PRACTICING CRITICAL LITERACY IN SECOND LANGUAGE READING

ARMAN ABEDNIA

Abstract

Disillusioned with educational approaches which encourage students' passivity and conformity to the wisdom transmitted to them, critical pedagogues focus on improving students' critical consciousness and self-seeking. This outcome can be achieved by encouraging and helping learners to be critical consumers of texts and reconstruct them in ways that are more consistent with their own local experiences. In this paper, I present and elaborate on some steps to practice critical literacy in second language reading instruction. I also discuss challenges involved in practicing this approach as well as some solutions based on my teaching experience. At the end, I highlight the significance of adopting a self-reflexive approach to conceptualizing and practicing critical literacy.

Keywords: Critical literacy, critical consciousness, second language classroom.

BACKGROUND

Critical theories of literacy, primarily derived from critical social theories, are concerned with creation of a more just society through questioning the status quo, recognizing problems and their origins, and bringing about locally effective changes. Literacy in this framework is regarded as an act of knowing which empowers individuals by helping them discover their voices and their ethical responsibilities to improve their world (Beck, 2005). Although there are different approaches to critical literacy (CL) (Pennycook, 2001), they are all concerned with "engaging with the possibilities that the technologies of writing and other modes of inscription offer for social change, cultural diversity, economic equity,

and political enfranchisement" (Luke & Freebody, 1997, p. 1). In other words, CL is "the ability to engage critically and analytically with ways in which knowledge, and ways of thinking about and valuing this knowledge, are constructed in and through written texts" (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999, p. 529). Reading resistantly (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999) is a key aspect of critical literacy since it encourages one to ask himself "what is this text doing to me?" (Bendall, 1994, p. 6).

Noncritical approaches to education encourage students' passivity and conformity to the wisdom transmitted to them by teachers. In contrast, critical approaches like CL highlight the importance of improving students' critical consciousness and focus on *self-seeking* rather than mere *meaning-seeking* (Callison, 2006) by reconstructing texts in ways that are more consistent with one's own experiences (Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, 2001). Text in this regard is defined as a "vehicle through which individuals communicate with one another using the codes and conventions of society" (Robinson & Robinson, 2003, p. 3). In CL students are encouraged to approach texts in a questioning manner, challenge received knowledge, and, instead of taking in knowledge passively, construct it actively and autonomously.

Despite the positive outcomes of adopting critical approaches like CL toward education (Beck, 2005; Ghahremani-Ghajar & Mirhosseini, 2005; Izadinia & Abednia, 2010; Shor & Pari, 1999), neutral, apolitical, and cognitive linguistic perspectives on language appear to have dominated the profession of teaching English as a second language teaching for decades (Braxley, 2008; Crookes & Lehner, 1998; Pennycook, 1990). As observed by Pennycook (1990), this field has been mainly concerned with questions such as "What is the relationship between conscious and subconscious learning, and which is more important?," "Is there a "logical problem" in second language acquisition that the outcome cannot be explained in terms of the input?," and "How do different question types affect learning?" (p. 303) and has shied away from addressing more fundamental questions such as "What kinds of curricula will allow students to explore critically both the second language and the second culture?" and "How can students pose their own problems through the second language (Pennycook, 1990, p. 311).

In addition to a predominantly noncritical approach to education, in academic and private programs of second language education, teachers often have to adopt teaching approaches and practices which are dominated by a test-oriented ideology. These programs are, to a great extent, designed to prepare learners for taking international tests of English such as Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or, at least, are affected by how these tests define language knowledge. Reflecting on my own experience of second language teaching, in many academic settings, reading courses are mostly focused on strategies which help second language learn-

ers answer multiple-choice reading comprehension questions, and instructors require students to memorize lengthy lists of vocabulary items included in IELTS and TOEFL preparation books. Similar styles of instruction are also observed in many courses of grammar, writing, and listening comprehension. Despite all of the validity- and ethics-related issues raised about these tests (e.g., Figueras, 2012; Johnson, Jordan, & Poehner, 2005, Shohamy, 1997; Taylor, 2002; Uysal, 2009), "teaching to the test" dominates because tests are gate keepers (Spolsky, 1997). Those who have non-English backgrounds and wish to study in or immigrate to English-speaking countries or perform jobs which involve the use of English need to have empirical proof of their adequate language proficiency, because, otherwise, they simply are not given the opportunity to study, work, or live in a place of their choosing. In the international arena this proof means almost nothing but a high enough score on an internationally recognized test. Consequently, second language instruction often involves tasks which, at best, improve learners' language skills and, at worst, teach them techniques and tricks which help them pass language proficiency tests, goals which move raising learners' critical consciousness and transformative potential out of focus.

