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Teacher's Narration of Teaching Critical Literacy: It's a KEY for Raising Students' Awareness in Iran

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Teacher’s Narration of Teaching Critical Literacy: It’s a KEY for Raising Students’ Awareness in Iran

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Abstract

To be literate, students need to be able to think critically and read between the lines to find the implicit meanings and ideologies. To help Iranian English language learners learn writing as a social action and not independent of social (in)justices and (in)equalities, we included critical literacy in a writing course at the University of Kashan. We intend to illuminate teacher’s narration about raising students’ awareness towards (mal)practices, (in)justices, and (in)equalities of the society in their writings. To do so, all 52 undergraduate 3rd-year-EFL learners of English Literature and Translation participated in our writing class. The teacher was also an associate professor (50 years old) with critical literacy as his main area of research. Students were required to write essays as mid-term and final exams. The teacher’s reflection on the course in general and on the EFL learners’ reflective essays highlighted that teaching writing through critical literacy helped students realize that writing is a process dependent on different social and political issues. Students’ growth in critical consciousness through their writing reminds teaching practitioners, policy-makers, and teacher educators to provide innovation in their classrooms to empower language learners with teaching methodologies contrary to what they are accustomed to during their learning. It is rare to find such a practice in a higher education context in Iran where all K-12 school teachers and university instructors are highly advised to stick to the predefined syllabi while the world of teaching and learning practice is changing.

Keywords: teacher’s narration, educational policy-makers, language awareness, critical literacy, writing practice

La Narración Docente sobre la Enseñanza de Alfabetización Crítica: la CLAVE para Concienciar al Alumnado en Irán

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Resumen

Para una alfabetización de calidad, el alumnado debe pensar críticamente y leer entre líneas para encontrar los significados e ideologías implícitos. Para ayudar a los estudiantes iraníes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) a escribir como acción social y no independiente de las (in)justicias y las (des)igualdades sociales, incluimos la alfabetización crítica en un curso de escritura en la Universidad de Kashan. Con este artículo, pretendemos aportar conocimiento alrededor de la narración del profesorado con relación a la sensibilización del alumnado hacia las (malas) prácticas, (in)justicias y (des)igualdades de la sociedad en sus escritos. 52 estudiantes de 3er año de Literatura y Traducción Inglesa participaron en nuestra clase de escritura. El profesor tenía la alfabetización crítica como su área principal de investigación y pidió al alumnado que escribieran ensayos como exámenes de mitad y final de curso. La reflexión del profesor sobre el curso y los ensayos reflexivos del alumnado resaltó que la enseñanza de la escritura a través de la alfabetización crítica ayuda al alumnado a darse cuenta de que la escritura es un proceso que depende de diferentes problemas sociales y políticos. El incremento en la concienciación crítica del alumnado a través de sus escritos insta a docentes, responsables políticos y formadores de docentes a promover la innovación en sus aulas para capacitar a los estudiantes de idiomas. No es común encontrar una práctica de este tipo en la educación superior en Irán, donde se recomienda encarecidamente a todos los maestros de escuela e instructores universitarios que se apeguen a los programas de estudio predefinidos mientras el mundo de la práctica de enseñanza y aprendizaje está cambiando.

Palabras clave: narrativas del profesorado, decisores políticos educativos, conciencia del lenguaje, alfabetización crítica, práctica escritura

Teacher and students form a community where the main goal is to learn successfully. Though, there are much focus on results than process of learning; it is the teachers' duty to empower students with more novel ideas, principles, and practices of teaching (English language teaching, in our case) to remind them not to stick to some clichéd methodologies which cannot help students survive in our today's society. We can consider teaching critical literacy as one of those techniques which aims to helps students identify the differences between mere learning of language skills and being able to use language for success in group discussions, writing argumentative passages, and also winning debates where other ideologies are discussed. This is the missing ring in our educational system where it seems our teachers and teacher practitioners prefer to exactly transfer what they know about teaching than trying to be more creative and critical in their profession which next generations of society are trained in schools. The focus of English language teaching (English as a Foreign Language/ EFL) in Iran is on training students to be mere proficient learners of language skills. It is believed that such excessive emphasis leads to the failure of formal teaching syllabi to train proficient learners which, in most cases, are developed by higher order educational policy-makers; hence, the learners' needs and teachers' real-lived teaching experiences are not taken into account. Luo, Lin, Chen, and Fang (2015) stressed that:

