



Viewpoint of Iranian EFL Teachers on a Technology-Driven Critical Pedagogy-Focused Program for Preparing EFL Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Without effective teacher education programs, they cannot be expected to be effective. To teach students effectively, their needs and voices must be considered. This is the main component of Critical Pedagogy (CP). To that end, teachers must effectively address students' needs through educational technology, while also raising students' critical awareness to apply Critical Digital Pedagogy (CDP). The purpose of this qualitative study was to establish how ELT teachers view the CP-based EFL teacher preparation program in the Iranian context as part of a basic interpretive design. A total of thirty English teachers were selected through convenience sampling. They were university professors with TEFL doctorates and various teaching experiences. A semi-structured interview was used to collect data. The data analysis was carried out by MAXQDA. Results showed that teachers' perceptions of the English language were consistent with hypotheses about CP and the use of technology in education. The interpretation of the results shows the compatibility of CP principles with the technology. Participants recognized the valuable CP concepts in terms of using technology to design a technology-based teacher education program. Findings have implications for EFL teacher education administrators, curriculum planners, and educators.

KEYWORDS: Critical Digital Pedagogy (CDP), EFL teachers, Teacher Education Program, Technology-based curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

In general, any educational program is guided only by a set of policies. The decisions made in such programs are policy motivated as they were originally intended to promote the ideology of a particular of thought by manipulating reality. This leads to the abolition of the status quo and consequently to the emergence of Critical Pedagogy (CP) following the efforts of the Brazilian scholar, Paulo Freire (Giroux, 2004). Freire (1970) was a proponent of a pedagogy whose main goal is to transform the attitudes of the oppressed from passive recipients of knowledge to critical actors (Gao et al., 2019).

In the field of teaching/learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), CP is a teaching/learning approach that aims to connect the classroom environment with the socio-cultural, political, and economic environment (Giroux, 2011). Originally, CP in this context aimed to transform society through language education through problem education (Degener, 2001; Freebody, 2008; Mulcahy, 2011). As technology has developed, the possibility of using CP in online teaching/learning has been proposed (Boyd, 2016). The interface between CP and technology is that both seek transformation (Gao et al., 2019). Both have the power to transform and strengthen people's cultures (McLaren, 1995). This is supported by the fact that following the advent of social media, there have been significant changes in professional and social communication, leading to the emergence of online network culture (Chambers, 2013). The contribution of technology in various fields including education, business, industry, and international communication is significant (Gao et al., 2019). In education, technological advances have changed

the way information is collected and shared in the educational environment (Valdez, 2020). Thanks to new educational technologies, various information resources and communication platforms have been created and used in educational institutions (Allcoat et al., 2021). It has also influenced teachers' perceptions of effective and successful teaching (Gao et al., 2019). Many teachers find that technology tools are associated with greater student engagement and collaboration (Anthony and Clark, 2011). With the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of technological aids in language teaching has become a necessity (Volkov et al., 2022). The concept of Critical Digital Pedagogy (CDP) is heavily influenced by this wave of educational technology adoption and has become a popular concept among researchers and practitioners. CDP refers to the application of basic principles of CP in digital contexts (Stommel, 2014). Furthermore, in today's technological world, teachers must respond effectively to the needs of students using educational technologies (Hu et al., 2021) so that students' critical awareness also increases when trying to apply CDP (Gao et al., 2019; Morris and Stommel, 2018). However, in the context of Iran, one can observe that although teacher training has been the subject of some studies (e.g.; Shahvand and Rezvani, 2016; Zamani and Ahangari, 2016), this issue has been overlooked by researchers from the CDP perspective (Chambers, 2013; Zohrabi et al., 2019). Back then, CP and technological pedagogical innovations, as mentioned above, covered various aspects of the world's education systems. Therefore, Whyte (2011) suggests that teacher education programs should aim, among other things, to improve teachers' digital competencies. In summary, the use of the CDP in the field of teacher training in the Iranian context is not without advantages. Therefore, this study aimed to uncover the perceptions of EFL teachers towards a CP-based and technology-based EFL teacher preparation program in Iran through the following research question:

What are Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of a technology-laden critical pedagogy (CP)-based EFL teacher preparation program?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

To use technology for critical purposes, and to develop critical awareness in online environments, the nature and impact of the technology that is going to be used should be understood (Stommel, 2014). More importantly, instead of over-attention to technological tools, users of educational technologies must give priority to the humans involved. "After all, information can be digitalized, but learning itself is still a very human business" (Gao et al., 2019, p. 177).