But why is it important to pursue a critical approach to second language education, and why is it not enough to simply help learners improve their language skills? Critical pedagogues believe education is first and foremost a means of social transformation because injustice, power asymmetry, and human suffering do exist. For transformation to take place at a social level, individuals should enhance their ability to recognize problem situations, their causes, and the existing resources which can be drawn upon to deal with and improve them. This ability, which is often called critical thinking, develops most effectively through social interactions where individuals are socialized into applying a questioning and analytical approach to everyday life. Educational institutions constitute a major platform for these interactions. Therefore, irrespective of the content of education, be it physics, painting, or a second language, increasing learners' critical consciousness and transformative potential should be a top priority since, otherwise, the status quo is reinforced.

PRACTICING CRITICAL LITERACY

In (second language) education, there have been numerous accounts of reading instruction as an area where learners' critical thinking can be considerably sharpened (e.g., Abednia & Izadinia, 2013; Ghahremani-Ghajar & Kafshgarsouteh, 2011; Hashemi & Ghanizadeh, 2012; Lau, 2013; Macknish, 2011; Wallace, 1999). However, there are only a few detailed reports on classroom practice (e.g., Wharton, 2011) and resources providing guidelines about how critical reading and literacy can be implemented (e.g., Wallace, 2003). To address this gap, in

the following section, drawing on my experience of incorporating CL in second language (L2) reading instruction, the workshops I have conducted for teachers in this regard (e.g., Abednia, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, Abednia & Izadinia, 2010a, 2010b, Izadinia & Abednia, 2009), and the research I have done into my own practice as an L2 teacher (Abednia & Izadinia, 2013; Izadinia & Abednia, 2010) in the context of Iran, I introduce some steps to implement a CL approach to teaching L2 reading in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts. These steps focus on what needs to happen before, during, and after reading a text to provide students with reasonable opportunities for improving their critical consciousness. Although I have mostly taught critical L2 reading in the EFL context of Iran, the steps I present below can be rethought and implemented in other EFL/ESL contexts. In terms of learners' age and language knowledge, however, I mostly have adolescent and adult learners who are at least lower-intermediate in mind, but I also provide tips which help teachers practice CL with younger and less proficient learners.

Step 1: Familiarizing Learners with Critical Literacy

Since many learners may have been mostly exposed to traditional and language-bound L2 reading instruction and have not gone beyond reading for comprehension, they may not feel prepared enough to fulfil critical reading tasks well. Therefore, teachers should provide them with instructions which are both clear enough to help them engage in critical reading and general enough to let them construct their own ways of reading critically. This issue is particularly important since very detailed and inflexible instructions may lead learners to copy the teacher's style of critical reading rather than create their own. Consequently, critical reading which is meant to help people become critical and creative will have a converse effect.

Teachers can help familiarize students with the nature of CL through providing them with short and simple readings about CL written by others (e.g., the one available at http://www.wordtrack.com.au/lit/crit.html) or by themselves. Reading about CL itself should happen in a critical manner; otherwise, it puts students in the position of passive recipients of expert knowledge which is against the premises of CL. Another way in which teachers can familiarize students with CL is through conducting a class discussion about its objectives, advantages, and limitations and how it can be practiced. To start with, teachers can explore students' reading habits and help them reflect on their own and each other's reading habits through questions like "How do you usually deal with passages you are supposed to read?" and "What questions do you usually ask about L2 passages?" A discussion based on these prompts can be followed by some other questions focusing on the value laden nature of texts, such as "Do you think texts are written in a neutral manner?," "Do authors write without any biases?," and "Do texts reflect

a particular way of thinking?" Building on the initial understanding prompted by these questions, the teacher can encourage them to think about what reading should involve by asking questions like "How should we read texts?," "What should we do with texts other than comprehension of ideas?," "In what ways can one deal with a passage critically?," and "What questions should you ask about a passage to analyze it critically?"