English communication is recognized as the 21st century essential competence. To equip learners with this competence, EFL educators' goal is to make language learning engaging and effective. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is an effective method for achieving Communicative Competence and has been found to have a positive effect on communication performance. (p. 320)

One more goal of language education is to encourage language learners to think and act as critical readers and writers. It is believed that, nowadays, we are living in a community of people with different social, cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds; hence, our students need to be acquainted with the pertinent skills required to survive in a community of totally divergent competing ideologies. Goatly (2000, p. 1) defined critical as “explaining how

the world and our relationships within it and to it are constructed through reading and writing”. Therefore, language teachers and teacher trainers are advised to provide opportunities for learners not to stick to those clichéd textbooks and syllabi (Table 1); rather, they need to learn the basics of critical literacy which empowers them to challenge the (un)seen biases, injustices, inequalities, and malpractices both within the contexts of learning and teaching as well as at the larger society as soon as they join the community of political practices.

Table 1.

ELT Education in Iran (Focus & Practice)

ELT in Iran	Main focus is on teaching language skills separately and out of its real context
	Language learners’ communication and dialogue capabilities are dismissed
	Grammar Translation Method (GTM) is the prevalent methodology among language teachers
	Students’ needs analysis, their rights, and voices are not taken into account during materials development processes, course designing, assessment, and selection procedures
	Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is introduced in 2012 in ELT textbooks of public schools; but GTM still shapes the teaching practice

Therefore, in the case of teaching and learning English, educational policy-makers and authorities of the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (MSRT) are advised to remember that further skills and proficiencies are needed beyond the basic language skills, as the function of language is more than giving and receiving information. Gee (1999, p. 1) described this function of language as “language-in-use is everywhere and always political”. Hence, policy-making bodies at the top-level of decision-making and teachers as the executive bodies of those policies need to believe that it is not appropriate to focus on separate teaching of language skills or communicative abilities in each language teaching curriculum and syllabus; rather, students should be empowered with critical literacy practices. Unfortunately, the practice of critical literacy within the educational realm of teaching and learning in Iran, where English is taught,

learned, and spoken as a foreign language, is not well-embraced due to a list of never-ending reasons such as “the prevalence of the transmission model of teaching and learning, [and] the insular nature of the education system [in teacher education courses]” (Safari, & Rashidi, 2015a) and also “teachers’ preference for a socio-politically neutral stance” (Safari, & Rashidi, 2015c, p. 103). Heijltjes, van Gog, Leppink, and Paas (2015, p. 487) began their research query by indicating that “acquisition of critical thinking skills is considered as an important goal in higher education, but it is still unclear which specific instructional techniques are effective for fostering it”. It is critical to remind teacher trainers to empower student teachers as well as language learners with the principles and practices of concepts such as critical thinking, critical pedagogy, and critical literacy as the latter is the main theme of our research practice within an EFL writing course at undergraduate level. We believe that teachers and students respectively should be trained and obtain such a professional development to enable them to challenge the (un)seen injustices and biases within the classroom walls and further in larger society. Safari (2016, p. 1), for instance, investigated how EFL testing parties’ rights in testing and assessment are not taken into account during development, administering, and evaluation of such tests as “The oppressive nature of tests, the marginalization of powerless testing parties, the asymmetrical power relationships, and the broader detrimental consequences and impacts of tests” are highly manifested among testing parties in Iran. King and Bigelow (2016, p. 1) also mentioned that “researchers have documented not only how tests serve as a powerful means of implementing language and education policy, but often as the policy itself” which resemble violation of educational stakeholders’ rights.

