

Critical Pedagogy in Curriculum Decision Making

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31918/twejer.2471.44>

Published: 21/07/2024

Abstract

Critical pedagogy has recently started to have an impact on the field of TESOL—teaching English to speakers of other languages—by introducing some new socio-political views of language teaching and linguistics. In this research, two main aims are set forward. The first aim is to explain the new concept of critical pedagogy and make suggestions for how it can be incorporated into the TESOL profession. The second is to investigate students' and teachers' perceptions of the concept and fundamental tenets of critical pedagogy, as well as the extent to which these tenets are utilised in formulating curricula in the context of Kurdistan. This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to employ instruments for gathering and analysing data from numerous sources. The sample for the study was 120 students who completed a questionnaire. Fourteen students from the same sample participated in focus groups and, seven teachers took part in semi-structured interviews. All participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the research and were affiliated with Sorani University in Iraq's Kurdistan region. The findings of this empirical study demonstrate that the stakeholders make the curricular decisions using a monologic approach rather than a dialogic one and that students and lecturers are not engaged in the decision-making process. The results also show that both teachers and learners are not very satisfied with the banking model of education and would like to be allowed to actively participate in the design and development of teaching curricula from a critical perspective.

Keywords: *Dialogic approach, Monologic approach, Curriculum decision-making, Critical pedagogy in Kurdistan.*

1. Introduction

Critical pedagogy opposes traditional teaching methods, commonly known as “banking education,” where the teacher is the primary source of knowledge and the students are passive recipients who rely solely on the teacher to acquire information. Yet, critical pedagogy tries to help students be independent learners and critical thinkers (Santana-Williamson, 2000). The tenets and principles of ‘Critical Pedagogy’ could be of great importance if applied practically in contexts where education is manipulated by certain groups of people who only try to serve their interests.

It seems that the ruling groups in many educational settings always strive to exert control over the decision-making process to maintain the status quo and sustain their hegemony and benefits. Therefore, the marginalised group could be the only victims if nobody questions the perpetuation of the injustice and inequality of the status quo (Joseph, 2015; Levin, 2007; Petrina, 2004; Sheldon, 2012). Here starts the role of critical pedagogy through raising the educators’ awareness and developing survival strategies to cope with the situation and create a basis for the reformation of the old system into a fairer and more impartial one instead of reproducing the same product again and again (Santana-Williamson, 2000). Rather than allowing only one group to decide about the curriculum, it might be much better if a dialogic approach is used in which students, along with the teachers, will be given a voice and an active participatory role in the process of curriculum development, syllabus, and material design (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018; Könings et al., 2010). Thus, teachers and students will be assisted to liberate themselves from the hegemony of the forceful group and probably will be able to transform the very conventional teaching and learning styles (Santana-Williamson, 2000).

However, some voices recently have risen against critical pedagogy to find it with many flaws and shortcomings. For example, Usher and Edwards (1994, cited in Santana-Williamson, 2000) report that critical pedagogy tenets and assumptions are difficult to apply in the classroom since they do not provide an explicit connection between the theoretical position of the "critical pedagogy" and the practical classroom environment. Another criticism is mentioned by Johnston (1999), who claims that it is essential to separate the education system from socio-political issues because the main essence of education is morality, not politics. Johnston (1999) further adds that the language used by pedagogues is extremely vague and hard to fully understand. Some other critics believe that critical pedagogy is not about liberating but only tries to make a mixture of TESOL and leftist politics, thus bringing the leftist ideology into the education system (Santana-Williamson, 2000).

All in all, despite the criticism, critical pedagogy seems like a tent that aims to reconnect the different joints of life through education. Critical pedagogy intends to bring more justice and equality to society and among individuals. Critical pedagogy appears to be a reaction against all the inequality when groups of oppressors try to control different aspects of life and spread and impose their ideologies upon people through the curriculum for their interests. If applied in our education system, critical pedagogy would likely change how people see the world and could lead people to a better-organised life.

Finally, the need for this study can be justified as there have been insufficient studies conducted in Kurdistan in the relevant area, especially on teachers’ and students’ perceptions of critical pedagogy in curriculum decision-making. Hopefully, this study will help fill the gap in the literature and the research findings could make an important contribution in the area of curriculum design and development and pave the way for further research within the context of Kurdistan or elsewhere to be compared.