Step 2: Negotiating Readings

Since the purpose of CL is to engage learners in close analysis of and meaningful interaction with readings, teachers should make sure reading topics are relevant and significant to learners' lives. One of the most effective ways of ensuring this quality is to involve learners in the process of selecting passages.

One useful technique is to ask them to write down a list of topics in which they are most interested. Then, a simple frequency analysis helps the teacher find out what topics all or most of them are interested in. This can be taken a step further by encouraging learners to discuss the reasons why their proposed topics are worth reading about in order to get their peers' agreement. Finally, based on the learners' average proficiency level, their sociocultural background, and other significant factors, a number of readings which match both their interests and their reading abilities should be chosen.

An alternative procedure would be to ask students to adopt a more active role and bring readings to the class. To do so well, they should be provided with general guidelines about how to search for passages, such as referring to reliable sources, which teachers may introduce, take account of their classmates' language level and interests, and make sure topics and the content are culturally appropriate. In an EFL context where learners come from and are situated in similar cultural contexts, ensuring cultural appropriateness mostly means taking account of commonalities in learners' cultural background and sensitivities. In an ESL context, however, there is more diversity in learners' cultural and racial backgrounds, and they are exposed to a relatively new cultural environment. Therefore, ensuring cultural appropriateness means incorporating passages which reflect the learners' culture, present the culture of the ESL context, and focus on cross-cultural differences. Analysis of these passages helps facilitate intercultural dialog and raise learners' intercultural awareness.

When students bring passages of their choosing to the class, the teacher should ask each to briefly explain what their passage is about and encourage the whole class to share their perceptions of how suitable and useful the passages are so that some are selected for reading. Since in large classes this can be a particularly time-consuming process, the teacher can ask the students to discuss their passages in groups and invite each group to propose one passage to incorporate into the classroom content. Another even less time-consuming, but also less in-

teractive, alternative would be the teacher's independently studying the passages and choosing some for reading.

To help realize such promises of CL as self-seeking and self-awareness, teachers can sometimes introduce topics and readings which may not necessarily interest learners initially but challenge their preconceptions and help them become more aware of their own ideologies. For example, I assigned a one-page chapter on the concept of utopia from *Daring to Dream; Toward a Pedagogy of the Unfinished* (Freire, 2007) to an undergraduate Reading Comprehension class in Iran. Although initially the students did not welcome it, I insisted that they would find the passage interesting which they came to agree with after they read and discussed it in the class.

What guarantees useful contribution of selecting suitable texts to critical literacy practice, however, is how the texts are dealt with in the process of critical reading and analysis. The following steps focus on these processes.

Step 3: Asking Critical Questions

Despite the initial introduction of the concept of CL (the first stage), some learners may not feel prepared enough to deal with selected readings critically. Due to their schooling or cultural background, for example, they may not know what questions to ask. Teachers' modeling of different types of questions helps students generate their own to focus on authors' purposes, attitudes, and beliefs as well as values presented and promoted or challenged in passages.

Let's take the passage "A Momentous Arrest" by King (1998) (See Appendix) as an example. After working on some comprehension questions, the teacher should pose a few simple critical questions such as "Why didn't Mrs. Parks follow the bus driver's command?" and "How would you compare Mrs. Parks with the other three black people who followed the bus driver's command?"

Since some may consider these questions noncritical, a short reflection on what *critical* might mean is in order here. There is no universal definition or set of criteria to decide if a question is critical. In fact, except for basic comprehension questions which ask for facts rather than analysis and interpretation, there is serious risk in dichotomously categorizing questions as 'critical' and 'noncritical'. However, we can evaluate how critical a question is by gauging its potential to:

1. encourage a given learner or group of learners to treat a text in a questioning rather than passive manner,
2. improve their reasoning skills,
3. help them think about issues in abstract terms,
4. enable them to apply knowledge to new situations,
5. develop their ability to propose alternative interpretations, courses of action, etc.,
6. raise their awareness of their own beliefs and biases,

7. develop their consciousness about the status quo and the existing opportunities for and barriers to making positive changes in individuals and society,
8. generate in-depth dialog among learners,
9. and, as a result, enhance their intersubjective understanding.

