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Dynamics of an EFL Reading Course with a Critical Literacy Orientation

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This study was an attempt to explore how a critical literacy (CL) approach to reading development may contribute to EFL learners' personal development, and what their perceptions of a reading course with a CL orientation are. 25 B.A. freshman English Literature students participated in a reading comprehension course at Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran. Throughout this course, students were encouraged to deal with the passages brought by them in a problem-posing manner through group discussions and reflective journals. To explore changes in their perceptions of themselves, their personal development, and the class dynamics, they wrote two self-assessments and two class assessments at the end of the first month and by the end of the course. As a result of the thematic analysis of 79 journals, a number of themes emerged that illustrate the contributions of the CL approach to learners' development of voice and self-awareness, to name a few.

Books were open in front of a number of university freshmen silently waiting for the new lesson. Although students had stepped into a new place with a different atmosphere, they were quite familiar with the way teachers dealt with the materials as they had endured almost the same process for years at school. The teacher, as usual, was reading a short text in the reading comprehension class while drawing the students' attention to the meanings of new words. Some of the students who were regarded as high achievers were contributing by offering synonyms for the new words and the teacher, pleased with their work, was encouraging other students to write them down so that they could memorize the words for the next session. After reading the text and

working on the meanings of some vague sentences, students were required to answer the comprehension questions at the end of that unit. Students' correct answers to the multiple choice, true/false, and fill-in-the blank questions 'proved' that they had learned the new lesson. The teacher, satisfied with his teaching, dismissed the class.

The above scenario may sound very familiar to many teachers and students, as it does to the authors of this paper who have encountered many colleagues who explicitly talk about the abovementioned procedures as the main tasks they use in their classes. And we have encountered too many students who report that most of the activities they are assigned are very similar to the above.

With a rather considerable concern for content knowledge and the heavy emphasis given to memorization in some educational settings, education has come to be considered by some scholars as an act of depositing, in which teachers are depositors and students are the depositories (Freire, 1972). Freire (1972) calls this kind of education banking: isolating learners from the content and process of education and assuming that the teacher knows everything and students know nothing (Crookes & Lehner, 1998). In the long run, the banking model encourages passivity in students and closes their minds to the higher objectives of education, i.e. finding one's own voice in society. The importance of developing voice in students lies in the fact that without daring to oppose and resist ideas, rules, and strict structures which might be imposed upon them, students develop a deep sense of silence, submissiveness, and obedience. These destructive feelings make them lower themselves and break the positive images they have of themselves until they learn to remain passive and silent, and this is what Freire (1972) refers to as the "culture of silence," which the above scenario exemplifies.

This teacher-fronted approach to education in general has colored English language teaching (ELT) as well since this area also "fails to make central the most fundamental pedagogical questions regarding student empowerment" (Pennycook, 1990, p. 304). One of the main reasons behind this failure seems to be the heavy focus placed on linguistic aspects of language education at the cost of due attention to its educational aspects such as creativity and generation of ideas (Pennycook, 1990). Such conditions reflect "the continuing power of SLA [Second Language Acquisition] to co-opt teachers into prioritizing autonomous, psycholinguistic issues over the dynamic, multifaceted social and ideological contexts that co-occur and interrelate with all aspects of pedagogy" (Morgan, 2004, p. 160).

To shed some light on the current conditions of ELT as depicted above, an example from EFL (English as a Foreign Language) writing instruction can help here. Many writing classes focus on accuracy, lexical variety, structural complexity, and other linguistic issues at the expense of attention to students' creativity, personal relevance, and significance of writing topics. What happens as a result of this approach is that teachers decide what topics students should write about in what genre with almost no negotiation with students about their likes and dislikes. "Write a description of fall!" was a topic given to some of our students by their writing instructor who didn't seem to have asked himself or herself whether the topic would interest them at all. In this regard, Raimes (2002), foregrounding the significance of factoring students' interests and voices into class policies, invites teachers to base their decisions on questions such as: "Are the

topics culturally appropriate for your students?”, “Will they engage the students’ interests?”, “Is the content relevant and engaging?” (p. 311).