Norton and Toohey (2004, p. 1) investigated the power relationships in language learning and claimed that “language is not simply a means of expression or communication; rather, it is a practice that constructs, and is constructed by, the ways language learners understand themselves, their social surroundings, their histories, and their possibilities for the future”. Johnson and Johnson (2015, p. 221) also claimed that “while language policy is often portrayed as multiply layered, or taking place across multiple levels of policy activity, we argue that language policy arbiters wield a disproportionate amount of power relative to other individuals in a particular

level or layer”. So, it is misleading to us in everyday practice of teaching if we consider literacy as the mere ability of reading and writing skills which are taught and learned separately within our classrooms. However, this failure might be the main reason for reforms which occur in educational systems. In-line with the reforms in educational systems, Safari and Sahragard (2015, p. 84) found that “if the new English language reform and policy turn out to be successful at the national level, the government is necessarily required to take actions towards the elimination of potential impediments which block the materialization of the new curriculum”. Freire (1970) also considered literacy as “reading the world” rather than reading the words. So, nowadays to be literate means not only be able to read and write, but also to have critical eyes to see the hidden ideologies and thinking behind the texts. Halliday (1973) stated that literacy is socially constructed because language intermediates the cultural and social realities within which people live. So, the definition of being literate is illuminated by the power relationship and competing ideologies of the society. Freire (1970) emphasized that proponents of critical literacy consider literacy as a means of empowering the oppressed parties through education against the imposed oppression on them in their societies.

Safari and Rashidi (2015a) emphasised that to empower learners with pertinent tools to survive in the above-mentioned societies where competing ideologies are living together, we need teachers who are well-acquainted with the relevant tools and have the power and willingness to train socially constructed learners. They further concluded that

policy makers, educators, and teachers needed to adopt alternative ideologies, theories, and practices in order to improve pre-service and in-service teacher education for English language teachers in Iran. However, any action taken towards this transformation should be given careful consideration as it is socio-politically, culturally, and ideologically bound (p. 201)

It is also highlighted by Safari and Rashidi (2015b) that

Through the connection of word to the world, or the relationship between classroom learning and students’ lived experiences and

worlds, teachers can create social transformation and empowerment in the marginalized students' lives. However, teachers as the transformative intellectuals can facilitate this transformative process only if they are equipped with the critical theories, theoretical underpinnings and practical implications of CP (p. 39)

In this regard, Freire and Macedo (1987) stressed that teachers who help students learn the already existing injustices and biases in society, should reconstruct their knowledge about language skills and move beyond the traditional objectives of the language courses that emphasize learning and teaching basic language skills.

The Practice of Critical Writing in EFL Writing Classrooms

Wallace (1992) criticized the writing tasks in materials for EFL learners, as her critique is based on a social practice view of literacy. Theodotou (2017, p. 143) also mentioned that “Literacy is a very important aspect in people’s lives as it equips them with the necessary skills and knowledge to interact effectively in the society”. Wallace (1992) also encouraged the practice of critical reading of public literature such as newspapers, magazines and advertisements to help learners write more critically. Wallace (1992, p. 71) also indicated that part of her approach is based on the following questions before reading a text: "1) Why do you like to read about the topic?; 2) How do you like to read about the topic?; and 3) What other ways of reading about the topic are there?". In another piece of research, McKinley (2015, p. 184) “makes the argument that we need to situate student’s academic writing as socially constructed pieces of writing that embody a writer’s cultural identity and critical argument”.

Considering the great importance of critical literacy for students as members of a future society, it is significant to fill this gap by conducting research on empowering learners with critical literacy as a tool to write freely about their ideologies. Therefore, teaching critical literacy helps students realize that writing is a process in which the writer deals with a text in a social context. In line with our research practice, Mehta and Al-Mahrouqi (2015, p. 23) also found that “continuous practice, both oral and written, provide opportunities for students to develop their critical literacy abilities as they

become more successful in incorporating nuanced and critical ideas into their academic writings”. It needs to be mentioned that narrative inquiry shapes the practice. Connelly and Clandini (1990, p. 2) stressed that

the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world. This general concept is refined into the view that education and educational research is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; learners, teachers, and researchers are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories.

One of the shortcomings of our teaching practice in Iran is that we rarely access teachers’ narration of their real lived experiences in the classrooms. So, the teacher’s reflection intends to portray the adoption of critical literacy within the EFL context of Iran, to highlight the teacher’s successful experience of teaching critical literacy in Iran, and to report how does EFL learners’ criticality increase in their writings.