The potential of a question to help achieve the above goals depends on how effectively a teacher can use it as a tool to work toward these goals. It also depends on learners' current critical thinking skills and other factors such as their age level, cultural beliefs, and schooling background. For example, while the first question above may fail in a class of adults who do not find it challenging enough, it may work well with younger learners who need to go through a more deliberate lead-in to be able to deal with the text in a questioning manner. A more abstract and sophisticated version of the same question, however, could be challenging enough for adults: "What is it about Mrs. Parks' perspective that generates a tendency within her to resist the established order?" Therefore, teacher- and learner-related factors can affect the potential of a question to foster critical thinking and generate critical dialog.

Questions such as these can facilitate an initial analysis of the events which took place in the passage and why they happened. Then, the teacher should encourage learners to go beyond the text and deal with the presented issues in a wider scope. To this end, depending on students' language abilities and background knowledge, the teacher may pose some general questions like "What social realities does the text present?" and then more specific ones like "How were Blacks treated in the US in the 1950s?" To make the reflection and discussion experience more immediately relevant and significant, questions which encourage a focus on the present situation can be posed, for instance "To what extent do you think this situation still exists in the US?" To give the discussion a more local focus, students can be encouraged to share their perceptions of what the situation is like in the context where they live, work, or study. For example, to foster meaningful connections between the text and the real life of learners who come from backgrounds where the issue of color may not be a concern, teachers should attempt to expand the discussion to other manifestations of supremacism. This can be done through asking questions such as "Can you think of similar acts of discrimination in your own country?" and, depending on the context, "How are females/homosexuals/transsexuals/political dissidents/Muslims/non-Muslims/Sunnis/Shiites, etc. treated by the government and others where you live?" I also strongly encourage teachers to pave the way for learners to reflect on their own approach and likely courses of action in similar situations. Some helpful questions are "How would you act in a similar situation if you were Black?", "How would you act in a similar situation if you were White?", and other variations relevant to the context.

To increase learners' autonomy in dealing with texts, the teacher may provide them with a list of CL questions to choose from and build on when reading a text critically. A list of such questions is available at http://www.wordtrack.com.au/lit/crit.html. These questions can be of great help to learners; however, the teacher should guard against learners' tendency to simply choose questions from the list to avoid the brainwork involved in selecting appropriate questions and modifying them so that they fit the text. Explicitly appreciating the demands of critical engagement with texts, the teacher should encourage learners to select questions which best fit a certain text and modify them according to its content, nature, and purposes. To help them develop this ability, the teacher should model the process and encourage the learners to discuss the relevance and importance of questions in groups.

A further step to foster learners' autonomy in critical reading would be asking them to develop questions of their own. To avoid undue confusion, teachers should be available and willing to help them frame their questions. Sometimes, due to lack of an adequate collaborative spirit, some may not welcome their peers' questions, which may discourage those peers from developing and posing further questions. Thus, the teacher should help them realize that different people develop different questions because they have different perspectives on issues and, therefore, have varied perceptions of what is worth asking and focusing on and what is not. This helps create an atmosphere of tolerance, appreciation, and cooperation in classroom, which is a prerequisite for critical dialog, the focus of the next section.

Step 4: Discussing Questions Collaboratively

Collaborative activities, such as class discussion, grew out of the social constructivist premise that knowledge is constructed through social activities which involve sharing of understandings and experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). The questions mentioned in the previous step about the passage "A Momentous Arrest" can serve as a springboard for class and group discussions among learners. Since dialog involves learners' sharing their personal understandings with each other, it results in their exposure to their peers' beliefs and perspectives, helps them examine issues from different angles, broadens their views, and deepens their understanding of the text and, by extension, the world around them. From a critical perspective, critical dialog heightens learners' awareness of real life obstacles to and opportunities for establishment and maintenance of justice in different spheres of life, since they share their experiences of suffering injustice and demanding equality in classroom dialogs. They also become more critically aware of their own beliefs and assumptions that determine what they do in different situations. In addition, learners are exposed to alternative perspectives and courses of action, and, as a result, have the chance to reconsider their own. In other words, they become more

critically literate in the sense that they develop a more in-depth understanding of the status quo, their own contributions to it, and alternative approaches they can implement to improve it. Finally, since "preoccupation with the content of dialogue is really preoccupation with the program content of education" (Freire, 1972, p. 93), students feel like co-owners of the classroom process since their active involvement in dialog facilitates their contribution to the classroom content.