2. The Role of Teachers and Students in Curriculum Decision Making

Scholars such as Handler (2010), Kumar and Scuderi (2000), Johnson (2001) and others have repeatedly focused on the significance of teachers' involvement in curricular decision-making. Carl (2009) asserts that including teachers in curriculum, decision-making would probably reduce their opposition to the curriculum's modifications. According to Fullan (1991), teachers' involvement in curricular decision-making is needed for the continued success of the curriculum. Kirk and MacDonald (2001) further added that the engagement of teachers in the curriculum design and development process is one of the important aspects of a successful application of the curriculum. Teachers, accordingly, should play an active role in curriculum decision-making and should be involved in all stages of curriculum design and development (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018).

However, due to a lack of required skills, teachers are sometimes disallowed from participating in curricular decision-making. According to Ramparsad (2001), this is the biggest obstacle preventing teachers from taking part in the process of curriculum development. In a similar vein, Finch (1981) asserts that teachers' exclusion from decision-making is primarily due to their lack of the skills and knowledge required to fulfil the requirements. Yet, one way to cope with these challenges is by providing teachers with sufficient training courses that would help them enhance their knowledge and awareness (Alsubaie, 2016).

The issue of student involvement in curriculum design and development is very recent. Yet, its roots may be seen in the writings of several critical theorists of the early 1900s, such as Max Horkheimer and his colleagues in what was known as the Frankfurt School. Then, in the 1960s and 1970s, Paulo Freire and Tyler began to talk about this issue more extensively (Santana-Williamson, 2000; Tyler, 1975).

For example, one of the main principles of the critical pedagogy theory, as stated by Santana-Williamson (2000, p. 8) is that "students should be allowed to practise critical skills by being engaged in a democratic model of teaching through which the students share power and authority with the teacher and are active participators in the process of curriculum and material design." In addition, Tyler (1975, p. 28) states "I have found that observing and interviewing students when they are actively engaged in learning things they think important help me to develop initial outlines for experiences that will help these students learn things the school seeks to teach".

More recently, researchers such as Eisner (2001) and Ornstein and Hunkins (2018) support the significance of students' involvement in the process of syllabus design and application. They think that students should take an active part in curriculum development and that their views should not be overlooked. Similarly, Könings et al. (2010) argue that student perceptions should direct instructional modification. According to Rudduck and Flutter (2000), students' involvement is crucial as there is a clear connection between students' achievement and their perceptions of the course's aims and objectives. However, as Jagersma (2010) argues, one of the obstacles that might appear is the students' reluctance to participate in curriculum decision-making. This is because some students are still at ease with the conventional methods of curriculum decision-making, which involves restricting and guiding students through a process that is based on external expectations.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research design of this study is qualitative, yet it also featured some quantitative work in the form of a closed-ended questionnaire. Among the most commonly used research methods in a qualitative research design, such as observation, interviews, reviews of documents, and focus groups, the current research study has used semi-structured interviews and focus groups as qualitative research instruments for the data collection (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Taherdoost, 2021).

3.2 Participants

Sixty students from the faculty of Arts (17 male and 43 female) and 60 students from the faculty of Education (16 male and 44 female) at Sorani University, were the participants of the study. They aged between 19 to 22 years old. Additionally, 14 students volunteered and agreed to participate in focus groups, which were selected to include maximum variation in terms of social and geographical backgrounds, as well as gender. Seven teachers with different qualifications, specialities, academic titles, and administrative positions were recruited to take part in the semi-structured interviews (PhD TESOL, M.A. TESOL, M.A. Linguistics, and M.A. English Literature). The administrative positions include heads of English language departments and members of academic department committees.

3.3 Research Instruments

3.3.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in this study was designed for Kurdish EFL students who are studying English at Sorani University's faculties of Education and Arts. It was administered to 120 English language students from both faculties to explore their perception of the Critical Pedagogy's main principles. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section one covered demographic information about the participants, such as name, age, gender, ethnicity, and faculty. The second section comprised some closed-ended questions.

3.3.2 Focus Groups

After the data from the questionnaire was collected, focus groups were held to gather detailed information on students' thoughts, attitudes, and viewpoints on the issue under investigation. Focus groups in this research helped participants interact more effectively and encouraged them to speak more freely and openly. Additionally, it enabled them to discuss and expand upon one another's ideas through the exchange of views and ideas. Thus, it either supported participants' existing beliefs or stimulated them to develop a new conviction (Lune & Berg, 2020; Then et al., 2014). Consequently, third-year students from two different departments participated in two focus groups. In each group, there were seven participants.

