

“I really don’t know what you mean by critical pedagogy.”

Reflections made by in-service teachers in the USA

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Abstract

*This is a qualitative case study of the responses given by in-service teachers in an exit interview upon completing a grant program that prepared them to be English-as-a-second-language (ESL) teachers in the USA. There were 28 participants in this study and they were in-service K-12 teachers who would become ESL certified. Based on Freire’s (2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Gee’s (2015) discourse analysis, the researcher analyzed their responses and found that the majority (96%) did not know about critical pedagogy or took the literal meaning and thought that the term meant critical thinking or evaluation of teaching. As critical pedagogy is an important construct for ESL teachers to take ownership and appropriate social justice, challenge the status quo of systemic oppression and marginalization of immigrants and refugees, the researcher advocates for academic programs to include critical pedagogy for strengthening the knowledge base of ESL teacher education programs.*

Keywords: social justice, emancipation, discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Critical pedagogy in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) is not a novice construct. It can be traced back to Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* written between 1967 and 1968 (Holst, 2006, p. 243). The term can be broadly construed as a sociopolitical framework for empowering learners by challenging the social realities and the status quo. According to Santana-Williamson (2000), the main tenets of critical pedagogy includes "understanding of education as political and never neutral, encompassing the notion of empowering, transforming, and emancipating learners, and advocating for critical consciousness" (p. 7-11).

According to Norton and Toohey (2004), "critical approaches to language education will require commitment to social transformation, justice, and equality." (p. 15) Therefore, critical pedagogy is a way of seeing social realities with critical lenses, with the intention to transform such realities and advocate for social justice and equity. As such, it goes beyond the literal meaning of critical thinking or critical analysis, which are often criticized as monolithic and skill-based.

This article focuses on the analysis of 28 recent Master of Arts in TESOL graduates' exit interview responses to a question, "Do you think that it is important to include critical pedagogy in the education of ESOL teachers? Would you elaborate on that?" The dataset was part of a large data corpus collected through a grant project which was funded by the U.S. Department of Education. The grant was to provide scholarship to 120 in-service teachers so that they could complete the courses required by the State and become ESL certified. Among them, 28 teachers from two sub-urban school districts participated in the end-of-project interview in 2019.

2. Theoretical Underpinning and Literature Review

The theoretical underpinning of this article was based on Gee's (2015) discourse in a big D and small d. Hanan (2018) problematized the critical attitude in critical pedagogy and proposed a "pedagogy of difference" (p. 903). Many studies corroborate the claim that ESL education requires an understanding of critical pedagogy and its application for enhancing the experiences of teachers and students (Wang, Many, & Krumenaker, 2008; Crookes & Lehner, 1998; Johnston, 1999)

3. Methodology

The grant project has a large data corpus with quasi-experimental data and multiple qualitative datasets. One of the sub-projects was to interview the grant completers and analyze their reflections. These reflections are instrumental in shaping the future courses in

the academic program. They are also invaluable for understanding how well the academic program had prepared the cohort members to become K-12 ESL teachers. As only a small dataset was selected for further analysis, this is a case study (Creswell, 2013) with the intention to offer suggestions for updating the existing curriculum.

There were 28 participants in the study. All of them were in-service K-12 teachers in public schools in a Midwestern State. The 28 participants had recently completed the seven courses required by the State's Teacher Certification Agency and they were on route to become ESL certified. They were phone interviewed by a trained research associate. The questions were semi-structured and they were designed for the grant completers to reflect upon the education that they received in the program. The author of this article was the co-director of the grant project and she analyzed the data using discourse analysis (Gee, 2015). James Paul Gee introduced the term "Discourse" with a capital "D", which foregrounds the social conventions which allow people to interact, and "discourse" with a small "d", which are the "stretch of language in use." (Gee, 2015)

4. Findings and Discussion

Among the 28 responses, only one participant gave a thoughtful definition of critical pedagogy. Participant A said,

"I find that having context-driven ideas and coming up with cultural ideologies like social justice or something and relating it to the classroom is good at providing those personal experiences, but combine that with critical thinking, you know, you can really get things going in the classroom. I want to say. It's just as long as we get the kids participating whatever it takes to get the students participated based on their, based on what they know and what they like, and be able to get them to produce what is taught, that's what's important. I mean, I got some things out of the classes that's for sure that I haven't thought about before."

