



## **Collaborative Discussion Circles: A Path towards Critical Language Teacher Development**

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### **Abstract**

The advent of postmethod pedagogy has completely changed today's conceptualization of language teachers, and the importance of powerful teaching has increasingly gained momentum in the field of TESOL. However, contemporary English language teaching contexts suffer a dearth of a workable package to educate the much-needed autonomous postmethod language teachers who are able to have their own contextualized praxis. As such, the present research aims to nurture the required self-growth and self-development in language teachers through forming collaborative professional and critical discussion circles. Enjoying a mixed method research design whose quantitative section included a quasi-experimental design consisting of three phases--a pretest, an educational 12-week long treatment phase, and a posttest--the results of the study gained by two instruments, namely, the reflective teaching questionnaire developed by Akbari et al. (2010) and two similar language teaching episodes, bore witness to the significant changes in the level of reflectiveness of all 13 language teachers who partook in these discussion circles. Developmentally speaking, participating language teachers were found to initiate the whole process, direct it, and finally evaluate the new experiences further along the road. Hence the ideals of teacher development, self-growth and personal development, were accomplished through the study.

**Keywords:** ELT, Freirean pedagogy, Postmethod pedagogy, reflective action, teacher education

### **Introduction**

More than two decades ago, Richards (1990) argued that English Language Teaching (ELT) methodology had already moved “beyond methods”. In a similar vein, Kumaravadivelu (1994) has firstly talked about the “post-method condition,” and, secondly, introduced and expounded the concept of postmethod pedagogy in a series of books and papers (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2006a, 2006b). The rise of the postmethod pedagogy has, in fact, stirred fresh rounds of academic discussions in the field of English as a foreign language/English as a second language (EFL/ESL) teaching profession.

"Postmethod pedagogy", in brief, "recognizes teachers' prior knowledge as well as their potential to know not only how to teach but also how to act autonomously within the academic and administrative constraints imposed by institutions, curricula, and textbooks" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006a, p. 178). Such pedagogy recognizes the need for multiple, complex, and context-driven solutions to educational questions. This stance also touches upon the Freirean critical pedagogy discourse recently emerging from the broader educational field into ELT (Blair, 2012).

Implying a social transformation goal for ELT (Akbari, 2008a, 2008b), postmethod pedagogy puts fresh emphasis on language teachers and their qualifications and education. This is because, as Canagarajah (cited in Blair, 2012) contends, language teachers can indisputably be regarded as ambassadors of the dominant global language (the English language in today's world) and values associated with its native speakers, or as agents of change and appropriation of the language with multicultural and multilingual perspectives. As such, postmethod pedagogy implies the presence of multilingual, multi-competent language practitioners.

Postmethod pedagogy, in classroom terms, places a heavy burden on language practitioners' shoulders because it is the teacher who needs to know both her learners and her classroom contexts best and develop and create her own methodology as she gains experience based on the particulars of her classroom contexts to fulfill postmethod promises. In other words, postmethod language teachers, as Kumaravadivelu (2003a) argues, need to “theorize what they practice and practice what they theorize” (p. 37). This principle, called praxis, is one fundamental principle in Freire’s

(1970, 1998) work as well, where theory and practice unite to form action that leads to social and political change. In this sense, post-method language teachers are autonomous, critical practitioners who make context-specific decisions based on their classroom research and analyses. In other words, such language teachers are, in effect, reflective as they observe their teaching, evaluate the results, identify problems, find solutions, and try new techniques (Can, 2012). As such, the future of ELT in most educational settings probably lies with language teachers who are able to manage to achieve a proper sense of balance among knowledge, skills, and experience needed for each situation-specific praxis.

But how can the field of TESOL come up with autonomous language teachers who are able to have their own contextualized praxis? As the pedagogical targets are indeed moving, then perhaps we do need to move along. Language teacher education programs need to acknowledge the growing impact of this contemporary trend, or they are doomed to fail to reflect the unfolding changing realities. They need to do away with the idealized teacher training programs and move towards more appropriate, pragmatic forms of language teacher education programs which may lead to prospective language teacher development. In other words, and to fulfill the promises of modern day language teaching profession, language teacher education programs today suffer a shortage of a practicable package which can incorporate all professional, cultural, and socio-political elements into a feasible set of proposals in order to educate highly sought-after reflective practitioners. As such, and as a possible contribution to the field of teaching English as a foreign/second language (TEFL/TESL), the current study aimed to provide some insights into a workable critical language teacher education program through establishing collaborative professional and critical discussion circles.