Almost the same holds true in L2 reading instruction as again many teachers, assuming themselves to be “sages on the stage” rather than “guides on the side” (Renandya & Jacobs, 2002, p. 299), often decide on the content without negotiation with students and let the tastes of some authors, who are usually detached from the realities of students’ lives, determine what students must read and what tasks they must do. Thus, as shown in the above discussion, such key educational concepts as student voice, critical consciousness, and creative action are practically ignored.

Of course, it is simplistic and judgmental to claim that uncritical and narrow treatment of ELT runs across all language education settings and classrooms since some studies report attempts made to cultivate a more democratic culture, encourage critical thinking and creative learning instead of memorization, and incorporate cultural aspects of L2 into language instruction (e.g. Ghahramani-Ghajar & Mirhosseini, 2005; Morgan, 2004; Norton & Vanderheyden, 2004). However, more can be done to free the context of schooling from the culture of silence in many education systems. One such measure is incorporation of critical theories of education such as critical pedagogy and transformative education into policies and practices of language educational institutions (Giroux, 1983; Pennycook, 1990). The goal of these approaches to education is the development of critical consciousness, which is imperative to human action and social transformation, and the remaking of their own identities through their own actions (Cervetti, Pardales & Damico, 2001). Education in these frameworks is considered as a powerful tool given to individuals to “better themselves and strengthen democracy, to create a more egalitarian and just society, and thus to deploy education in a process of progressive social change” (Kellner, 2000, p. 7). Therefore, in these approaches the essence of education is not mastering the A to Z of the books but developing critical thinking skills in order to transform inequitable, undemocratic, or oppressive institutions and social relations (Burbules & Berk, 1997).

In keeping with critical pedagogy and transformative education which generally deal with issues such as voice and critical consciousness, critical literacy inspired by these schools of thought focuses on “self seeking” rather than meaning seeking processes (Callison, 2006), specifically by reconstructing texts in ways that are more consistent with one’s own experiences (Cervetti et al., 2001). Text in this regard is defined as a “vehicle through which individuals communicate with one another using the codes and conventions of society” (Robinson & Robinson, 2003 p.3). In other words, in critical literacy students are encouraged to approach texts critically and in a questioning manner and challenge received knowledge through asking questions such as “What is the purpose of the text?” and “Whose interests are served by the dissemination of this text?” (Cervetti et al., 2001, ¶ 37). In other words, instead of being passive recipients of knowledge, they actively construct knowledge.

Critical literacy suggests active participation of students in the learning process through collaborative activities like dialogue (Freire, 1972). Being involved in constructive dialogues with other students and teachers necessitates students gaining expertise in supporting their ideas, strengthening their arguments and considering texts and the world, in general, as multilayered

(Callison, 2006). This kind of practice gradually helps students to change and redefine their world by viewing it from newer and broader perspectives, and this is the essence of literacy. Critical literacy practice benefits teachers as well in that they also get involved in a developmental process. That is, by encouraging students to develop critical thinking skills, teachers change into critical-democratic educators (Shor, 1999).

Critical literacy is not merely a set of new activities that teachers can simply learn and employ (Kamler & Comber, 1997). This critical way of teaching broadens teachers' understanding of "what it is [that] students are learning to read and write, what they do with that reading and writing and what that reading and writing does to them and their world" (Kamler & Comber, 1997, p. 4). For the present authors, critical literacy was not a piece of sound advice to receive from critical theoreticians, but advice on which to act and follow dutifully. In order to implement critical consciousness, self seeking, and dialogue, a reading comprehension course was run by Arman Abednia, in which the reading passages selected by the learners and the teacher were dealt with critically and dialogically, i.e. through encouraging the learners to read passages in a questioning manner, discussing texts through different lenses, and writing reflective journals with personal experiences in mind.

The aim of the present study was twofold: first, to provide an example of how critical pedagogy played out in this course so educators might apply it in their classrooms; second, to explore the participants' perceptions of the dynamics of this course based on the self- and class assessments written by them, that is, their understanding of advantages and disadvantages of such a critical course and the ways in which the critically-oriented practices informed their intellectual development. In order to provide an example of how the course was conducted, a detailed description of the course as well as an in-depth account of qualitative thematic analysis of its processes and outcomes are presented below.