This participant understood that being critical goes beyond critical thinking, despite having critical thinking involved. It has a social consciousness perspective that intertwine with cultural ideologies, justice, and equity. The definition offered by the participant was thoughtful and relevant. It echoes with the definitions of critical pedagogy given in Santana-Williamson (2000) and Norton and Toohey (2004). More importantly, the participant went into the further explanation of how critical theory could be applied in the classroom, with the aim of increasing students' participation and engagement.

Two out of 28 participants took the literal meaning and guessed that critical pedagogy was equivalent to critical thinking. Participant B said, "Yes, I do. 'Coz what's critical, including critical pedagogy, increases critical thinking skills, which can help them in TESOL students

or TESOL teachers and many different aspects of their lives. So if you're including critical practices, you're encouraging them to be critical thinkers." Participant C said, "Oh, absolutely. I think that, you know, in order for our students to be critical thinker - we, as teachers, need to be also critical thinkers, and we need to make sure that we're taking our lessons." Both Participants B and C made a direct linkage to critical thinking and they thought critical pedagogy was to encourage critical thinking for the teachers and students. Though critical pedagogy requires critical thinking skills, it is not equivalent to critical thinking because it has an overarching goal of social justice. As such, both Participants B and C did not know about critical pedagogy.

Nine out of 28 participants conceptualized the term with the assumption that critical pedagogy was having a critical analysis or evaluation. Their responses are shown in Table 1 as follows.

Table 1. Participant responses.

Do you think that it is important to include critical pedagogy in the education of ESOL teachers? Would you elaborate on that?	
Participant D	"Critical. Yeah, yes. Anytime that you're doing any type of classwork or anything like that, you have to have critical analysis behind it. You're not an expert at everything, so having those different outside pedagogy type things is essential to be able to be critiquing there."
Participant E	"I'm not sure I understand that term, but certainly pedagogically you know the teachers will need to know what works in what subject. Um. As it has to, well, teacher, we work with every subject and so it helps for us to be able to understand you know pedagogy: what works and what doesn't work pedagogically in many subjects so when we look at it. I tend to look at it with a linguistic eye and academic language eye so connecting that and then having (inaudible) become to connect that as well is helpful."
Participant F	"With critical pedagogy, I'll take that as meaning that, it's evaluative and yeah, its feedback from things, and then it's evaluating itself and improving as it goes along and also yeah, 'coz that's what it means. And yes, I think that part of the, the feedback and looking at what's going on and then looking and improve is a good thing."
Participant G	"Um. Yeah, I think it's always important for teachers to look at how they're instructing as a whole like how does each lesson fit into a unit? How does each unit fit into a year? I think it's important that we have our students um develop more and more of their analytical skills within each lesson. I'm hoping that I understood critical pedagogy. I know I can't ask you to clarify."
Participant H	"Um. Yeah, I'm kind of (inaudible) what critical pedagogy was. I remember a little bit. You're not allowed to answer anything like if you can give me a refresher. If it is what I think it is, then it's just the idea that we kind of look

