

Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy in the Classroom: Promotion of Critical Thinking in South African English First Additional Language (FAL) Students

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ABSTRACT This study investigated the use of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy in an English (FAL) classroom and its implications in order to promote students' critical thinking skills and to improve English (FAL) lecturers' teaching practice. A qualitative approach with open-ended questionnaires and unstructured interviews were used to collect data. The research population of this study included eight first-year English (FAL) students and eight final-year student-teachers whose home language is Xhosa, Zulu or Sesotho, with English as their medium of instruction, as well as four lecturers with the home languages of Xhosa, Zulu or Sesotho, majored in English at teacher-training. Results indicate that cooperative learning, students' questions, and problem-posing methods as instructional cues play a significant role in stimulating students' participation in the discussion of the topic and problems related to the content. This study recommends that lecturers should ensure that teaching and learning objectives manifest collaborative activities inclined to a social constructivist approach.

INTRODUCTION

Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy is our primary inspiration in promoting critical thinking skills among English FAL (English First Additional Language) students. Critical theory and critical thinking emerge as integral parts of the principles of critical pedagogy which underlie collaborative and mutual relation between lecturers and students in the classroom. Freire (1998) claims that critical pedagogy allows students to critically think about their educational goals by recognising and dealing with their individual problems, experiences and social context for expanded opportunity and usage of learned knowledge. In a classroom environment, the role of the lecturer is to promote learning through facilitation, which helps students to identify their strengths and weaknesses in the production of knowledge (Shor 1980). Shor's assertion relates to the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in South Africa which has introduced new learning styles, implying change from passive, rote learning, to creative learning and problem solving through active participation in the learning process (Department of Basic Education 2011). In other words, CAPS is based on the principles of the constructivist view of learning and teaching theories, such as interactive and contextualized learning, student-centeredness,

critical thinking, and problem solving skills and integration of skills, among others.

The purpose of CAPS in South Africa was not only to change the education system, but also to transform the society, to become an answer for economic growth, which was contrary to Bantu Education, where rote learning and a curriculum were not related to the aspirations and practical job qualifications for Africans (Department of Basic Education 2011). In essence, Bantu Education was designed to inculcate a sense of inferiority in blacks. For this reason, blacks were trained to acquire practical and technical skills in order to become carpenters, labourers and artisans for the white economy, but not professionals or critical thinkers who might threaten the status quo. The existence of Bantu Education was related to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which advocates the capability of banking education which minimizes or invalidates the student's creativeness, innovation and critical thinking, but stimulates their credulity to serve the interests of the oppressors who do not care about educational transformation (Freire 1993). Within the educational framework of the pedagogy of the oppressed, the lecturer knows everything and the students know nothing, thus makes the lecturer the subject of the learning process, while students are the objects. Leonardo (2004) points

out that the existence of oppression should incite our pedagogies to fight against oppression in the classroom. Within critical pedagogy, the student is seen as “transformative intellectual” who provides knowledge and abilities. Individual students can see themselves as political agents and act accordingly through their schooling (Fischman and McLaren 2005: 426). This means that lecturers play a significant role within the critical theory framework by shaping the curriculum and school policy, defining educational philosophies, and working within their communities in diverse capacities (Fischman and McLaren 2005). In this context, critical theory is multi-disciplinary, which aims to improve the quality of education by enabling students and lecturers to participate in making the society a better place to live in through the practice of critique and a sense for alternatives.

Transforming schools, higher institutions and society is the core concern of critical pedagogy, which involves a strong agenda for change within education, through education and throughout society by caring for the individual students who are under any type of oppression. Within the ideological framework of critical pedagogy, the researcher designed this research to ensure that social justice is not only a cause that we should help our students fight for to optimise their learning and potential, but also it should be a state that our students should witness and live in throughout their schooling. This view is supported by Tyack and Cuban (1995), who claim that educational reform refers to efforts undertaken by people to correct social and educational problems to foster a truly united and democratic country in order to address the needs of the society at large. In this context, outcome refers to an individual’s ability to demonstrate learned knowledge and skill. In other words, critical pedagogy strives to introduce a democratic pedagogy in South African schools and higher education to create South African identity that encompasses critical consciousness, to transform South African society and to magnify student involvement in education.