Methodology: Teacher’s Narration of Critical Literacy Practice

The teacher of the course was an associate professor whose main areas of research and practice are critical literacy, critical discourse analysis, critical pedagogy, critical applied linguistics, and writing. He has extensive teaching, research, and living experience in different countries. He was also aware of the main teaching techniques and methodologies in those areas as he has extensively published (articles/ books) in these areas (he asked researchers to be anonymous). All 52 undergraduate 3rd-year-EFL learners of English Literature and Translation (females: 33/ age range: 22-27; males: 19/ age range: 23-26) participated in our writing class. An Oxford Placement Test (OPT) of a 60-item multiple-choice test of grammar and reading texts was adopted to determine the students’ level of language proficiency at the first session of the semester. All the test items examined reading comprehension, meaning, and writing.

The use of the available textbooks was considered to be inappropriate for critical literacy classrooms because one of the most important issues in teaching critical literacy is that the adopted texts should be highly related to the students’ real lives and daily experiences (Shor, 1992). As Shannon

(1995) claimed, critical literacy content needs to stem from the students' lives; hence, our students will never consider classrooms as segregated areas from the larger society. Shor and Pan (1999, p. 52) also suggested that "critical teachers should not rely on traditional textbooks as the mainstay of the curriculum but should center instruction around themes drawn from learners' social reality, using students' concerns and issues as the starting point".

Based on the above advice to select sources which are relevant to learners' real life experiences, the instructor adopted Current Controversial Issues (Malekpoor, & Rahimi, 2009) to talk about its embedded topics. The following textbooks *Becoming a Critical Thinker* (Ruggiero, 2009) and *Reason to Write* (Vallis, 2010) were also the instructor's choice to teach the theories of critical thinking and writing critically. Students' reflective essays – one as a mid-term assessment and one as a final exam- were also used to examine students' critical literacy development during the course.

As we were supposed to have both students of English Translation and Literature, obtaining permission from the Vice-chancellor in Education was the main step prior to conducting the course. Further, the syllabus was designed for a fifteen-session course. An OPT was administered at the first session of the class to find our participants' English language proficiency and the instructor gave an overview of the course to let them know what they are supposed to learn, so fourteen sessions remained for teaching a critical literacy-oriented writing class.

One of the main drawbacks in our teaching and learning continuum is the lack of attention to the students' thinking about empowerment. In the first seven sessions, the instructor's focus was on the book "Becoming a Critical Thinker" to make students aware of the critical thinking phenomenon and the ways in which they can develop a critical mind to see the hidden assumptions behind the texts. Our students still suffer from lack of well-established and practical techniques for effective learning. Novelty of ideas and issues within the very beginning chapter of the textbook raised students' thirst for learning as they were confronted with innovative ideas and words contrary to their already-shaped concept towards learning. Then, students learned the very preliminary concepts and fundamentals of thinking which most of us might have not yet learned the process of thinking. Learning how to be convincing

and persuasive was the next technique which students enthusiastically tried to learn and incorporate within their learning practices. “Becoming an individual”, “Evaluating arguments”, “Recognizing errors in thinking”, and finally, “Applying your thinking skills” were the remaining chapters which guided students through a practical and step-by-step continuum to learn to think and further act as a critical thinker. Miri, David, and Uri (2007, p. 367) highlight that “the compelling empirical evidence shows that if one knowingly, persistently and purposely teaches for promoting higher order thinking among her/his students, there are good chances for success”. In our class, students worked in groups to discuss what is taught in the class and further time is also provided for them in case they need to remain in the class. Students were seated in circle-like groups to work on each section of the chapters. At the end of each session, students wrapped up their understanding of each section based on their notes in the page margins and further elaborations were also provided for the students if they confronted vagueness in the text. Below is a sample of students’ notes on page margins (Figure 1).