Given the above-mentioned problem and to take the almost unbeaten track, the present study developed a critical language teacher education path through which in-service language teacher education programs could lead to further professionalism, reflectivity, and criticality of practicing language teachers. Thus, the primary purpose of the current study was to determine whether there was any statistically significant change in the reflective action

of participating language teachers as a result of their participation in the collaborative discussion circles. The secondary purpose of the current research was to determine whether participation in collaborative professional and critical discussion circles enhanced the practical, cognitive, affective, metacognitive, and critical components of reflective action. As such, the following research questions were addressed:

1. Does participation in collaborative, professional, and critical discussion circles enhance reflective action?
2. Does participation in collaborative, professional, and critical discussion circles enhance the practical component of reflective action?
3. Does participation in collaborative, professional, and critical discussion circles enhance the cognitive component of reflective action?
4. Does participation in collaborative, professional, and critical discussion circles enhance the affective component of reflective action?
5. Does participation in collaborative, professional, and critical discussion circles enhance the metacognitive component of reflective action?
6. Does participation in collaborative, professional, and critical discussion circles enhance the critical component of reflective action?

#### **Language teacher education: Training and development**

As Richards (1998) points out, the research on teacher education has undergone a shift. At first, teacher education was looking for better ways to train teachers. More recently, it has been trying to describe and understand the process of how teachers learn to teach through self-awareness or reflection. This shift, as Shulman (cited in Ohata, 2007) contends, reflects the recognition that teaching involves both action and the thought underlying it.

Teacher education programs leaning towards teacher training are characterized by objectives that are motivated by deficit (Atay, 2004). Such programs argue that the characteristics of effective teaching are previously known and can be described in discrete terms, often as skills or competencies (Richards, 1989) that can be transmitted to prospective language teachers in a top-down, prescriptive manner. In other words, language teacher training programs do not consider teaching as mainly individual or contextual but as a process factorized into general rules, principles, goals, and topics derived from pre-existing knowledge sources

and determined by the language teacher educator. The role of the language teacher is then to skillfully perform a number of prescribed tasks decided by language teacher educators (Zeichner & Liston, 1987).

On the other hand, and more recently, there are teacher education programs which are oriented towards teacher development as it is used in European contexts (Johnston, 2003). The European view sees teacher development as a process that is led and undertaken by teachers themselves. In this understanding, teacher development is a process that teachers themselves introduce and follow; other people, such as co-workers, can only help and guide teachers; however, others cannot tell teachers what they need or what they should do. The European view, in fact, holds that teachers must always be seen to be in charge of their own development (Johnston, 2003). The principal feature of this European view is that it lays personal growth and self-development at the centre of its definition of language teacher development (Mann, 2005). It is this view of teacher development that the current researchers employ in this study.

### **Postmethod pedagogy and language teacher development**

Given the context-specificity of praxis, postmethod pedagogy demands that language teachers provide the theoretical bases for their classroom practices and become action researchers within the realms of their own classrooms in order to cope with the fresh expectations of the classroom dynamics. In other words, language teachers are expected to become not only classroom practitioners but also theorists of their teaching practicum.

However, the insights provided by teacher training programs generally fall short of bridging the gap between being a practitioner and being a theorist. This is because language teacher training programs, as Kumaravadivelu (2006a) claims, are based on idealistic concepts which are geared up for idealistic contexts. As such, they consider the whole process of language teacher education as finite and leave almost no room for prospective teachers' maneuverability. In other words, such programs hold that they can predict all situational variables globally in advance in a top-down fashion. However, given the countless language learning and teaching needs and necessities, teacher and teaching factors, learner factors, and institutional

factors, no language teacher training programs can envisage all the variables beforehand to furnish contextualized proposals.

To take situation-specific decisions, as Kumaravadivelu (2003a) argues, language teachers need to be given the necessary sovereignty "to tackle the challenges they confront every day in their professional lives" (p. 28) in a more bottom-up fashion. Therefore, postmethod pedagogy demands that language teacher education programs move towards the European teacher development programs. This is because the modern needs of the global village require language teachers to learn how to tackle innumerable issues as they unfold contextually.