Problem Statement

This study was informed by lecturers’ lack of cognitive skills in using critical pedagogy and to apply much *declarative meta-cognitive knowledge* of thinking skills during the process

of designing learning activities to promote critical thinking skills (Sonn 2000; Engelbrecht 1995; Schlechty 1991). In this situation, lecturers place very little focus on the construction of knowledge and thinking skills, which resulted in a significant number of students passing through the school system without achieving adequate levels of English (FAL) proficiency, despite the use of English (FAL) across the school curriculum (Schlebusch and Thobedi 2004). This means that many students are unable to think independently or to go beyond the content in their texts and workbooks. From the above-mentioned statement, it is clear that critical thinking skills, as well as an understanding of how to teach these skills, are lacking among prospective and practicing lecturers and teachers. It could therefore be concluded that despite a supposedly student-centred curriculum, students were not taught by teachers and lecturers who infused critical thinking skills into their daily lessons. This could possibly be attributed to the continuous use of non-critical teaching approaches (Potterton 2008). Therefore, the study intends to explore the following research questions in order to achieve the aim of this study:

1. What are English (FAL) lecturers’ perceptions concerning the development of critical thinking skills in the English (FAL) classroom?
2. What critical thinking skills do English (FAL) lecturers want their students to develop?
3. What are the implications of Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy in an English (FAL) classroom?

Aim of the Study

The study investigates the use of Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy in an English (FAL) classroom in the school of education at an institution of higher learning to promote students’ critical thinking skills and to improve English (FAL) lecturers’ teaching practice.

Objectives of the Study

In order to achieve the aim of this study, the following objectives have been formulated:

- To examine English (FAL) lecturers’ perceptions concerning the development of students’ critical thinking skills.

- To identify critical thinking skills English (FAL) lecturers want their students to develop.
- Explore the implications of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy in an English (FAL) classroom.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy as a theoretical framework because it promotes diversity of perspectives by emphasizing the significance of student-lecturer collaboration in the construction and development of new knowledge. Freire believes that critical pedagogy is a "*problem-posing*" approach in which students have power to question beliefs, values, understandings and information to represent equal subjects while simultaneously becoming students and experts. In this case, students are encouraged to listen attentively and genuinely to their classmates' ideas and opinions without treating the lecturer's opinion as the most valuable voice, although the lecturer is facilitating the conversation (Hooks 1994). In principle, critical pedagogy can be applied to the English (FAL) educational context as a collective effort in which lecturers and students work together to share, create, analyze and act on their own experiences through language instruction. Although it is true that many definitions of critical pedagogy have been proposed, scholars have come to the realisation that critical pedagogy is concerned with developing a contextualised, culturally specific and reflective approach which engages research and theory not grounded in a particular context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this research study, the researcher used qualitative research as the methodological approach which is used for in-depth investigations. Qualitative research seeks a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon; it represents an inquiry about a field and explores the participants' experiences and understanding of these experiences (Creswell 2008). According to Ary et al. (2010: 64), qualitative inquiry "seeks to understand and interpret human and social behaviour as it is lived by participants in a particular social setting". This study was designed to investigate the relationship of English (FAL) stu-

dents' critical thinking and lecturers' critical pedagogy use within university classrooms in South Africa. Research questions that address critical thinking and critical pedagogy are best suited to qualitative inquiry (Janesick 1994). Therefore, a suitable approach to investigate lecturers' critical pedagogy use within the classroom to improve students' critical thinking, according to the literature, is an explorative one (Hedgcock 2002). The choice of methodology was guided by the philosophical stance of the researchers to see knowledge as personal, and therefore encourage the involvement of the researchers with the research participants to capture the uniqueness of the context without attempting to change it. The type of qualitative research to be used is a basic interpretive study. According to Ary et al. (2010: 29), this type of study "provides descriptive accounts targeted to understanding a phenomenon using data that might be collected in a variety of ways, such as interview, observations and document review". The purpose of this study was to get an understanding of the experiences of the target population and the meanings they assign to them.

Research Design

To contextualize the research, information on the topics of critical thinking and critical pedagogy was gathered by means of literature review and empirical research. Research design was the strategy, the plan, and the structure of conducting a research project. The empirical part of the research was approached from a qualitative perspective, using an explorative approach. The researcher used phenomenological research design to be able to reach an understanding of lecturers' and students' perceptions regarding critical thinking and the use of critical pedagogy by collecting sufficient data about the situation under investigation (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Phenomenological research focuses on the essence of the experience as perceived by the participants in order to understand that the meaning of the experience to each participant is what constitutes reality.