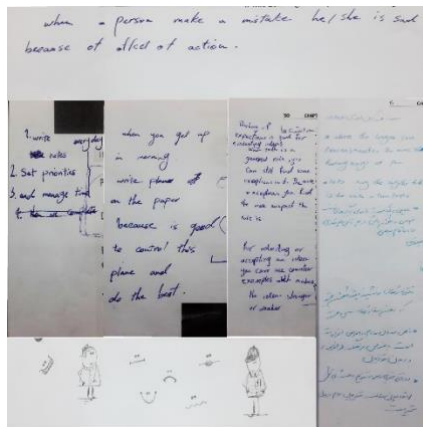


Figure 1. Sample of Students’ notes on textbooks page margins

The teacher also took further notes from the students’ feedback or their reactions during teaching practice, for instance:

I had a very basic image of thinking! The process which happens unconsciously within our minds. It's the first time I have a course which deeply manoeuvres over thinking practice. The content of the textbook is also contrary to what I've read over the years from primary to now as an undergraduate student of English. (Student from GROUP 1)

I feel teaching/learning environment which happens in developed countries. Where students have the control of the class with no fear of being challenged by their peers or the teacher. The practice of group work, sitting in a circle for face-to-face interactions, sharing our understanding and not oral presentation of verbatim memorizations, and the practice of thinking were all missing activities during my whole learning continuum. (Student from GROUP 2)

In this regard, Miri, David, and Uri (2007, p. 366-367) also claim that

...teaching strategies of many of the science (and also non-science) teachers are not always compatible with the fostering and development of students' higher order thinking. [They also mention] that conventional teaching is short of preparing students to our ever-changing and challenging world that requires the making of critical/evaluative thinking-based rational decisions.

It also needs to be mentioned that the students were also required to work on the topics discussed in the Current Controversial Issues which dealt with the most debated social and cultural issues of their everyday lives. As teaching thinking techniques were in progress, students were asked to put into practice those learned techniques to discuss about those social and cultural issues during the class and further in their free time (as an audio-recorded session, 3 in total).

The course instructor was fortunate enough to have committed students who delved into the course to learn new ideas and be different from their peers in previous years who are not familiar with such principles and practices of criticality. The instructor's focus for the next three sessions was on the textbook entitled "Reason To Write" for encouraging the learners to manipulate the texts for writing from a critical perspective based on their

learning in previous sessions. Vallis's (2010, p. xiii) preface to the book illustrates how such a textbook guides student to incorporate critical literacy techniques into their writing. It is mentioned that "Reason to Write makes a clear distinction between critical thinking, rhetoric, informal and formal logic, and analysis, for the purpose of demonstrating various connections between ways of thinking, and stages of writing". Hence, the teachers' main focus, for these three sessions, was on exclusive presentation of textbook content and reminding students how to incorporate their early learned critical thinking techniques into their writing based on the textbook chapters. One of the EFL undergraduate students' concerns was "what is the use of writing?" So, they learned the reason behind writing and how voices are explicitly/implicitly put into words.

The place of critical thinking in writing was the next step to engage students with the texts, not as a mere piece of ordered words, rather as a portrait of ideologies and thinking which are written based on a critical thinker's mindset. Empowering students to raise critical questions which are of interest to a group of audiences was the next step for learning from a critical perspective. And further, how to organize their words into a well-grounded written piece which engages readership were the remaining steps for teaching practice during those three sessions. Students formed groups of four (13 groups in total) at the beginning of the course in order to participate in small group discussions throughout the course. Each group was supposed to present new ideas and information based on what they have learned from the course and topics discussed in the textbook. It is also interesting to note that other students immediately joined the presenter if he/she failed to elaborate their understanding of the text.

Our students were required to write reflective essays based on the topics which were corresponding to controversial issues of Iran. However, they were asked to submit two reflective essays on the issues discussed in the class during the course, one as a mid-term and the other as a final work at the end of the course. Students' reflective essays were used to capture their responses to the issues discussed in class and to examine students' critical literacy development. It also needs to be highlighted that students not only presented their learned techniques through those proposed reflective essays; rather they tried to write their reflections about surrounding issues and concerns which

are of high priority among politicians and authorities. The instructor reminded students to be in constant contact through email as soon as they needed any further help in their writing practice.