### **Freirean critical pedagogy and language teacher development**

The current authors believe that the concept of "critical" which has a prominence in Paulo Freire's (1970, 1998) philosophical beliefs, offers great theoretical value to debates about the role and preparation of postmethod language teachers and language teacher development programs. As Hawkins and Norton (2009) appropriately contend, if we are going to have language teachers who are able to act autonomously within the academic and administrative constraints, we must conduct an interminable search for "critical language teacher education" (p. 32) in the hope that the required preparations for the kaleidoscopic particulars of the classroom arenas are made.

Language teachers who are enlightened by both the European view of teacher development and the Freirean critical pedagogy perspective are in a privileged position to act as transformative intellectuals who are able to address educational inequality (Hawkins & Norton, 2009). To make this happen, language teachers must first make sense of the make-up of the dominant culture and the inequality or oppression therein. Therefore, language teachers, to follow Giroux and McLaren (cited in Bercaw & Stooksberry, 2004), need to make classroom arenas "public spheres" by adopting a critical stance and making existing norms problematic; i.e., they need to firstly pose problems and secondly try to solve them: to "problematize" (Freire, 1998, p. 13).

The problematization process, as Benade (2009) argues, places emphasis on the co-operative knowledge construction and democratic dialogue. Within such a process, neither are teachers the sheer passive recipients of

professional knowledge (Zeichner, 1983), nor are they technicians who merely pass on knowledge within a banking system of education. Freire (1970) regards both teachers and learners in the dialogical quest for knowledge and development of critical thinking. He argues strenuously that both teachers and teacher education programs need to be prepared to help students to develop their curiosity from a state of naivety to a state of critical and functioning awareness. Thus, any language teacher education program which struggles for critical language teacher development needs to institutionalize both critical appraisal of self and society and critical action upon the available norms within its foundations.

### **Language teacher development and reflective action**

How can language teachers move beyond the level of trained responses to classroom situations? How can they achieve a higher level of awareness of how they teach? How can they get a deeper understanding of the kinds of decisions they make as they teach? And finally, how can they get to know the value and consequences of particular instructional decisions? The answer, as Richards (1991) claims, lies in reflective teaching.

But how can language teachers take reflective action up? Dewey (cited in Farrell, 1998) contends that growth comes from a "reconstruction of experience" (p. 8); thus, we can reconstruct our own educational attitudes through reflecting on our own experiences. To reconstruct experience, as Pollard (2008) holds, language teachers are required to be constantly aware of and engaged in challenging assumptions, as well as to identify areas of practice that entail careful consideration. Furthermore, Grant and Zeichner (1989) maintain that reflective teachers need to actively reflect upon their teaching and upon the educational, social, and political contexts where their teaching is situated. As such, reflective practice, as Pollard contends, is an instrument that helps teachers to remain lifelong learners combining critical reading, critical thinking, and critical practice to ensure that they provide the best learning experiences possible for their learners.

## Method

### Participants

The boundaries of this research study were three language institutes located in the northern city of Sari, Iran. These language schools were chosen as the research site based on several factors, namely those of convenience and the willingness on the part of language institute managers who allowed the study to be conducted in their institutes and the willingness of English language teachers to participate.

The main participants in this study were a total of 13 practicing EFL teachers aged 24-34. All participating teachers, both male (6 language teachers) and female (7 language teachers), had language experience ranging from 2 to 8 years at various levels of EFL conversation classrooms. Six of them had their B.A. degree in English-related majors, i.e., translation, teaching, and literature; the remaining 7 were working towards or had already earned an M.A. degree in TEFL. The participants came from the same Persian L1 background.

### Instrumentation

Given the nature of the current research, the researchers made use of two research instruments, namely:

(1) *The Reflective Teaching Questionnaire* which was created and tested by Akbari, Behzadpoor, and Dadvand (2010). The questionnaire items had a Likert scale format where participants could choose to answer on a varied scale of 1 (never) to 5 (always). The questionnaire considers the teachers' five reflection categories:

- 1. Practical component:** This component includes those items that deal with the tools and the actual practice of reflection. Different tools/procedures for the reflective practice include journal writing, lesson reports, surveys and questionnaires, audio and video recordings, observation, teaching portfolios, group discussions, and analyzing critical incidents.
- 2. Cognitive component:** This component is concerned with teachers' efforts aimed at professional development. Conducting small-scale classroom research projects (action research), attending conferences and workshops related to one's field of study, and reading the



professional literature are among the behaviors included in this domain.

