramount to equip the teachers with the skills to judge and interfere appropriately so that everyone in the class profits. The materials, course books, textbooks, and assessment system must be in line with the goals of critical pedagogy, and this is something that takes a concerted and joint effort of English language program leaders, instructors, and educators to attain their authority in the classrooms, adjust the materials and assessment to principles of critical pedagogy, foster criticality in the class, and remove the inequalities and the dominance in the field of English education imposed on them (Kumaravadivelu, 2016). Making materials more student-centered, incorporating the social issues and themes into the course and textbooks, and aligning the assessment system with the key concepts of critical pedagogy are all doable solutions to best apply critical pedagogy in ELT contexts. Moreover,

many successful applications of critical pedagogy in ELT settings found in the literature (Flowerdew, 2005; Larson, 2014; Shin & Crookes, 2005; Ünalı & Yıce, 2021) suggest incorporating critical pedagogy in all English teaching environments with different cultures and traditions.

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