	at the practices that we already have and find out why they are this way and are there better ways that we could be doing better and more inclusive. And if I'm right about it, then definitely we should totally be more inclusive, and be critical about our process about how we go about teaching in educating students; so they can be as successful as we want them to be or as they want themselves to be.”
Participant I	“Critical pedagogy. I would say that EL teachers are in somewhat unique place, I suppose. Because EL is somewhat of a new area in K-12 classroom, relatively speaking to other disciplines. That being said, there had been a number of different approaches to teaching EL K-12. Not all of them have been good. Not all of them have been bad, but it's going to be critical of the different pedagogies and be able to take the things that are valuable. That research shows actually work.”
Participant J	“I do because you're going to have different types of ESOL students in the classroom, so being able to think critically about the way that you teach and provide the instruction on the curriculum is important.”
Participant K	“I think, I mean yes. I don't think that's the most essential part for, essential for teachers is not as I don't think like as part of a second degree program. I don't think that it's essential. But if it's a first degree program that then absolutely essential. But I think most of us had some sort of understanding about to begin with. But the idea of reflecting and just putting that into practice, you know, doing reflective types of assignment, I think that's totally reasonable and sound and helps you see how you're from.”
Participant L	“Well, if I if if you're talking about critical pedagogy in terms of like being critical of the pedagogy we're using right now - pedagogy from the past and then what we're moving towards, then yeah, absolutely. I would completely agree. You know, we were able to look at a few like educational-wise, and and things that were enacted in the past, and how so much has changed, and kind of talked about our current educational system today, and why we're critical of it now. And I think that it's just, it's really, really important to stay knowledgeable about that stuff and where you can operate within those spaces and how you can advocate for better education for your students.”

As shown in Table 1, nine participants thought that critical pedagogy was to have a critical review or evaluation of teaching. Participant H mentioned the word, “inclusive”, which is under the paradigm of social justice. However, he or she was unsure about the definition.

The overall findings of the study show that only 1 out of 28 participants (3.6%) had a thoughtful understanding of critical pedagogy and its application in the field of TESOL. Two participants (7.1%) thought that it was critical thinking. Nine participants (32%) thought that critical pedagogy was having a critical analysis or evaluation of teaching. Sixteen participants said they didn't know the term or they chose not to respond to the question. Since the sixteen

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responses were repetitive, they were not shown in this article. One of the responses was, “I really don’t know what you mean by critical pedagogy.” The majority of the participants (96%) did not comprehend the meaning of critical pedagogy and its application in TESOL.

Based on the findings, the researcher analyzed the responses with discourse with a big D and small d in mind, and proposed the following chart to explain why.

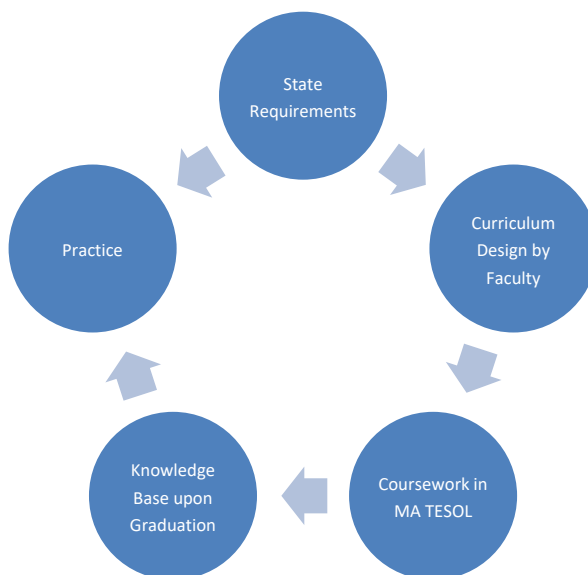


Figure 1. Contextual Realities Behind the Teacher Education Curriculum.

With “Discourse with a big D” (Gee, 2015) in mind, the author analyzed the contextual reality behind the responses. The State’s department of education set forth the coursework requirement for ESL certification. In order to keep the State anonymous, the name of the State is not included in this discussion. As the State mandated these coursework requirements, universities designed curriculum and then teacher candidates took the courses in MA TESOL in order to complete the requirements. When analyzing the State’s requirement, there was no mentioning of critical pedagogy in the required courses. The coursework in MA TESOL did not incorporate critical pedagogy and therefore, the knowledge base lacks the framework of social consciousness, as evidenced in the exit interview.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the responses given by MA TESOL graduates in a graduate program in the USA. Based on the responses, the researcher concludes that critical pedagogy was not

included in the curriculum, which was designed by the university and designated by the State Certification Agency. As critical pedagogy has become an important pedagogical and research paradigm in the field of TESOL, it is suggested that the TESOL curriculum incorporates it in the academic program.

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