3.3.3 Interviews

In this research, semi-structured interviews were done with English language teachers and heads of English language departments. Participants were university lecturers with master's and doctorate degrees. The main research questions and relevant literature were considered to generate several specific, open-ended interview questions. Slade and Sergent (2022) suggest that choosing an appropriate research sample is critical in obtaining comprehensive and valuable responses. The selection of interviewees for this research project was based on the goals and objectives of the study, which included exploring the interviewees' perceptions of the fundamental concepts of critical pedagogy, and the extent to which these tenets are applied in the development of curricula in the context of Kurdistan. Seven English language teachers from both genders and with different scientific titles and qualifications were chosen to take part in the interviews. For ethical consideration of keeping the privacy of participants, the respondents were given pseudonyms as T1, T2...T7.

4. Data Analysis

To be more descriptive, this research has used Microsoft Excel to analyse the data obtained from the survey questionnaire. For focus groups and semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis, as one of the qualitative data analysis methods, was used for analysing the data. The thematic analysis, according to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79), is "a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data".

5.1 Results and Discussion

The findings from the data-gathering methods, including a questionnaire, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews, are presented and discussed as follows:

5.1.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was used to explore critical pedagogy tenets by students. It was to evaluate how far the principles of the critical pedagogy approach are applied in the Kurdish educational curriculum. The Table1 displays the results of students' perceptions collected through the questionnaire:

Table 1: Curriculum Decision-making Perceived by Students

Curriculum decision-making perceived by students					
No.	Question item	YES	NO	N	
				Valid	Missing
1.	Do you play any role in the process of curriculum design and development?	6	114	120	0
2.	Do decision-makers use a dialogic approach to curriculum decision-making?	13	107	120	0
3.	Do you agree with the conventional banking education system?	10	110	120	0
4.	Do you want to be allowed to actively participate in the process of curriculum and material design through a critical perspective?	110	10	120	0

Concerning the first question “*Do you play any role in the process of curriculum design and development,*” the responses demonstrate that the vast majority of students think they have no voice in the curricular decision-making process. Out of 120 respondents, 114 (95%) reported that they do not play any role in the process of curriculum design and development. Only 6 students (5%) of the 120 respondents believe that Kurdish students play a role in curricular decision-making. On the other hand, in response to the second question about whether *decision-makers use a dialogic approach to curriculum decision-making,* 107 (89.16%) students responded that in the context of Kurdistan, a dialogic approach is not applied, while only 13 (10.83%) learners say that a dialogic approach is used when making decisions on the Kurdish curriculum. About question number three, “*Do you agree with the conventional banking education system?*” the great majority of respondents 110 (91.66%) rejected the conventional banking education system. Merely (8.33%) 10 students favoured traditional banking education. Finally, the results of question number four, “*Do you want to be allowed to actively participate in the process of curriculum and material design through a critical perspective,*” show that the greatest number of student respondents, 110 (91.66%), want to play an active participatory role in the curriculum design and development process, whereas a mere handful of them, 10 (8.33%), believe they do not need to be involved in this process.

The survey results support the claims that students in Kurdistan's educational system do not have the opportunity to actively participate or have their voices heard in determining curricular decisions and that their participation has been considerably ignored (Sharif, 2013). These findings appear to be at odds with critical pedagogy core principles. For instance, Santana-Williamson (2000, p. 8) asserts that “students should be allowed to practise critical skills by being engaged in a democratic model of teaching through which the students share power and authority with the teacher and are active participators in the process of curriculum and material design”.

A growing number of academics, such as Eisner (2001), Ornstein and Hunkins (2018) and Könings et al. (2010) advocate the necessity of student participation in the development and implementation of curricula. According to them, students ought to actively participate in the

formulation and the instructional modifications of the curriculum, and students' opinions should not be disregarded. Rudduck and Flutter (2000) contend that student engagement is crucial because they believe that there is a direct relationship between students' academic success and their supportive attitudes towards the aims and objectives schools seek to achieve. Tyler (1975, p. 28), for example, said "I have found that observing and interviewing students when they are actively engaged in learning things they think important help me to develop initial outlines for experiences that will help these students learn things the school seeks to teach".