Study

Setting

This study took place in "English Language & Literature department of Allameh Tabataba'i University, a well-known state-run university involved in Humanities in Tehran, Iran. The course in which the critical literacy approach was implemented was "English Reading Comprehension 1" offered in the first term of the B.A. program of English Language Literature. The reading course consisted of three weekly sessions lasting approximately 100 minutes apiece. Two sessions were held on Mondays (8-10 and 10-12) and one session took place on Tuesdays (8-10) for twelve weeks between February 2008 and June, 2008.

The instructor of the course was a sessional lecturer and a Ph.D. candidate of TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) at Allameh Tabataba'i University at the time. He was and still is passionate about critical approaches to (second language) education and tries to implement these approaches in all courses he teaches despite most instructors' adherence to mainstream ELT at the same university and their disapproval of his "passionate" and "unnecessary involvement with students." In his classes dialogue, student voice, and critical thinking are always high on the agenda. He is outspoken in his criticism of the status quo and actively tries to encourage critical and creative action on the part of his students. This style intentionally departs from the banking

model, which, to the present authors, is more or less dominant in the academic context of EFL in Iran. Thus, he strikes many students as very radical at first.

Twenty-five freshmen (twenty two females and three males), at the age range between eighteen and twenty one, attended the course. Most of the students were from Tehran and only a few of them were from other cities of Iran. Regarding their language abilities, more than 80% of the students had attended language classes at private language institutes and were fluent in speaking and writing English. With regard to their religious background, the participants were all Muslims and this seemed to inform the way some of them treated the topics and readings of the class. That is, sometimes some participants would critique the authors' ideologies based on their own religious views.

As for their educational background, the mainly lecture format of the schooling system seemed to have made many of them quite passive and silent. In other words, as they used to listen rather meekly to teachers throughout their schooling, they rarely showed willingness to actively participate in the class at the beginning of this course and proved to be relatively unfamiliar with the nature and features of dialogue in class and group discussions. Another significant consequence of this mainly traditional educational background was lack of interest in and awareness of critical ways of approaching issues in general, and reading, in particular, on the part of many of them. For example, in the first couple of weeks of the course, some of them would ask the teacher to allocate the bulk of the course to reading skills necessary for taking high-stakes tests such as TOEFL since they didn't deeply appreciate the significance of critical reading and were not used to tasks involving critical thinking skills. Consequently, they had a hard time working out what critical reading entailed and would mainly pose mere comprehension questions when they were invited to participate.

In addition to the banking-oriented educational context, the fundamentalist religious and political atmosphere of Iran had a significant role to play in cultivating the culture of silence. A brief glance at the historical origins of this atmosphere is in order. As a result of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, a government headed by religious authorities was formed, amounting to the dominance of a fundamentalist reading of Qu'ran and its principles as well as an insistence on all Iranians' adherence to that Islamic framework in different spheres. A very clear expression of the perceived interconnection of governmental policies and religious values in Iran is a statement made by Modarres, an influential delegate, and printed on 100-Rial bills which read "Our religion is the same as our politics, and our politics is the same as our religion." The academia in Iran was also strongly influenced by its political and religious value system. As an example of this influence, an organization called "the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution," consisting of the president, the heads of the legislative and judiciary systems and some academic figures, was established in order to formulate and implement new policies on students' admission to universities. Among the most important criteria for admission were Iranian applicants' religious and political beliefs, which, as mentioned above, are inextricably interwoven in Iran. That is, anyone holding antigovernment beliefs was believed to have anti-Islamic views and, consequently, was deprived of receiving academic education (Farhady & Hedayati, 2009). The same criteria are still more or less in effect, and most of the students in the reading class, aware of this political structure and religious taste, initially preferred to distance themselves from discussion about political, religious, and other unsafe issues.

Classroom content and process

In order to adopt a critical pedagogical approach in the reading course, no specific reading book was chosen. That is, it was assumed that selecting a certain book prior to the course contradicts the basic tenets of participatory and emancipatory education where students are the co-owners of the classroom. In order to develop a negotiated syllabus (Clarke, 1991), the teacher encouraged all of the students to actively participate in the process of designing and running the course through providing materials on their own. In doing so, he provided them with some guidelines as to how to choose materials such as taking into account their own and their classmates' interests, real life concerns, needs and background knowledge, and the reliability of the sources from which they retrieved texts.