Morris and Stommel (2018) defined CDP as a channel through which teachers and students find themselves socio-politically and emotionally related. They proposed more interaction and engagement of learners in the light of CP and technological advancements (Buss and Wolf, 2021). CDP aims at providing learners and teachers with opportunities for active participation, creation, reflection, and dialogue (Morris and Stommel, 2018).

Stommel (2014) enumerates the fundamental principles of CDP as follows: CDP (a) places its practice on collaboration; (b) must welcome diverse opinions, and must re-define through invention the way collaboration and communication take form across cultural and political boundaries; and (c) cannot be defined by a single voice but must gather together a cacophony of voices; (d) must be used and applied beyond traditional educational methods.

When applied critically, educational technologies (such as social media platforms), particularly in online courses, may contribute to critical reflection and interpersonal meaningful dialogue (Morris and Stommel, 2018). However, educational technologies could simultaneously reveal and make obscure some power structures (Waddell and Clariza, 2018). As such, applying CDP with cultural and political sensitivity is of paramount importance. According to Waddell and Clariza (2018), CDP is closely associated with the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education. They present three main frames of CDP as follows: (a) Authority is Constructed and Contextual: This frame helps learners critically examine the characteristics and contexts of digital objects and to ask questions about their origins; (b) Information Creation is a Process: Creating digital objects



involves a unique process; (c) Information has value: Learners should be asked to consider the value digital information objects have in the information landscape.

RELATED STUDIES

Larson (2014) investigated the theoretical bases and justifications for the employment of CP and proposed some preliminary steps for teachers to follow in implementing critical pedagogy in English language teaching. Rahimi et al. (2015) proposed some ideas for material designers based on the premises of critical pedagogy. Taylor et al. (2016) investigated pre-service teachers about their perception of critical education and teaching of culturally and linguistically underrepresented diverse students and showed that the majority of pre-service teachers had consensus on the need for the inclusion of critical education in teacher education programs with regards to teaching linguistically culturally diverse students. Roohani et al. (2016) developed and validated a questionnaire, namely Teacher Critical Pedagogy, to measure the amount of critical pedagogy employed in the classroom by English teachers in Iran. Childs (2017) investigated the history of critical education in the USA and concluded that since the demographics of students are subjected to inevitable shifts, critical ideas should be integrated in such areas as planning future curricula, teacher education, etc. Enyew and Melesse (2018) examined the extent to which the issue of critical principles is infused into the environments of Universities in Ethiopia and disclosed that the issue of criticality is infused into the programs of the Universities. Waddell and Clariza (2018) indicate two examples from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Library where CDP was incorporated into a science course and a humanities classroom using infographics and digital storytelling. Parker (2019) addressed the values of critical education for ELT and teacher education in post-secondary education and recommended that stakeholders take these elements as starting points for re-conceptualizing their teaching principles and methods. Tabatabaei (under press) aimed at developing a scale for developing EFL materials based on critical pedagogy and some main themes were revealed as the main themes for CP-based EFL materials development.

METHOD

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study benefited from a basic interpretive design. The basic interpretive design was the best choice for this study since this approach is the best one for the exploration of people's perceptions. In the basic interpretive design, the researcher seeks to understand the meaning constructed for a phenomenon or situation by the people involved in it (Dörnyei, 2007).