3. **Affective component:** This component includes those items that deal with a teacher's reflecting on her students, how they are learning and how learners respond or behave emotionally in class. According to Zeichner and Liston (cited in Akbari et al., 2010), "this tendency emphasizes reflection about students, their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, thinking and understandings, their interests, and their developmental readiness for particular tasks" (p. 214). This element also concentrates on teachers' reflecting on their students' emotional responses.
4. **Meta-cognitive component:** This element deals with teachers and their reflections on their own beliefs and personality, the way they define their practices, their own emotional makeups, etc.
5. **Critical component:** This component refers to the socio-political aspects of pedagogy. This category deals with teachers' reflecting on the political significance of their practice and introducing topics related to ethnicity, gender, and social class, exploring ways for student empowerment and voice. The critical component relates reflective action to Freirean critical pedagogy.

(2) *Two similar Teaching Episodes* of upper-intermediate English conversation classrooms which contained problematic teaching/learning concepts, strategies, or issues followed by open-ended written questions for teachers to give reasons in writing for some successful / unsuccessful teaching actions. Two experts were trained to judge quantitatively the content of teachers' writings in terms of levels of reflection targeted by the categories in the Reflective Teaching Questionnaire.

### **Procedure**

To achieve the purpose of the study, the participants underwent a 12-week-long scenario as follows. The participating language teachers convened as panelists with the researchers as the moderators for regular meetings once a week outside the walls of their classrooms. They created collaborative discussion circles in which they reflected and talked about the details of both theoretical and practical issues, to be discussed later, through

a number of activities. The purpose of such activities was to create opportunities for circle members to have an open-ended curiosity towards language teaching and respectfully and dialogically share their ideas and experiences with one another. It was hoped that such exchanges of ideas ultimately paved the way for the circle members' reflectivity and criticality.

Another benefit of discussion circles, in addition to openness to dialog, was to help circle members practically engage in improving essential qualities of their own critical practices, that is how to listen and to respect for what others know. This is because, as Freire contends, in such situations, speaking "to" (p. 83), which is an authoritarian form of the world, is replaced by speaking "with" (p. 83), which is part and parcel of any democratic vision of the world. The present research employed two types of discussion circles:

(1) *Practical issues circle* where language teachers needed to exchange their experiences of their teaching practices to seek further advice/feedback. The members tried to analyze and evaluate what they and other circle members did in their classrooms. The analysis and evaluation was open-ended, and no definitive result was guaranteed. They also discussed their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as inconsistencies and contradictions that occur in their classes. In addition, circle members discussed their philosophy of teaching and the ways it affected their everyday practice. Circle members also discussed ways in which they took their students' needs, learning styles, and preferences into account.

Furthermore, each circle member posed such socio-cultural or socio-political problems as poverty, social justice, vandalism, corruption, and divorce to see how the other circle members tried to address the issues in their own classrooms. The purpose of this activity was to involve circle members in problem-posing and problem-solving activities, necessary for both teacher development and criticality.

(2) *Theoretical and language-related issues circle* where circle members needed to read collectively-selected papers and book chapters and discuss their contents with the other circle members in their regular meetings. This type of activity strived to provide food for the theoretical and language-related aspect of teacher development, reflective practice, and criticality of practicing language teachers through their familiarity with theories learned

from research and the existing body of literature. This is because, as Freire (1998) further holds, the ideological nature of education entails "decision-making that is aware and conscientious" (p. 79) since in truth, critical awareness, or, to use Freirean terminology, conscientization "is one of the roads we have to follow if we are to deepen our awareness of our world, of facts, of events, of the demands of human consciousness to develop our capacity for epistemological curiosity" (p. 35) whose understanding "brings us to a critique and a refusal of the banking system of education" (p. 12).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The required data for the current study were collected at two stages: one prior to the start of the research treatment, and the other one at the end of research treatment. In a similar vein, evaluation has been done in two phases: The first phase (pretest) which was an attempt to describe the teachers' initial reflective practice and the second stage (posttest) which explored how research treatment helped the teachers, if any, to become more reflective practitioners.

For the pretest phase of the study, the participant language teachers were firstly asked to individually describe in writing (in English) their reflection on a given teaching episode. They were to identify and reflect upon the teaching episode which contained problematic teaching/learning issues, and then explain in writing (in English) the reasons for some successful/unsuccessful teaching actions. Secondly, the teachers were asked to fill out the Reflective Teaching Questionnaire.