After students brought different texts to the class and the teacher provided initial feedback about the difficulty level and appropriateness of the texts, the students voted on them based on the relevance of the passages to their lives. The two or three readings that obtained majority vote were selected. Since the teacher tried to take all students' tastes into account, the selected readings proved to be about a variety of topics such as differences between men and women, deception in mass rallies, caring for parents, gossip, attitudes of different religions toward heaven, facial expressions, the power of imagination, and living standards in different societies. The students were also required to go through the readings at home and try to work out the lexically and structurally difficult and complicated parts so that the class time would be mainly spent on discussing the issues involved in the passages, relating them to their daily life concerns and problematizing them.

The class usually started with a class discussion on the issues involved in the reading, through which the students shared their general understanding of the main points mentioned in the passage. Then the whole reading itself would be read through by the participants and they were encouraged to ask about language and comprehension problems they had faced when reading it.

Since the instructor wanted to base the course on the students' situation and understanding of the course (Shor, 1992), the students were invited to pose questions about the reading which could help critically analyze aspects of texts such as ideas expressed or reported by the author and the way the passage had been written. After four weeks, the instructor felt the students had begun to act as independent co-owners of the class. Thus, he provided the students with a list of critical literacy questions such as "Are there 'gaps' and 'silences' in the text?" and "Who is missing from the text?" (<http://wwwfp.education.tas.gov.au/English/critlit.htm>).

Once the questions, which seemed to best fit a given reading, were chosen based on the agreement of the majority, the students teamed up in groups of four to seven and had discussions based on selected questions. Whenever the class time was not taken by the group discussions, the groups shared the findings in brief class discussions that followed.

Another activity in which the students were involved in during the course was writing reflective journals. That is, every student was encouraged to choose one of the topics covered in that week which proved to be more interesting to him/her, approach it in any way s/he preferred, and write a reflection on it. The teacher, on the other hand, was responsible for giving feedback. As journal writing can help promote individuality and subjectivity, the teacher's comments were mainly

meant to motivate the students to voice their personal opinions and analyze writers' ideas in a critical manner. However, when necessary, the teacher also made a few comments on linguistic aspects of the reflections.

Every student was also invited to assess their own performance and the effectiveness of the course in terms of materials, teacher performance, and students' interactions. To this end, each wrote a class assessment and a self-assessment once at the end of the first month and once by the end of the course. This study focuses on the assessment journals the students wrote about themselves and their class.

Thematic Analysis of the Data

79 journal entries of students' class and self-assessment were gathered throughout the course and subjected to qualitative thematic analysis in order to identify recurring themes in the journals. After color-coding and conceptual coding of the journals, the points referred to by the students were subsumed under different themes and, subsequently, classified into the categories of class assessment and self-assessment themes respectively. In the thematic analysis done on the journals, we found twelve recurring themes eight of which were related to class assessment and four were related to self-assessment. Before discussing the themes a word of caution is in order. One cannot take it for granted that perceptions of a group of learners necessarily reflect the whole reality, especially given the fact that not all students shared the same understanding of the dynamics of the course. The themes discussed below, both positive and negative, are not the outcome of all students' perceptions but that of the majority. Thus, such findings should be always treated with caution, and different and even conflicting results should be expected.

Themes from Class Assessments

Freedom of speech. The theme with the highest frequency of occurrence in the journals was freedom of speech. Almost all students in their reflective journals referred to the freedom they had felt during the course for voicing their opinions and also the teacher's respect for their ideas as a positive point.

Giving students space for expressing ideas and, at the same time, showing them how to respect other people's thoughts and feelings is a way of cultivating the culture of voice in students as apposed to the culture of silence (Freire, 1972), which would hinder students from making their voice heard both in classroom and in society.