PARTICIPANTS

A total of thirty male and female EFL teachers were selected and interviewed conveniently to explore their perceptions of a technology-laden critical pedagogy (CP)-based EFL teacher preparation program. They were university professors with Ph.D. in TEFL with different years of teaching experience.

INSTRUMENT

In an attempt to explore the participants' perceptions of a technology-laden CP-based EFL teacher preparation program, a semi-structured interview was developed by the researcher with approximately five open-ended questions. In developing the interview questions, the researcher consulted the related literature. To ensure the clarity of the interview questions, the developed interview was piloted with a small representative sample (drawn from the intended population). To cope with the constraints, the interview was conducted and audio-recorded virtually in WhatsApp and Telegram without any time limitation in English. To ensure the comprehensibility of interview questions, they were piloted with a small representative sample (drawn from the intended population) in conditions similar to those of the main study.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

Initially, a group of thirty EFL teachers was selected, taking the research ethics into account, and interviewed to explore their perceptions of a technology-laden CP-based EFL teacher preparation program. The interviews were

audio-recorded to facilitate the process of data collection. Then, the researcher transcribed the audio-recorded data verbatim for further analysis. The transcribed data were then entered into MAXQDA in cooperation with a qualitative statistician for obtaining more accurate and precise results.

To add to the validity of the interview data, a quotation was presented along with the extracted themes when presenting the results of the thematic analysis. Moreover, the researcher checked some random parts of the results with the interviewees to ensure that the extracted themes are compatible with the intended meaning of the interviewees.

RESULTS

To answer the research question ‘What are Iranian EFL teachers’ perceptions of a technology-laden critical pedagogy (CP)-based EFL teacher preparation program?’ the following themes were the output of the MAXQDA:

1. Teaching teachers to be aware of the recent advancements in the field of education using technology

As meant by this theme, teachers should be trained to be informed of educational technologies using technology. The following quotation shows this:

Teacher preparation programs’ responsibility is big. They should warn teachers to remain up to date regarding educational advancements and use technology in this way. For example, they can use search motors to download new papers published in their field. (Teacher 5)

2. Teaching teachers to create equal learning opportunities for all students in classes using technology

As mentioned by this theme, teachers should be taught to put all students in the same educational opportunities by using technology. The following theme confirms this:

Teacher educators should tell teachers that they are obliged to take technology at the service of generating discrimination-free conditions so that students with different cultures, religions, genders, and social classes can be exposed to equal learning opportunities. A work they can do is to provide the substrates of e-learning to all the students regardless of their background. (Teacher 9)

3. Teaching teachers to teach students problem-solving skills using technology

According to this theme, teachers should be trained to use technology to prepare students for problem-solving skills. The following quotation shows this:

Teaching students problem-solving abilities through technology should be a part of teacher education programs. Teachers should be made aware of the significance of the problem-solving skills of students. To use technology, there are different ways. They can engage students in electronic games, as a suggestion I can give. (Teacher 3)

4. Teaching teachers to stimulate students’ curiosity using technology

This theme says that teachers should be trained to trigger students’ inquisitiveness with the help of technology. The following quotation confirms this:

Curiosity is a powerful tool that teachers should be educated to instigate with technology during pre-service courses. In so doing, for example, they can provide students with open-ended films and ask them to guess their endings. (Teacher12)

5. Teaching teachers to teach students how to recognize, understand, analyze, and synthesize information using technology

As stated by this theme, teachers should be educated to prepare students for analytical skills using technology. This is supported by the following quotation:

Instructors or teachers of teacher education programs should train teachers to instruct their students about information analysis and synthesis through technology. Analysis and synthesis is as important as information comprehension. Using technology should not be forgotten. Teachers can send different pieces of electronic information through Adobe Connect or Sky Room and ask students to come to a general interpretation and send it to the teacher as an assignment. (Teacher 9)

6. Teaching teachers to teach students to seek reasons behind anything using technology

According to this theme, teachers should be trained to make students reasonable via technology. The following quotation corroborates this:

A task of teacher education programs should be instructing teachers to teach reason-seeking to students by using technology. Students should be instructed not to accept anything without reason. Through technology, it can be done by holding question- and- answer sessions in a virtual space wherein students ask any question they like from teachers. Or they can be provided with some specific matters and asked to find the reasons behind them on the related sites. (Teacher 17)

7. Teaching teachers to use inductive learning techniques using technology

According to this theme, teachers should be taught the use of consequential techniques utilizing technology. The following theme reveals this:

Teachers should be made informed of effective techniques including inductive learning and the usefulness of applying them in technology-based ways in their future classes. It is in this way that students learn to make inferences instead of linear thinking. To add the taste of technology to this, students can be taught using different platforms including SHAD and Sky Room and after a period, compare and contrast these networks with each other. (Teacher 17)

8. Teaching teachers to teach in a way that students are engaged in thinking using technology

According to this theme, teachers are to be instructed on encouraging students to think via technology. This is understood from the following quotation:

To encourage students to think more through technology, teachers should be trained by teacher educators. Teachers can ask students to design their plans for synchronous or asynchronous teaching. (Teacher 1)

9. Teaching teachers to teach students how to go beyond the received information using technology

As unraveled by this theme, teachers should learn to empower students, via technology, to think beyond the boundaries of information they receive. This is comprehended from the following quotation:

A teaching skill that should not be given a weak load by teacher trainers is teaching, based on technology, to students to transcend the information they receive. Teachers can provide students with class videos on different types of electronic corrective feedback from different contexts and be asked to select which one is more appropriate for the context of Iran. (Teacher 19)

10. Teaching teachers to enhance students' self-esteem and self-confidence using technology

According to this theme, teachers must be trained to corroborate students' positive personality traits through technology. This is evident in the following quotation:

Teacher preparation programs should be an opportunity for teachers to practice enhancement of students' skills such as self-esteem and self-confidence through the use of technology. Teachers can give innovative ideas to students to help them design electronic plans for simple software. (Teacher 17)

11. Teaching teachers to try to promote fair distribution of power in educational settings using technology

As put by this theme, teachers should be trained to encourage just power distribution in educational environments with the help of technology. The following theme confirms this:

Teachers need to be trained to distribute power equally among all the students. They can use technology by providing all the students with distance learning, even dis-privileged students. Or they can, let say, build an e-mail address for all the students to be in relation with each other and with the teacher. (Teacher 21)

12. Teaching teachers to encourage peaceful life among students using technology

As implied in this theme, teachers should be taught to make students oriented towards peace with the help of technology. The following quotation supports this:

Through teacher education programs, teachers should learn to generate peace among students through technology. For example, teachers can ask students to set collective pictures of their classmates as their profile pictures on social networks. (Teacher 13)

13. Teaching teachers to develop democratic attitudes in students using technology

According to this theme, teachers must be educated to introduce democracy to students employing technology. This is shown by the following quotation:

Since critical pedagogy is not separate from democracy, teachers should be taught to make students democratic in attitude by applying technology. To this end, teachers can administer electronic polls among students on a newly implemented teaching or evaluation method. (Teacher 10)

14. Teaching teachers to use diverse teaching methods and strategies using technology

This theme says that teachers need to be trained in using various methods of teaching via technology. Evidence of this is the following quotation:

Teacher training should emphasize teachers' use of various technological teaching methods. MALL, CALL, and similar methods are good strategies to use technology in teaching. (Teacher 30)

15. Teaching teachers to use participatory teaching methods using technology

Comprehended from this theme is the point that teachers should be taught to implement participative teaching with the help of technology. This can be taken from the following quotation:

EFL teachers must learn to teach through participatory methods based on technology. They can assign each class session to each student to play the role of teacher and teach the class in a virtual space. (Teacher 20)

16. Teaching teachers to use mixed evaluation procedures using technology

This theme says that teachers are to be taught to benefit from different assessment procedures through technology. The following quotation shows this:

Teachers are to be educated to use both quantitative methods including multiple choice tests and open-ended exams and qualitative methods including interviews and biography writing in the assessment of learners. These procedures can be used in the form of CAT. (Teacher 22)

As revealed by the results, the following perceptions were extracted for Iranian EFL teachers on a technology-laden critical pedagogy (CP)-based EFL teacher preparation program: Teaching teachers to be aware of the recent advancements in the field of education using technology; teaching teachers to create equal learning opportunities for all students in classes using technology; teaching teachers to teach students problem-solving skills using technology; teaching teachers to stimulate students' curiosity using technology; teaching teachers to teach students how to recognize, understand, analyze and synthesize information using technology; teaching teachers to teach students to seek reasons behind anything using technology; teaching teachers to use inductive learning techniques using technology; teaching teachers to teach in a way that students are engaged in thinking using technology; teaching teachers to teach students how to go beyond the received information using technology; teaching teachers to enhance students' self-esteem and self-confidence using technology; teaching teachers to try to promote fair distribution of power in the educational settings using technology; teaching teachers to encourage peaceful life among students using technology; teaching teachers to develop democratic attitudes in students using technology; teaching teachers to use diverse teaching methods and strategies using technology; teaching teachers to use participatory teaching methods using technology; and teaching teachers to use mixed evaluation procedures using technology.

DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to answer this research questions 'What are Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of a technology-laden critical pedagogy (CP)-based EFL teacher preparation program?', the extracted themes were as follows: Teaching teachers to be aware of the recent advancements in the field of education using technology; Teaching teachers to create equal learning opportunities for all students in classes using technology; Teaching teachers to teach students problem-solving skills using technology; Teaching teachers to stimulate students' curiosity using technology; Teaching teachers to teach students how to recognize, understand, analyze and synthesize information using technology; Teaching teachers to teach students to seek reasons behind anything using technology; Teaching teachers to use inductive learning techniques using technology; Teaching teachers to teach in a way that students are engaged in thinking using technology; Teaching teachers to teach students how to go beyond the received information using technology; Teaching teachers to enhance students' self-esteem and self-confidence using technology; Teaching teachers to try to promote fair distribution of power in the educational settings using technology; Teaching teachers to encourage peaceful life among students using technology; Teaching teachers to develop democratic attitudes in students using technology; Teaching teachers to use diverse teaching methods and strategies using technology; Teaching teachers to use participatory teaching methods using technology; and Teaching teachers to use mixed evaluation procedures using technology.

The extracted themes have been more or less reported in some previous studies by some scholars including Ahmadi and Sadeghi (2016), Colombo (2013), Daryai-Hansen et al. (2015). The findings are also similar to the results of some other related studies (e.g., Colombo, 2013; Honnett, 1992; Taylor, 1994). Further, the results are consistent with the study by Adams (2005), Unterhalter and Aikman (2007), Gollnick et al. (2009), Mohammadi et al. (2016), Mostafazadeh et al. (2015), Sadeghi (2012), Subrahmanian (2005), Unterhalter (2007), and Wilson (2004).

To interpret the findings, the perceptions extracted in the present study are reflective of the reconciliation of the use of CP principles and technology. Indeed, such issues as attention to students' needs, awareness-raising of students regarding the aims of different teaching strategies, rapport in the classroom, social problem-solving, change, and transformation are among the main tenets of CP (Colombo, 2013). Further, corroborating life skills, recognition of students' capacities, making the load of learning as light as possible, incorporating diversity and dynamicity into teaching and evaluation procedures, and putting teacher-centeredness aside are deeply emphasized in CP (Ahmadi and Sadeghi, 2016). Additionally, heed to communication abilities of students,

teaching question- posing skills, facilitative role of teachers, and equal discrimination-free learning opportunities are proposed in CP (Gollnick et al., 2009).