Again, and in line with one of the critical pedagogy principles, the findings demonstrate that the traditional banking education system is widely opposed by the questionnaire respondents. Critical pedagogy, likewise, strongly disagrees with what is known as 'banking education'. Thus, instead of being passive learners, critical pedagogy encourages students to be autonomous and critical thinkers (Santana-Williamson, 2000). Moreover, a dialogic approach to curriculum decision-making which is one of the key concepts of critical pedagogy (Eisner, 2001; Könings et al., 2010; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018), received a strong preference from survey participants.

5.1.2 Focus Groups

Following the completion of the questionnaire, focus groups were held with the students to elicit in-depth information about their opinions on the topic under study (Then et al., 2014). The focus group respondents made an effort to justify and further explain the students' responses. However, no discrepancy was found between the responses students provided in the questionnaire and the data gathered through the focus groups. All of the participants in our focus groups strongly agreed that students should play an active role in creating and developing the curriculum. They claim that the students' involvement in the materialization of the Kurdish curriculum has been completely neglected. One of the participants, for example, said "*Concerning the process of curriculum decision-making absolutely no one asks the students about things that they are interested in or what should be included in the curriculum*" (Student1). All the students believe that the process of curriculum decision-making should be transformative in a way that can offer students, parents and society a greater chance to have a significant role in the process. For instance, one of the students commented on this item by saying, "*There should be cooperation between the experts and the society; I believe, of course, students and parents have to be sure about what students are learning and what they are trying to learn*" (Student B). Student C went on to say that "*if parents are permitted to express their different ideas about the curriculum, then they will not have any blame or complaints regarding the curriculum, as the majority of students nowadays are complaining the government (authority) regarding the curriculum.*"

Similar to these views, critical pedagogy proponents contend that a fundamental transformation in the educational sector is inevitable and that social engagement in educational environments must be given greater focus (Santana-Williamson, 2000). They support giving students the assistance and the power they need to take an active part in decision-making and free themselves from the oppression of the dominant group. According to critical pedagogy, it is more advantageous to use a dialogic approach where students and teachers have a voice and an active engagement in developing teaching syllabi and material designing (Eisner, 2001; Könings et al., 2010; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018). Thus, students will have the opportunity to challenge the dominant group's hegemony and potentially transform the traditional educational system (Santana-Williamson, 2000).

5.1.3 Interviews with Teachers

As mentioned, the interviews were conducted to acquire in-depth information and allow respondents to express their thoughts and perspectives (Bolderston, 2012; Doody & Noonan, 2013). The interviews were also important to compare and contrast the data from a

questionnaire and focus groups with those from teachers' interviews. It was, thus, to identify any sort of match and mismatch between students' and teachers' thoughts and ideas concerning this issue.

The results of the data gathered through the questionnaire, focus groups and semi-structured interviews reveal that the role of students and teachers in the process of curriculum decision-making is substantially minimized and that decision-makers adopt a monologic approach rather than a dialogic approach to curriculum decision-making. The results also show that teachers and students strongly disagree with traditional banking education and call for active participation in curriculum and material development through a critical perspective.

As an illustration, one of the teachers said, *"In Kurdistan, students are not usually involved in the process of curriculum design and development; their voices are not heard in the process of curriculum design"* (Teacher1). Another teacher further elaborated by saying, *"The decision-making process for the curriculum is centralized. Only a few people are involved in the process of curriculum decision-making, especially in primary and secondary schools. In the majority of cases, the ruling class nominates people or creates committees of some experts, who are very close to them, to decide about the teaching curricula. There are, in fact, interventions of politics in curriculum decision-making. The teaching authority uses a monologic approach rather than a dialogic approach to curriculum decision-making; many things are imposed on us such as (what to teach and how to teach, and how to assess the students)." (Teacher 2). Teachers also believe that there is sometimes an intervention from political (ruling) groups into the curriculum *"I think, sometimes especially with some specific subjects such as history, Kurdish, maybe geography... political groups may interfere the content of such teaching subjects in such a way that would serve their ideologies and interests"* (Teacher2).*

One more teacher made the following comment: *"As far as the decision-making is concerned in secondary and primary schools in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, it is evident that the whole process of education is managed by the certain fixed rules directed by the centre, leaving no role to the active agents within the schools as they are the teachers and students. Thus, the teachers have to follow the rules unwillingly and this leads to negative consequences on the students directly and the whole process of education in general"* (Teacher 3). Teacher 3 further added *"Curriculum designers should follow a transformative approach, where the real participants of the process are allowed to have their voice about the good and bad sides of the process. Thus, by adopting a transformative approach, academic goals are achieved"*.