In critical literacy, "literacy" is considered to be the ability that originates in the development of voice and contributes to the well being of oneself and society. However, in every social context, educational settings included, in order for individuals to find their voices, a democratic atmosphere, which paves the way for freedom of expression is necessary. During this course, attempts were made to break the students' silence by inviting them to share their ideas with each other freely without being frightened of being laughed at or ridiculed. Respecting students' personal viewpoints, the teacher encouraged students to listen to and respect others' points of view. Although at the very beginning of this course some students resisted communicating their ideas freely in the discussions, they gradually showed more enthusiasm for making their voices

heard in the class as they found their classmates attentive to their opinions. The following examples directly quoted from the participants' reflective journals clearly illustrate this point:

- “When we have discussions about any topic, you seek our opinions; but you never say that one's opinion is completely wrong or right (just because you believe in that opinion or not).”
- “It was great for me that not only you did not look down on us but also you respected us a lot. You were not like some instructors who think they are such a brain and they let themselves humiliate their students.”
- “In this class you respect our ideas, by doing so you let us learn that we should respect each other's ideas. When I am in this class I do not let myself think my idea is superior to my classmate's.”

Friendly relationship with the teacher and comfortable atmosphere of the class. Many teachers may try to create a friendly relationship with their students for many instructional and affective reasons such as increasing the learning of the class content and preventing a stressful and boring atmosphere. Not all such attempts are necessarily directed by critical and emancipatory motivations as, for example, a teacher may try to create a comfortable atmosphere just to help students become verbally active or “take in” content deposited by the teacher. However, in critical literacy-oriented courses, a close bond between teacher and students is particularly significant due to a different reason: enabling teachers not only to talk to learners but talk with them in a dialogical manner (Freire, 2005). That is, if teachers try to come down from their safe and impregnable position to a friendlier, more democratic, and dialogical environment, they can find the opportunity to connect with the concrete conditions of students' world which impact students' ways of thinking and living (Freire, 2005). Through this open and heart-to-heart talk, students dare to express their ideas and little by little develop their own voices and identities. This type of teacher-student interaction can encourage social and personal development in students that is a major objective in critical literacy programs.

When analyzing the reflective journals, we found many occasions on which students had appreciated their teacher's friendly conduct, and had labeled him as “elder brother,” “problem solver,” and “facilitator” because of his friendly behaviors in and out of the class. The excerpts below shed more light on this issue:

- “I was not afraid of speaking to you about my problems in university classes. You tried to know everyone of your students and treat them in a unique way.”
- “When I speak with you and discuss my problems, you guide me very friendly like my brother and now I think, I improve a little....”
- “..he can be students' friend too, he feels worry about students who come late or students who are tired,....”

A unique class. The reading course was described as unique in many students' journals due to features like shared ownership of the classroom content and procedures, particular focus on critical thinking, and practical usefulness all of which are attributable to the critical literacy orientation of the course. With an eye to the fact that learners' passivity in class diminishes their motivation for learning (Schunk, 2004), the teacher strived to involve students in all classroom decisions and activities such as bringing their own learning materials, deciding upon the appropriateness and interestingness of the materials, etc. This opportunity provided for students to run the class jointly with the teacher was considered as unique by many of the students as shown below:

- “This class is a unique one in my mind. . . to have the right to choose the topics we want to debate on, by bringing our own readings and being able to choose from those brought by others.”

As mentioned above, the other two reasons behind the students' considering the class unique were practicality of the course content and activities and encouraging them to think in a questioning manner:

- “Students who attend your class understand that there is a big difference between your class and other classes which they have or have had before. . . . [Y]ou encouraged us to think deeply, gave this opportunity to pose questions.”
- “I love this course and I think it is one of the most practical courses that I have ever had.”

Helpful group discussions. According to Freire (1972), dialogue lies at the core of transformative pedagogy and, therefore, the lecture format of the banking approach is a far cry from the dialogical approach of transformative education. Transformative education, while supporting dialogue and open communication among students and teachers, asks them to turn the lens on social phenomena and critically analyze social issues through a process of collaborative dialogue, and, in doing so, involve the voice of all participants (Guilar, 2006). Therefore, contrary to many communicative English classes where discussions tend to be mainly aimed at increasing student talking time (STT) in order to improve their linguistic abilities such as fluency, discussions conducted in critically oriented classes are meant to maximize the opportunity for students to critically analyze their life situations, co-construct their understandings of the world, find their voices and reconstruct their identities. In addition, although improvement of linguistic skills is not the only concern in critical L2 classes, it is also focused on language as a means to critical and social ends. Thus, in critical classes student empowerment coincides with literacy development.