Consistent with this study, Mostafazadeh et al. (2015) identified the main dimensions of transformative education and showed that a transformative curriculum revolves around several dimensions, including anti-racist pedagogy, utilizing diversity and multiculturalism, pedagogical and social justice, diversity in teaching methods, plurality of assessment processes, acceptance of diversity rather than uniformity, support for minority languages, and promotion of multicultural and intercultural communication.

The study results are also consistent with recent work by Morris and Stommel (2018) on CDP, with a central aspect of the CDP being its focus on “community and collaborative practice”. Specifically, Morris and Stommel argued that CDP fosters new perspectives on how teachers and students are socially, politically, and emotionally connected in an online learning environment. Additionally, they suggested that high levels of engagement and interaction are the foundation for successful outcomes in online and hybrid environments. Taken together, these statements were consistent with our thoughtful and planned efforts to build and sustain online communities.

The view of the participants of the present study showed that they believe that educators who use technology in education are too focused on effectiveness. Buss and Wolf (2021), suggested that by reviewing the human and interactive aspects of learner learning should be prioritized. This study supports CDP as an open learning environment focused on dialogue.

Teacher preparation programs that compatible with the recent advancements in the field of ELT, student curiosity enhancement, student information synthesis ability, reason seeking, and critical thinking are CP-based in reality (Wilson, 2004). Going beyond here and now, being involved with students’ self-esteem and self-confidence, and attention to democracy and peace are also among the ideologies which can give CP orientations to teacher preparation programs (Adams, 2005). As perceived by the participants of the study, it is just in the light of using technology that a technology-based CP-laden teaching preparation program takes form, however, Baroud and Dharamshi (2020) believed that by using self-directed research methods and ongoing course reflections and assessments to highlight “critical” aspects of CDP by collecting data from notes and reflections shared online and recorded during weekly meetings, they co- planned and designed learning opportunities that consciously addressed social, cultural and ethical issues related to digital learning. They argued that this work should not be left to teacher educators alone; rather, teacher education programs need to play a greater role in preparing and supporting teacher educators with both technical and pedagogical skills to design and meaningfully integrate critical digital practices into their classrooms.

However, as perceived by the participants of the study, it is just in the light of using technology that a technology-based CP-laden teaching preparation program takes form.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In line with the findings of the study, it can be concluded that teacher educators’ mission to make EFL teacher preparation programs in line with technological advancements and CP doctrines is multi-faceted. In the absence of appropriate measures that center on the nature of class relations, students’ needs, aims clarification, social problems, and problem-solving, it cannot be expected for a technology-laden CP-based EFL teacher preparation program to be materialized. Further, teacher educators should go beyond a mere focus on teaching EFL skills and seriously remind teachers to emphasize on life skills, as well as effective traits of students such as self-confidence and self-esteem in the classroom. Removing discrimination, and cultural learning barriers, promoting peace, making student learning simple, and moving towards learner-centeredness is to be incorporated into the body of teacher preparation policies to make the system consistent with CP, albeit in the heavy light of technology. Last but not least, making students proficient in communication and inference- making, taking advantage of a variety of teaching and evaluation procedures intermingled with diversity and mutual participation, tackling students’

curiosity, and generating fairness in learning opportunities are at the heart of a technology-laden CP-based EFL teacher preparation program.

The findings may engage different groups of stakeholders to take appropriate measures and thus, contribute to transformations in the current EFL teacher education system of Iran. EFL teacher education administrators may take useful insights from the findings and redefine the guiding policies of teacher education in Iran. EFL teacher education curriculum planners' responsibility is to revise the current curriculum of EFL teacher education and plan the new one incorporating the themes extracted in the present study. EFL teacher educators can make their best to transform the current status of the system and pave the ground for the replacement of the system with a technology-laden CP-based framework.

Taking limitations and delimitations of this study, future researchers can triangulate the data collected in this study by other tools including reflective journals, open-ended questionnaires, diaries, etc. Moreover, since at present, technology-laden CP-based teacher education is not implemented in Iran, exploring the challenges and problems of technology-laden CP-based teacher education can be the topic of future studies.

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