The teacher's aim was to strike a balance between teaching language skills and critical literacy. So, he helped students take a critical stance towards the writing materials. The teacher also reminded students of their power to look at the writings through personal reflections and a critical lens. This kind of engagement was achieved by asking critical questions to promote students' critical consciousness. In this study, even though the teacher used those two textbooks as the mainstream of teaching, he tried to engage students in critical discussions by posing critical questions. Cervetti (2004, p. 6) also stresses that "the varied strategies that encourage students to take a critical stance toward text include textual analysis, dialogue, and questioning, or problem posing, which typically characterize critical practice". Figure 2 portrays one of those sessions when issues about suppression of students' voice, students-teacher relationship, and critical pedagogy were introduced (teacher's caricature is also on the board).

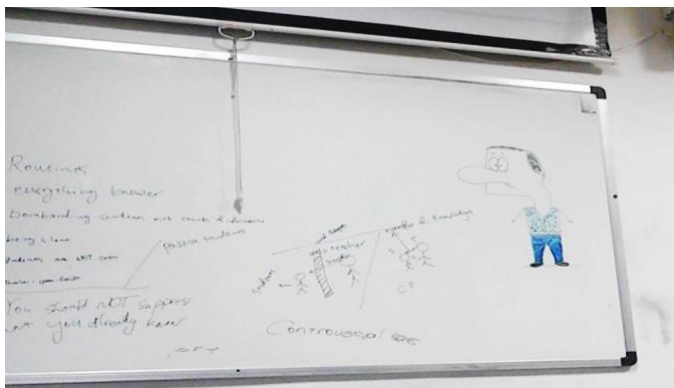


Figure 2. Students' discussion about students' voice & students-teacher relationship in class

McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004, p. 81) indicated that "in order to see things from a different perspective, students must feel that they have

permission to think beyond the text”. So, the instructor tried to engage students as much as possible in the process of dialogue and provide them with a chance to challenge the inequalities and injustices of the surrounding community. We also found that thinking and writing are ongoing processes which were also the core of our teaching practice during the academic semester. To do so, we need to remind teachers to adopt further roles beyond that of a basic teacher.

Results: Teacher’s Practice to Improve Students' Critical Literacy Awareness

A total of 104 reflective essays were gathered based on *temporary marriage* and *Hijab is an attitude not a fashion*. Students were supposed to highlight their main ideas in different colors in their writings which are briefly presented in Figure 3. Then, the teacher presented students’ ideas within two main headings of *emotional and financial support for women* (for text on temporary marriage) and *use of Hijab to protect modesty and privacy* (for text on Hijab is an attitude not a fashion) respectively. The main aim of the course was to help the learners present their ideas in their writings based on the techniques of critical literacy. As we deal with human beings, we will have different ideologies. In this regard, some samples of the students’ writings (as Pros and Cons) are also provided.

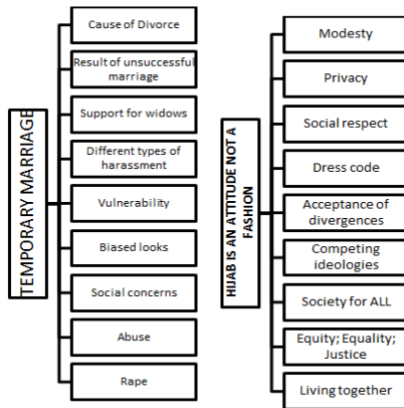


Figure 3. Students' key ideas in their writings

Emotional-Financial Support for Women

There is the other side of the coin nonetheless; some students claimed that temporary marriage could have a constructive positive influence on the family members especially the widows or women influenced by broken families. The focus of their argument has been the economic problem inflicted upon such poverty-stricken women. A woman who has experienced the harrowing mishap of divorce is extremely vulnerable and needful of emotional and economic support. They think temporary marriage can be utilized as a mean to save such women from the helplessness and desperation. Aside from the economic importance of temporary marriage, it can provide women with the emotional certainty and attention they need.

Widows are in a catastrophic and psychologically shaky situation and repercussions of their failure is undoubtedly far reaching. In case they are able to develop a new kind of healthy and warm relation with the partner they like, the likelihood of other serious breakdowns dramatically diminishes. Isolation, segregation and solitude are detrimental to their mental and physical health and temporary marriage, if properly exercised, can have a healing effect on them. I also remember one of the widows' feelings where we met while commuting by train "I can also continue and turn into a permanent kind of relation in case it is appropriately perpetuated based upon mutual understanding and reciprocal love and attention". Student #24

Some of my friends have the experience of re-marriage in their family and among their friends. They rarely talk about such cases as the prevalent atmosphere of our culture provides no chances to talk about these issues freely especially if we have personal experience about these issues. Student #38

Such women really need help and support especially in terms of emotional and financial needs. Successful re-marriage is the best choice and it even can provide promising choices for prosperity of the widows. Student #49

Students' raising awareness happened during and at the end of the course as it was also evident in their writings. Some of the opponents' criticisms are also presented which is fewer than the proponents of the issue of temporary marriage.