In order to cultivate the culture of dialogue in students in the reading course, students engaged in discussions after reading about a certain topic and exchanged their personal ideas with each other. Of course, discussions were not always friendly and the students were not always comfortable as their ideologies and beliefs were questioned by others. However, they seemed to appreciate the opportunity they had to deepen their intersubjective understanding. Moreover, students' attention, from the very beginning, was directed toward some rules governing

discussions such as avoiding monopolizing the discussions, and inviting silent students to participate. These discussions won students' favor according to their journals:

- “Discussions in class are really useful. Every student learns how to develop their ideas in a discussion.”
- “Discussions were in a friendly manner and style which made me personally think a little on what I am about to say, because I saw I am being heard not only for the marks but for my thinking methods.”
- “Group discussion is one of the most complicated process I have ever experienced. It is a symbol of cooperation among classmates. We learn how to work in group, how to respect others.”

Teacher as a role model. According to the constructivist paradigm, one of the channels through which learning happens is mental models generated as a result of individuals' experiences with other human subjects (Schunk, 2004). In other words, the positive or negative images one leaves in people's minds might be a source of learning. For instance, in a classroom, if a teacher strikes his/her students as positive, it is more likely that they will emulate his/her behaviors and vice versa. In this study, it was found that the image of a caring and loving teacher who aspires to help students know themselves better and be agents of change would influence who they are and will become. Moreover, what is of utmost importance in critical and transformative education is combination of word and action (Freire, 1972). What probably made the teacher of this class a role model for his students was his practicing what he preached. For example, he didn't merely foreground the importance of dialogue and openness. He also tried to deal with topics and students' ideas in a dialogical and open manner. When analyzing the journals, it was observed that students created a positive mental image of their teacher and his teaching approach during the course. The examples below provide some evidence for this observation:

- “I am a big fan of this method. If I become a teacher at university, I will do the same.”
- “What is really fascinating for me is to see a teacher who wants to be agent of changes and motivates others to be the agents of change too. This is what I always thought that a teacher should be.”
- “I should confess that you are one of the most dedicated (and of course rare) teachers I have seen in this country,... I hope that one day every teacher get to the point to understand that teaching has an important role in every human's life and try to deal with teaching as you do.”

Teacher's helpful feedback on student work. Giving feedback on students' work plays a central role in students learning (Vygotsky, 1978). These responses might focus on the content or ideas of students' writing and grammar or lexical errors (Lee, 2005). As a critical literacy practice, writing is mainly aimed at maximizing interaction and dialog between teacher and learners. This type of writing, which is called dialogue journal writing (Peyton, 2000), attaches great importance to teacher's feedback on content and ideas as compared to linguistic accuracy.

In this course, in order to facilitate dialogue between the teacher and the students and provide another opportunity for the students to voice their opinions, every piece of the students' writing was carefully read and analyzed by the teacher and appropriate and constructive feedback was provided mainly on their ideas and, when necessary, on their language use. In addition, the learners were encouraged to respond to the teacher's comments whenever they felt like doing so. Here are the ideas of some of the students in this regard:

- “The most important thing that I could not believe was that the professor read all the reading [i.e., reflections] and it was interesting he wrote his ideas about reading.”
- “When you returned my writing and I read the feedback and your ideas about my writing, I really enjoyed.”
- “I can say these writings and your comments under it were the best part of all my education. It was so valuable for me that sometimes I need a special desire to write--if we can say poems--my poems.”

Uninteresting topics. As students were responsible for bringing materials to the class, every one of them would choose texts mainly based on their own interests. Some topics interesting to some did not prove to be interesting to some others. This point was referred to as a weak point by some of the students as explained below:

- “Some of the topics which are debated by students are not so interesting, sometimes the topic of the discussion is unfamiliar for some students, I mean they do not have any information, so they prefer to keep silent.”
- “Voting to choose a topic does not work sometimes, because the topic seems interesting, but after we choose and read it, we feel it was not what we expected it to be.”