Moreover, all participants agreed that knowledge should be delivered via a critical perspective rather than the banking education system. For example, an interviewee (Teacher 7) commented *"In my opinion, Knowledge should be delivered through critical perspective, because students can get more knowledge, be more independent learners, and also they can express and share their ideas"*. However, some interviewees reported that teachers are sometimes excluded from decision-making because of their lack of knowledge and experience and that not all of them are qualified to participate in this process.

The results of these interviews are consistent with the claims made by other academics, such as Handler (2010), Kumar and Scuderi (2000), Johnson (2001), and others, who have consistently emphasised the importance of teachers' engagement in curriculum decisions. Similarly, Fullan (1991), for example, holds that teachers' participation in curricular decision-making is necessary to develop a successful curriculum. Moreover, Kirk and MacDonald (2001) and Ornstein and Hunkins (2018), pointed out that one of the key elements of a successful implementation of the curriculum is teachers' full engagement in the process of curriculum design and development. Also, many scholars, such as Joseph (2015), Levin (2007), Petrina (2004), Sheldon (2012), and Wrigley (2014) have repeatedly drawn our

attention to how the intervention of political groups has evolved into a troubling phenomenon that threatens and adversely affects the quality of school programmes.

However, the absence of well-qualified teachers was one of the most challenging obstacles we found and that many other studies have also noted as a potential barrier to teachers actively participating in this process. Therefore, it is suggested that teachers should periodically be provided with sufficient training courses to help them improve their knowledge and experience (Alsubaie, 2016; Ramparsad, 2001).

Overall, it can be said that all of the teacher participants were positive about putting the core principles of critical pedagogy into practice in Kurdistan's educational system to enhance academic achievement and guarantee equity in the educational system.

6. Conclusion

Critical pedagogy proposes several changes to the realm of education. Some of them are perceived as having beneficial results. It holds that the decision-making process for the curriculum cannot be reduced to merely deciding on teaching methods, techniques, and approaches. Yet, it calls for a dialectical, non-nomological approach to be utilized to evaluate these methods, strategies and approaches to more effectively address the classroom problems. It asks teachers to critically assess the whole process and learn how to practically apply the details appropriately within a given setting. Teachers need to be more intellectually sophisticated, versatile, and open-minded about various perspectives.

In addition, it requires enhancing students' critical awareness. Raising students' critical consciousness is one of the primary goals of critical pedagogy. It also tries to break down the barriers separating the upper classes from the socially marginalised groups, bringing more justice to society and providing everybody with equal chances in education. There would be no social inequality among learners and hegemony in society and culture would cease to exist. Hence, it seeks to help students to engage in the process using the dialogical approach. This dialogical approach, according to critical pedagogy, will enable students to acquire a mindset of critical thinking with reasoning, questioning, and flexibility. The dialogic approach of critical pedagogy is not restricted to engaging students in the process of curriculum decision-making, yet it strives to implement it in almost every single detail of the educational process. This includes, for example, involving learners in the learning/teaching activities in a dialogical method to find solutions to any given problem.

The results of this empirical research study show that the teaching authority is utilising a monologic approach to curricular decisions rather than a dialogic one and that students and teachers are not participating in decision-making. The findings further indicate that teachers and students are not particularly satisfied with the traditional banking education system and want to be allowed to actively participate in creating teaching syllabi from a critical perspective. The research has revealed some evident outcomes and has given the readers a great amount of information about the research problem which might be of great importance for stakeholders to have at least a clearer picture of the issues of curriculum decision-making.

It seems that most of the time, the stakeholders try to preserve the status quo to protect its advantages and interests. Therefore, if no one challenges the maintenance of the unfairness and inequity of the existing quo, the marginalised minority may be the only sufferers. Here, the role of critical pedagogy starts by raising the educators' awareness and developing survival strategies to cope with the situation and create a basis for reforming the old system to a fairer and more impartial one instead of reproducing the same product again and again. Rather than allowing only one group to decide about the curriculum, it might be much better if a dialogic approach is used by which students and teachers will be given a voice and an active participator role in the curriculum development process, syllabus and material design. Thus, students will be assisted to liberate themselves from the hegemony of the forceful

group and probably will be able to transform the very conventional teaching and learning styles.

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