I believe in the idea that disseminating or practicing such a tradition will lead to immorality and unethically. I think if we agree with the concept of temporary marriage, the codes of behaviour are blatantly violated. Hence, the aftermath of such practices would no doubt be the spread of moral laxity. Student #34

Women's rights for virtue faith and divinity are trespassed and infringed upon by the laws allowing short lived transient and purely shallow as well as exclusively physical relationships. Women, in this way, are treated as second hand citizens who are only suitable for whimsical desires of the men who use abuse and dispense with them afterwards. Student #41

I reject it because of the presumed damage it can inflict upon the foundation of family. As you know, the family structures in Iran are extremely harmonized and cohesive. The social network and family ties are very much interrelated and family members are inextricably intimately tied. Owing, no doubt, to the religious and cultural rituals and rites in the country, the family has gained a very respectable aura of even divinity and spirituality the violation of which has been deemed for long egregious and appalling. Student #22

It can bring about social and religious stigma to the family so severely so much so that the family may go through traumatic experience leading to its final deterioration and havoc. Student #03

Use of Hijab to Protect Modesty and Privacy

Based on this perspective, women need to adopt influential methods to maintain their dignity and value. One of the most useful ways to guarantee this sense of value and modesty has turned out to be Hijab.

There are always dark sides to life and the sun is not always beautifully shining. The rates of crimes such as rape are indicative of the fact that

men are from flawless and immaculate. Women's curves if obviously perceived by men can lead to stimulation of their desires. Hence, it is taken for granted that women need to protect themselves one way or another from the potential problems and pitfalls. Hijab can be considered as defensive and protective shield against the male ogles and flirtatious tendencies. It is a sign of respect and value for women as mentioned in Islamic traditions likening women to pearl covered by Hijab. Student #37

A Muslim woman is not an instrument in the hands of companies and organizations to spread their culture of sensuality and consumerism. They are not abused by powerful agencies hungry for money and clout. They are well aware and conscious of the sad fact that their looks and bodies can be the stimulating factors for advertisement agencies. They are not sexual tools employed by media to perpetuate material and superficial ideologies. Student #5

Hijab is by no means an unambiguous unequivocal concept, it is replete with complexities and intricacies making its full understanding and practice a hard nettle grasp. It is erroneously presumed to have a restrictive nature dampening Muslim's desire for joy and fun. Hijab is not a joy killer though. Mostly, people consider it as a hurdle or impediment on the way of fun and pleasure. It is wrongly seen as constraints imposed on Muslim women limiting their abilities and destroying their lives. It is notoriously tough and harsh and believed to have imprisoned the women denying them any joviality agility and vitality. It is considered a pain in the neck indeed! It unfortunately is seen as a police controlling every inch of women's movements. Student #11

It is a blessing in disguise, it makes Muslim distinct from others in terms of their identity and their beliefs. It is an internal police, not an external controlling agent, giving Muslim women voice, power and discipline. Muslim women opt for it based on profound understanding and analysis of Islamic regulations rather than their perception and spineless docile obedience. They have mostly delved deeply into the building blocks and the stumbling blocks of such laws and came up with the necessary insight and inspiration as to their decision to wear it. They have

fathomed the fact that it is an obligatory condition and commandment inherent in the true essence of Islam. Student #52

Some few students also presented their ideas as opponents:

They wear Hijab not out of an internal profound understanding but due to some confinements instilled in them, they simply cannot do otherwise. Student #04

Women have to follow very formidable dress codes while the dress codes intended for men are quite lax and flexible. Student #19

So, in a teaching and learning cycle where teachers are well-prepared to teach theories of critical literacy, and adopt these in their classroom practices, learners learn critical literacy as more than mere sets of language skills (Banks, 2003; Gee, 1997). So, critical literacy involves understanding the ways in which language and literacy are used to accomplish social ends. Bomer and Bomer's (2001) perception of critical literacy also deals with empowering learners with the critical literacy as a tool to empower students to read and write for social actions with the intended goal of voicing inner ideologies and behaviours, changing the world, and challenging the injustices of the surrounding communities.