Big talkers. At the very beginning of the course, there were some students who had not yet found their voice in the class and usually preferred to remain silent in class discussions and, to a lesser degree, in group discussions. Like ‘Siberian Syndrome’ that Shor (1996) observed in his own students who were willing to sit in parts of the room farthest from the teacher, these students' reticence could be the result of “their being talked at, talked about, talked around, and talked down to, but rarely talked with in traditional schooling” (Shor, 1996, p. 16). These students were, at times, victimized by those who were more talkative and monopolized discussions. This problem was partly overcome during the course as the silent students recognized their right to speak in the class and some others learned how to respect their classmates' right to speak more. However, the problem of big talkers never completely faded away. The excerpts below show some students' dissatisfaction with this point:

- “There were some students who spoke a lot and took lots of time. Although they could express their opinions in one or two sentences, they spoke a lot almost say nonsense they just wanted to say more.”

- “At first there were some students spoke a lot and did not permission to another students spoke but step by step it solved.”

Themes from the Self-Assessments

The second set of themes that emerged in this study was related to self assessment journals the students had written in order to evaluate their own progress during the course. Below are the most recurring themes in this category:

Improvement of critical thinking ability. As mentioned in the introduction, one of the purposes of education is developing critical thinking in students, so that they “become more skeptical toward commonly accepted truisms” (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p.45), recognize themselves and feel disposed to remake their identities through their actions in the world (Cervetti et al., 2001). In order for students to obtain this critical consciousness in the reading course, they were asked to reflect on the reading texts they brought to the class and pose thought-provoking and critical questions such as: “What is the purpose of the text?” and “Whose interests are served by the dissemination of this text?” We hoped that raising such questions in class would help students develop critical consciousness. The examples below clearly show the emergence of this ability in students:

- “My thinking progress was out of function but in your class I improved my way of thinking and my judgments.”
- “As a teacher, you encouraged us to think deeply, gave the opportunity to pose our questions about subjects which we ourselves had chosen.”
- “I have learnt a lot from this class including thinking deeply about the issues which may seem so clear and see their other aspects which may have been remained hidden.”

Improvement of self-confidence. Another positive change that took place in the students, according to their reflective journals, was related to their self confidence. Making students responsible for bringing materials, helping them find their own voices through discussions and reflective journals, and encouraging them to participate in every class decision not only helped run the class in a negotiated manner but also raised their self-confidence. That is, as they found themselves to be the co-owners of the class and their ideas worth incorporating into class procedures, they gained a more positive image of capabilities that could help them with real-life decision-making and problem solving. In the thematic analysis of the journals we found occasional references to the students’ gaining more confidence:

- “I could develop my self confidence in this class and attended in discussion and spoke...my master increased my self confidence by his behaviors, his encouragements.”
- “In this class, we did not try to compare our knowledge of English language together and show our language ability histrionically. It helped us to increase our self confidence.”

Development of self-awareness. Transforming self and society, which is at the heart of transformative pedagogy and critical literacy (Shor, 1992), happens as a result of broadening

students' understanding of themselves and the world around them. In other words, in order to question and transform the taken-for-granted assumptions about the world and the way we live, it is essential to develop a deep and critical understanding of who we are and what abilities we have. In order to do so, instead of encouraging students to report other people's thoughts and beliefs, the teacher frequently invited the students to focus on their own standpoints, no matter how worthwhile or logical they might sound to others or how different they might prove to be from the majority's opinions. Putting on the paper what they wholeheartedly believed in, students came to know their ideas, likes, dislikes and, generally, themselves more fully. The examples below focus on this point:

- “You recommended us to read texts by the aid of “critical literacy”... and that was exactly when I found its’ “profound effects.” My routine life is now much better and purposeful.”
- “Writings helped me a lot. They helped me to recognize myself more. I became more familiar with me (I mean my ideas, thoughts. . . they became organized).”
- “Frankly, I find myself again in your class.”