For the posttest phase of the study, the language teachers were firstly asked to individually describe in writing a similar teaching episode as they had reflected on in the pretest phase. The purpose of this implicit measurement of the change was to see how far the nature, content, and quality of their criticism had changed as a result of their participation in the treatment period. This posttest device would also reflect the implicit measurement of the change in the participating teachers' attitudes, viewpoint, and practices. Secondly, language teachers were asked to fill out the same questionnaire they had filled in for the pretest phase. The two trained raters judged the language teachers' writing accounts quantitatively

to gauge their levels of reflection according to the categories in the Reflective Teaching Questionnaire.

## Results

Each set of the data, both the pretest and the posttest data, gained from the Reflective Teaching Questionnaire were explored to determine whether they showed a normal distribution or not. The results are provided for the total scores of pretest and posttest in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Tests of Normality Results for Questionnaire Pre- and Post-test Total Data*

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Discussion Pretest	.176	13	.195	.943	13	.495
Discussion posttest	.203	13	.146	.853	13	.063

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

As the results in Table 1 show, the values of P for both Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests of normality for the total results of the pre-test and post-test data were found to be larger than .05. This meant that the data did show normal distribution, and, as such, one of the conditions to use parametric tests to analyze the total results of the questionnaire was established.

The results for Practical, Cognitive, Affective, Metacognitive, and Critical components for each set of pre-test and post-test data are shown in Tables 2.

Table 2  
*Normality Tests for Questionnaire Pre- and Post-test Data*

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Practical pretest	.132	13	.200	.965	13	.823
Cognitive pretest	.192	13	.200	.926	13	.304
Affective pretest	.164	13	.190	.936	13	.410
Metacognitive pretest	.241	13	.063	.892	13	.105
Critical pretest	.268	13	.061	.843	13	.056
Practical posttest	.293	13	.053	.855	13	.063
Cognitive posttest	.237	13	.054	.881	13	.072
Affective posttest	.155	13	.200	.905	13	.155
Metacognitiveposttest	.233	13	.052	.881	13	.074
Critical posttest	.147	13	.200	.901	13	.140

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

As the results in Table 2 indicate, the obtained values of P for both Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests of normality for each component of reflective action for both pre-test and post-test data were found to be larger than .05. This meant that these data also showed normal distribution, and, as such, one of the conditions to use parametric tests to analyze the component-related results of the questionnaire was established.

Prior to the analysis, the data gained from the language teachers' written accounts of the Teaching Episodes needed to be examined in terms of normality to determine the types of tests to apply. Therefore, the data were explored to specify if they showed a normal distribution (Table 3).

Table 3  
*Tests of Normality Results for Teaching Episode Data*

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Pretest	.146	13	.056	.955	13	.119
Posttest	.138	13	.059	.919	13	.060

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

As Table 3 demonstrates, the values of P for both Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests of normality for both pre-test and post-test results of Teaching Episode are larger than .05. As such, the data did show normal distribution, and, therefore, one of the conditions for the employment of parametric tests to analyze the results of the Teaching Episode data was fulfilled.

To find out whether there was any significant difference in the reflectiveness of participating language teachers before and after their involvement in the implementation phase of the study, a Paired Samples t-test was run on the pretest-posttest data obtained through the questionnaire, the result of which is provided in Table 4.

Table 4  
Paired Samples t-test Results for Questionnaire Data

	Paired Differences							
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 posttest - pretest	1.94615E1	10.55632	2.92780	13.08242	25.84066	6.647	12	.000

As Table 4 indicates, there is a significant difference in the reflectiveness of language teachers who took part in the collaborative professional and critical discussion circle  $t(12) = 6.647$ ,  $p < .05$ .

The second step was to analyze the Teaching Episodes data gained through the language teachers' responses to open-ended written questions and rated by two independent trained raters. An interrater reliability analysis statistic was performed to determine consistency among raters (Table 5).

Table 5  
Interrater Analysis Results for Teaching Episodes

		rater1	rater2
rater1	Pearson Correlation	1	.877**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	13	13
rater2	Pearson Correlation	.877**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	13	13

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As Table 5 shows, the interrater reliability for the raters is found to be  $r = .877$  which means there is a significant consistency between the two raters.