Population and Sampling

The research population of this study encompasses eight first-year English (FAL) students and four final-year student-teachers from

the school of education at an institution of higher learning in the Free State Province, South Africa. All the students have isiZulu, isiXhosa, Afrikaans, Sepedi, Setswana, Sesotho Xitsonga, Siswati, Tshivenda and isiNdebele as their home language and English as their medium of instruction at school and has attended pre-school for a minimum of two years before entering school using English as their medium of instruction. Four lecturers also have one of the above-mentioned home languages and majored in English at teacher training. Lecturers in this study have varying years of experience in teaching English (FAL) within the higher education context. Some they taught during the Bantu Education policy (during apartheid), while others started teaching under post-apartheid policy (when South Africa became democratic in 1994). The researcher selected the sample on two grounds: purposiveness and accessibility. Lecturers' and students' consent were offered in a written form in English. The researcher conducted initial meetings with lecturers and students to explain what the research is about and to encourage them to speak their mind.

Data Collection

As Burton (1996) explains, methods of data collection in social sciences are governed by the selected sample and characteristics of the research participants. Overall, data collection in interpretive research is collected in its natural setting (Holliday 2001). In this study, the researcher was the catalyst or the filter through which the findings were processed. Information was gathered through the use of open-ended questionnaires and interviews with students and lecturers. Through open-ended questionnaires, participants were asked to identify their effective questioning strategies that work well for them or might enhance their critical thinking skills and critical pedagogy use. Finally, the researcher used *unstructured interviews*. The interview schedule contained open-ended questions to which respondents provided answers in their own terms or in a manner that reflected their own perceptions, rather than those of the researcher (Frey 1989, as cited in Lewis-Beck et al. 2004). It is worth mentioning that the interviews in this inquiry were conducted in English, as the interviewer and the participants are fluent in English. It is an acceptable tradition in the con-

text of the South African education system to find English (FAL) lecturers and students who can converse in English, because of the many ethnic languages they bring to school.

Data Analysis

The researcher adopted an inductive approach in analyzing the data, which was recorded without prior knowledge or conception of the phenomenon under investigation. The researcher used techniques from the grounded theory approach by presenting the findings in categories. Grounded theory is a form of qualitative analysis in which the researcher makes constant comparison, codes similar data and develops theory out of the data (Merriam 1998). The researcher kept notes of the recurring themes and used them as headings for sections in a document on the computers that the researcher was using as a draft for analysis. Finally, the researcher worked out a summary of the findings and interpretations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this was to investigate the use of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy in an English (FAL) classroom to promote students' critical thinking skills and to improve English (FAL) lecturers' teaching practice. In order to respond to the research questions, the researcher examined English (FAL) lecturers' perceptions concerning the development of students' critical thinking skills and explored the implications of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy in an English (FAL) classroom in analysing collected data. The discussion of the results of this study is presented through the category of the development of critical thinking with the following sub-categories: cooperative learning, students' questions, problem-posing method, lecturers' perceptions and the critical thinking (CT) skills which English (FAL) lecturers want their students to develop, and the implication of critical pedagogy in the classroom.

Cooperative Learning

This study revealed that cooperative learning calls for reflection, many responses, as well as change in responses, and allows for group participation to elicit responses which provide a

source of information and learning for further discussion. This view is supported by researchers such as Motlhaka and Wadesango (2014) and Malatji (2014), who assert that cooperative learning encourages a non-threatening and collaborative learning environment in which students ask each other questions to enhance their critical thinking skills. It was also found that students who are engaged in cooperative learning develop the skills necessary to work on projects too difficult and complex for any one person to do in a reasonable amount of time. It can therefore be concluded that cooperative learning enhances students' critical thinking skills, as they tend to have a deeper understanding of the material and remember it by using the language of the discipline, explaining, providing feedback, understanding alternative perspectives, and organising and synthesising information.

Students' Questions

Several researchers such as Motlhaka and Wadesango (2014) and Chin and Osborne (2008) have emphasised the value of students' questions in eliciting explanations, evaluating evidence, justifying reasoning, critical reasoning and as a motivating factor to actively engage students in learning. This study found that students' questions serve as a source of desire to extend their knowledge as they articulate their understanding of a topic. Students' questions has the potential of producing comprehensible output, with many opportunities to enhance students' critical thinking skills. However, the study also found that few students often ask few high-quality thinking questions in search for knowledge. Given that asking questions is fundamental to FAL learning, the development of students' abilities to ask questions, reason and think critically should become a central focus of language teaching.