Development of speaking, writing, and reading skills. The last theme from the data was related to development of language skills. Although the major goal of the reading course was to improve students' reading skills, this intended outcome was achieved along with improvement in students' speaking and writing abilities due to the group discussions and journal writings students had been involved in during the course. The critical approach adopted in this class encouraged the participants to go beyond mere reading of texts to develop a deep understanding of real life issues through reading as well as voicing their own ideas, listening to others', and writing reflections. The reading skill per se wouldn't help them with the whole task and they needed to use such skills as speaking and writing as well. The critical nature of the course helped realize an integrated approach to language skills development, which takes the interrelatedness of all language skills into account. Almost all students referred to this point in their journals as depicted below:

- “Although this class was reading class, we had reading, listening, and speaking. We had to write a composition every week and we could improve our writing skill.”
- “In the past, I never thought I could be able to write or talk as well as I do now. . . . I owe my skills to my classes, specially, my Reading & Comprehension classes.”
- “Another positive point about this class was writings. Specially finding the collocations from reading. It was really sweet to me. Since I did not know what collocations were in the past.”

Concluding Remarks

The positive effects critical literacy brought about in the students' personal, social and educational development in this study are certain because, as observed in the reflective journals, considerable positive changes were made in students' critical thinking ability, self-confidence

and self-awareness. Also, throughout the course, the teacher observed increasing familiarity with and interest in critical reading and dialogue on the part of the learners. Given the mainly traditional educational background many of them had come from, such changes in their reading and thinking habits can be attributed to the critical approach adopted in this reading course.

Despite the great value of these changes in the participants' thinking and reading habits, critical reflection, by itself, is not enough. As implied in the concept of praxis, action inside and beyond the borders of classroom is also of particular significance in critical pedagogy (Freire, 1972). In this study, we cannot make claims about how the observed critical reflection of the participants translated into action in society at large simply because the teacher didn't teach any other courses to them and, thus, didn't have regular contact with them at the university let alone outside. However, since the course itself can be considered a context for social interactions with other members of society, the changes observed in the students' styles of interaction with their peers, the teacher, and the texts, can be thought of as samples of critical and creative action that may promote similar behaviors in society. Moreover, students' later expression of willingness to have other similar courses with the teacher and their dissatisfaction with courses that employed a banking orientation also indicated that they had not really forgotten about criticality and creativity they had practiced in the class, nor had they lost their interest in them.

In order to have a self-critical approach to this study, the pitfalls of critical practices, such as those mentioned in the last two themes emerging from the class assessments, mustn't be ignored. To be more specific, given the negotiated nature of the course, the selected readings were not always interesting. With regard to discussions conducted in the class, due to students' lack of adequate familiarity with the culture of dialogue and its ingredients, some proved to be too talkative, monopolizing discussions and rendering others more and more silent. Of course, discussions became more dialogical during the course, and the participants seemed to enjoy more equal shares in discussions after a few weeks of challenges with the emancipatory approach adopted in the course.

The conclusion this study is going to make at the end, however, does not merely reside in the above analysis but comes out of the students' emotionally positive reactions to the course long after it was finished. Although the course was over two years ago, the students have kept in touch with the teacher, still consult and share their ideas, feelings and experiences with him and show their willingness to take other negotiated and co-constructed courses with him. Trying to teach as a transformative intellectual (Giroux, 1983) and cultural worker (Freire, 2005), that is, attending to the critical and emancipatory side of education, regarding students as whole persons, helping them go beyond mere memorization of materials and developing critical consciousness, the teacher tried to dispense with power relations which render the classroom atmosphere strained and discourage negotiation of ideas. The lasting results of the present study may help other teachers, including the present researchers, find their true vocation in a world where many students do not experience emancipatory teaching in their classes due to many of their teachers' preoccupation with teaching contents to students in a rather banking manner.

We make an urgent plea for ELT teachers and authorities to question their mindsets and make a close and fair analysis of potential benefits of critical approaches to education. We strongly agree with Pennycook's (1990) observation that what can save language education from the

consequences of its divorce from its educational side and apparently strict adherence to its linguistic side is critical pedagogy. Having said that, critical practitioners and theoreticians mustn't forget that there is no single version of critical pedagogy out there to be discovered and adhered to, but critical pedagogies must be co-constructed by human beings.

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