Finally, to find whether the language teachers' written accounts showed any difference a Paired Samples t-test was run on the average data obtained through the written reports to the teaching episodes, the result of which is provided in Table 6.

Table 6  
Paired Samples T-test Results for Teaching Episode Data

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
Pair					Lower	Upper			
1	posttest - pretest	-.69231	1.51143	.24202	.20236	1.18226	2.861	12	.007

On the basis of the findings of Table 6, there is a significant difference in the reflectiveness of participating language teachers before and after their participation in the implementation phase of the study  $t(12) = 2.861, p < .05$ .

In order to find out if participation in the professional and collaborative circles resulted in any significant difference in the practical component of reflectiveness of participating language teachers, the parametric Paired Samples t-test, considering the normality of the data (see Table 2), was run on the Practical section of the data generated by the questionnaire both before and after the treatment. The results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7  
Paired Samples T-test Results for the Practical Component

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
Pair					Lower	Upper			
1	posttest - pretest	3.38462	5.43965	1.50869	.09747	6.67176	2.243	12	.045

The results show that there is a significant difference in the practical component of reflectiveness of language teachers who attended professional and collaborative circles,  $(t 12) = 2.243, p < .05$ .

In order to understand whether there was any significant difference in the cognitive component of reflective action of language teachers who took part in collaborative professional and critical discussion circles, a Paired Samples t-test was conducted on the Cognitive part of the pretest-posttest normal data (see Table 2) provided by the Reflective Teaching Questionnaire (Table 8).

Table 8  
Paired Samples T-test Results for the Cognitive Component

Paired Differences							
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Interval of the Difference		t	Sig. (2-df tailed)
				Lower	Upper		
Pair 1 posttest - pretest	-3.23077	4.32346	1.19911	.61813	5.84341	2.694	.020

As indicated in Table 8, there is a significant difference in the cognitive component of reflective action of teachers who took part in discussion circles,  $t(12) = 2.694$ ,  $p < .05$ .

To find out whether there was any significant difference in the affective component of reflective action of language teachers who took part in the collaborative professional and critical discussion circles, the affective part of the pretest-posttest normal data (see Table 2) generated by the Reflective Teaching Questionnaire was analyzed using a Paired Samples t-test whose results are depicted in Table 9.

Table 9  
Paired Samples T-test Results for Affective Component

Paired Differences							
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Interval of the Difference		t	Sig. (2-df tailed)
				Lower	Upper		
Pair 1 posttest - pretest	-2.30769	2.32324	.64435	.90377	3.71161	3.581	.004

As Table 9 demonstrates, there is a significant difference in the affective component of reflective action of language teachers who participated in the discussion circles  $t(12) = 3.581$ ,  $p < .05$ .

Following the normality test for the pretest-posttest data (see Table 2) related to the metacognitive section generated by the Reflective Teaching Questionnaire, a Paired Samples t-test was used to discover whether there was any significant difference in the metacognitive component of reflective action of language teachers who took part in the collaborative professional and critical discussion circles. The results are summarized in the Table 10.



Table 10  
Paired Samples T-test Results for Metacognitive Component

Paired Differences							
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	Sig. (2-df tailed)
				Lower	Upper		
Pair 1 posttest - pretest	-3.69231	3.81629	1.05845	1.38614	5.99847	3.488	12 .004

As the findings in Table 10 suggest, there is a significant difference in the metacognitive component of reflective action of the language teachers who attended discussion circles  $t(12) = 3.488, p < .05$ .

Last but not least, to understand whether there was any significant difference in the critical component of reflective action of the language teachers who took part in the collaborative professional and critical discussion circles, a Paired Samples t-test, given the normality of the data gained through the Reflective Teaching Questionnaire (see Table 2), was administered (Table 11).

Table 11  
Paired Samples T-test Results for Critical Component

Paired Differences							
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	Sig. (2-df tailed)
				Lower	Upper		
Pair 1 posttest - pretest	-6.84615	5.52036	1.53107	3.51023	10.18207	4.471	12 .001

On the basis of the findings of Table 11, there is a significant difference in the critical component of the reflective action of the language teachers who participated in the discussion circles  $t(12) = 4.471, p < .05$ .

### Discussion

The results of the study based on both groups of the data generated by the Reflective Teaching Questionnaire and the written accounts of the Teaching Episodes showed there were significant changes in the reflectiveness of the participating language teachers. In fact, the findings suggest that

participation in collaborative professional and critical discussion circles ameliorated the reflectiveness in the language teachers.