Conclusion: Critical Literacy in an EFL Writing Course in Iran

Though undergraduate students in Iran might be aware of the scope and definition of critical literacy; there is, however, no emphasis to work on such issues within classroom syllabi. Teaching practitioners also prefer to stick to the clichéd materials for their teaching practice to prevent being thought of as ‘the one who swims against the river’ (especially in university where they have more freedom to select the sources based on the nature of the course, students’ needs and level of proficiency, and use of the most recent and updated materials). Teaching practitioners also prefer not to be challenged for teaching concepts or materials which are not yet taught in previous years at that level of teaching. Even in some cases, the lack of teachers’ knowledge about the ways to practice pertinent techniques of critical thinking and

critical literacy as well as its integration into other courses might be the reason why these concepts are not introduced into our teaching practice. Therefore, our students just have a very vague understanding of these concepts. In this regard, we included critical literacy into our writing course syllabus to improve the students' critical literacy with an emphasis on their writing skill.

The students' reflections are considered emancipatory as students will be well-empowered to bring about social change for a more democratic society as the students' thinking and behaviour in their classrooms affects their actions and personalities in the future. In other words, when students produced texts which differed from what they were accustomed to (from beginning days of schools until their higher education studies), highlighted the changes which may happen in their future lives as members of society as they will have the power to voice their ideas and mentality (Giroux & Penna, 1979; Heyward, 2002; Houser & Frymier, 2009; Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook, & Irvine, 2011; Peoples, 2015) and increased their consciousness.

In this study, the researcher's focus was on the concept of critical literacy as an instructional approach advocating the adoption of critical perspectives toward text. We outlined the idea that critical literacy can encourage readers to actively analyze texts and offered strategies for uncovering underlying messages. We also elaborated on different theoretical perspectives on critical literacy which have produced different pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning foreign languages. We also highlighted, that readers and writers alike, need to adopt a deep critical and even questioning approach. The important thing is being able to have a discussion with others about the different meanings a text might have and teaching the potentially critically literate learner how to think flexibly about it. Here we explored the experience of Iranian EFL learners (in their writing samples) who received instruction from a critical literacy perspective towards writing.

Findings show that such an approach increased learners' engagement with texts on the one hand, and the learners developed their critical awareness through their feedback and writings based on the raised questions in the text on the other hand. Our participants were not only taught to be EFL writers, rather they were also trained to be socially responsible members who have the power to challenge the seen and unseen injustices and biases in their

surrounding society. The findings of this study have pedagogical significance for teachers, teacher trainers, student teachers, policy-makers, parents and material developers to learn that students are not deprived members of our societies, rather they are expected to be well-acquainted with pertinent tools of critical literacy and pedagogy to have the power to voice their ideas in future real-life situations. We are trained in an educational context where the teacher is supposed to be the main authority. For years, Grammar Translation Method (GTM) was (and in most cases, it is still used) the prevalent methodology of teaching English at schools and universities. Our participants also have had the same experience. For years, we have learned not to challenge our teachers in class as he/she is the all-knowing character of the class and we are mere passive recipients of teachers' feeding (transmission of knowledge) (Tohidian, 2016).

We experienced an educational reform in materials development for teaching English at high school as the teaching practice witnessed a shift of focus from GTM to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) where the focus is on dialogue and collaboration between Students and between Students and their Teacher. The present research practice reminds us (as educational stakeholders) that we need (and have to experience) a change of focus in teaching methodologies of writing skill in ELT classrooms. For years, we are teaching for the sake of testing/ assessment (mid-term or final); hence, surface learning happens while deep learning is taken for granted among educational corresponding bodies. Finally, this piece of research has shed further light on a road towards a more successful English language teaching practice where real training of students happens rather than the mere teaching of specific rules of English.

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