Problem-posing Method

The findings of the study demonstrate that the problem-posing method encourages the existence of diverse perspectives through critical thinking for classroom dialogues and learning activities. It also found that students are no longer having to accept the world in which they were born "as it is", but they can make judgments about life circumstances to determine what is

appropriate for them. From the teaching and learning point of view, students and lecturers found that the incorporation of critical pedagogy and critical thinking positively foster their ability to question and think critically in the construction of knowledge, not only in education, but also in their own lives, communities, and society as they strive to sustain their active citizenship in democratic society. This method shows lecturers that adding student participation in the classroom helps them to apply what they have already prepared for their course (Ribot 2011). Finally, this study, through the problem-posing method, found that lecturers realize that student participation benefits students and allows them to enjoy teaching as they exchange ideas throughout the teaching and learning process.

English (FAL) Lecturers' Perceptions and Critical Thinking (CT) Skills They Want Their Students to Develop

Lecturer perceptions make a significant contribution to students' understanding and the incorporation of critical pedagogy in the English (FAL) classroom. The findings of this study revealed that lecturers believe that teaching of critical thinking skills is based on individual personalities rather than pedagogical principles. Lecturers want their students to learn critical thinking skills such as explanation, evaluating evidence, justifying reasoning, critical reasoning, understanding alternative perspectives and organising and synthesising information. Critical thinking skills such as explanation and critical reasoning are directly related to communication and expression. From a teaching and learning perspective, explanation holds a special place as one of six core critical thinking skills, as defined by the Delphi study on critical thinking (Facione 1990). However, explanation may be a critical thinking skill that is hard to measure empirically, but it can be a skill that is a great joy to teach and employ in the classroom. Good critical thinkers can explain what they think and how they arrive at that judgment. It was also found that a holistic approach to critical thinking should involve the concepts of critical listening, thinking, writing, reading and speaking. While not synonymous with good thinking, critical thinking is a pervasive and self-rectifying human phenomenon.

Implication of Critical Pedagogy in the Classroom

It was found that critical pedagogy has the potential to improve students' critical thinking abilities, increase their overall engagement in the learning process and develop their sense of self-worth that leads to the commitment to strive for success and accomplishment.

CONCLUSION

In principle, critical pedagogy and critical thinking can be regarded as collective endeavours in which lecturers and students work together to create and share knowledge based on their own experiences through language instruction. The findings suggest that lecturers should incorporate several general strategies such as lecture, discussion, demonstration and inquiry into questions to provoke students' critical thinking and their potential for learning. For instance, in the lecture method, the lecturer encourages students to pose some questions about the presentation of problem and presents additional information to acquaint students with becoming expert questioners by placing questions in their lives so that information heard will be thought about at a higher level of thinking.

Coupled with a good discussion, the study further finds that students analyze the bases of their arguments, refine their statements through questions, reorganize perceptions, and also understand by engaging in high-level critical and creative thinking based on the notion that learning is more than just accumulating information at increasing levels of abstractness. This suggests cognitive activities wherein students are given the opportunity to clarify, question, consolidate and appropriate new knowledge as they actively participate in the learning and teaching process. The researcher found that this type of collaborative knowledge development between lecturers and students promotes students' level of thinking and affords them the opportunity to explore their natural curiosity and enthusiasm in the pursuit of valuable knowledge as they intelligently and constructively immerse in the learning process. In this atmosphere, students and lecturers possess an enthusiasm for learning, for thinking, for questioning and for helping each other to be involved actively in learning, because questions and critical thinking are integral parts of the learning process. Through his

findings, the researcher concludes that an atmosphere conducive to effective student questioning is one in which persons respect the ideas and concerns of all and learning becomes a collaborative endeavour.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends that lecturers should ensure that teaching and learning objectives manifest collaborative activities inclined to a social constructivist approach for the successful learning of critical thinking skills. Secondly, the study recommends that lecturers should engage students in assignments and learning activities that help them to bridge from their present thinking to the new thinking they are looking for. This could be achieved by modelling good critical thinking practices to students and creating activities that foster critical thinking to students. Furthermore, lecturers are encouraged to integrate critical thinking into the curriculum through the use of the approach that focuses on the individual student being thoroughly engaged in the learning process. In this case, lecturers are urged to open the topic with questions to explore what the students know, as well as pose problems to be solved.

NOTE

- 1 Declarative meta-cognitive knowledge refers to students' knowledge of knowing about oneself as a student and about what factors influence one's performance.

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