Activities done at both practical and theoretical levels in the circles paved the ground for the participating language teachers to cooperate and collaborate outside of their classrooms to achieve goals at two individual and collective planes in tandem. The results indicated that the gatherings provided what Richards and Farrell (2005) called a "teacher support group" (p. 51) in which "critical friendship" (Farrell, 2001, p.368) was vividly in good working order. This is because circle members explored other members' teaching acts and classroom lives and then came up with their own non-judgmental feedback in a democratic, collaborative environment.

The activities carried out in the group also regarded the member teachers not as empty vessels waiting to be filled by a certain teacher trainer. On the contrary, the group members made use of a dialogic approach to pose problems, make decisions, and finally solve problems. The very dialogic process gave indeed the participating members a voice. The language teachers, in fact, realized that they were not mere passive receivers of knowledge. They, instead, challenged each other and generated information and created knowledge dialogically.

The findings are in line with the Vygotskian (1978, 1986) sociocultural perspective which views cognitive development as a socially mediated process. The researchers, in fact, played the role of More Knowledgeable Others, to use Vygotskian terminology, exploiting larger areas of language teachers' Zone of Proximal Development through providing them food for thought by introducing various issues and handouts to be discussed in the group's gatherings. By the same token, the socially mediated discussions in practical and theoretical circles helped the participating language teachers with their cognitive development through a transformative and constructive process of consciousness development.

Similarly, the outcome of the study is on the same wavelength with the tenets of Activity Theory (Daniels, 2001). The whole process of development (reflectiveness) were undertaken by human agents (language teachers in our case) who were motivated toward a purpose (reflectiveness) mediated by tools (language) in collaboration with other (circle members).

It is also worth mentioning that language teachers in these circles reflected and then acted upon their own experiences of teaching to make some changes in them. This process tried to combine act of teaching with thinking or what Freire (1970) calls "praxis" (p. 51) in which union of action and thought happens when teachers are engaged in a dialectical movement departing from their acts of teaching to reflection and reflection upon their acts of teaching to new acts of teaching.

Furthermore, the findings could provide proof of what Freire (1998) calls "education as intervention" (p. 70) which helps human beings to "forge on the development of their autonomy" (p. 78) and finally make decisions that are "aware and conscientious" (p. 79). The outcome of this study shows this by a significant change in the reflectiveness of the participating language teachers.

### **Conclusion**

The current study was set out to take some deeper steps into the almost uncharted territory of critical language teacher education through organizing collaborative professional and critical discussion circles. The aim of the study was to see how the proposed path for language teacher education would foster the professional and critical development, otherwise known as reflective development, and improve the classroom practice of participating language teachers.

The reason for such proposition is that the limited and limiting view of the dominant teacher training paradigm denies language teachers sufficient opportunities to articulate and share their beliefs in many ELT educational contexts. However, we do need language teachers in today's postmethod era who are autonomous and self-governed professionals. As such, in this study the participating language teachers were given ample opportunities to reflect, discuss, and share their experiences and ideas.

The results of the study bear testimony to the fact that teacher development, in its European sense in particular, does not happen inherently. First of all, there must be a strong will behind it. This is the case with the participating language teachers in this study who were eager to participate through the whole process of the study. Secondly, there should also be a proper understanding on the part of language teachers to take part

in the circles and to cooperate and collaborate with one another for the betterment of language instruction.

Furthermore, the proposed collaborative discussion circles did not intend to deposit any knowledge or information in a transmission-based way. On the contrary, it did its best to create an environment in which language teachers could cooperatively construct knowledge in a democratic atmosphere through critically exploring and examining various options available to each of them in the discussion circles. This very process of searching for the best solution, but not necessarily a definitive one, paved the way for nurturing a critical consciousness much favored by the Freirean critical pedagogy.

Finally, throughout the implementation process of the proposed collaborative discussion circles, language teachers learned to exercise and practice tolerance toward new, and not necessarily better, ideas. They learned, or improved, one great skill much needed for critical reflection: learning how to listen. Developmentally speaking, participating language teachers recognized to initiate the whole process, direct it, and finally evaluate the new experiences further along the road. Hence the ideals of teacher development, self-growth and personal development, were accomplished through the study.

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