However, since engaging in collaborative activities such as group discussion demands adequate understanding of the culture of dialog, the teacher needs to take into account learners' familiarity with the nature and ingredients of dialog in practice and what needs to be done to make their collaboration fruitful. Therefore, at the outset of a class, they should briefly explain the main principles of dialogical interaction such as openness, humility, mutual trust, and dynamicity (Freire, 1972; Shor, 1992) and the potential consequences of failing to observe them. Also, throughout the course, they should monitor how learners work as a group and help them have a constructive dialog with each other. To help them develop effective interaction skills, teachers are recommended to provide them with timely feedback and tips on how to act as effective speakers and active listeners. In this regard, Brownell (2006) recommends students master several listening skills, such as maintaining mental involvement, paying attention to their peers' responses, asking questions when appropriate, and preventing peers from dominating. She recommends "I'll listen" behaviors, such as "direct eye contact", "positive facial expressions", "nods", and "forward lean" (p. 199).

To develop and maintain an atmosphere of critical dialog, teachers can build on the concept of *critical friends* and familiarize their students with it. For example, they can share with them the following oft-cited definition of a critical friend proposed by Costa and Kallick (1993):

> a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critiques of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work. (p. 50)

They can break this general definition down into some roles for learners to take on, such as facilitator, challenger, and supporter which can be fulfilled through such behaviors as listening attentively, giving feedback, and questioning (Swaffield as cited in Gibbs & Angelides, 2008).

Classroom discussions are not the only opportunity for learners' reflection and dialog. Another task teachers can ask them to do is writing reflective journals which is the focus of the next section.

Step 5: Writing Reflective Journals

Reflection helps us enhance our understanding of the world and how we operate within it through analyzing our personal experiences, critiquing information presented to us using our experiences and beliefs, thinking about how others' experiences and attitudes apply to our lives and the contexts in which we live and work, etc. (Cisero, 2006). In addition to class/group discussion which, as mentioned above, encourages critical reflection among L2 learners, reflective journal writing can help learners take their time and reflect on their own views and those of others such as their peers', the teacher's, and authors'. In other words, writing reflective journals, which can happen out of the classroom, provides learners with a golden opportunity to rethink their views and modify them in light of the discussion they have had with their peers and teacher in the classroom. Similar to discussions, in a class where the passage "A Momentous Arrest" is worked on, some of the abovementioned questions can again provide a powerful impetus for writing reflective journals. For instance, the question "Can you think of similar acts of discrimination in your own country?" can serve as a thought-provoking topic for writing about one's own real-life experiences.

However, writing reflections is not necessarily an individual activity; rather, it has a great potential to serve as a collaborative and dialogical task. Therefore, teachers can encourage learners to share their journals with each other for feedback. Also, teachers are recommended to use this opportunity to maintain their own dialogical interaction with students through reading and commenting on their ideas and encouraging them to respond to their comments. This way, the individual activity of journaling turns into the interactive task of dialog journal writing facilitated through the exchange of hard or soft copy journals.

Finally, teachers can make this stage even more fruitful by encouraging learners to obtain more information about the topic they want to write about through, for example, reading other relevant passages, watching related videos, and making use of others' real life experiences. To facilitate this process, they might choose to introduce to learners different sources such as books, magazines, newspapers, and online resources, where differing and opposing views on an issue are reflected. Reflecting back on "A Momentous Arrest," teachers can encourage learners to think about what was "momentous" about Mrs Parks' arrest and encourage students to gain some background information about the freedom movement she sparked against racism in the US and why she came to be known as "the first lady of civil rights" and "the mother of the freedom movement." Attempts such as these to expand learners' knowledge help them go beyond a superficial and limited understanding of issues and avoid weak arguments and hasty generalizations, as they will be able to analyze issues in an informed manner (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999).

CHALLENGES TO CRITICAL LITERACY

The steps discussed above show that, unlike passive approaches to reading instruction, a CL class is not just about comprehension of a text but incorporates it as a prerequisite of critical engagement with a text. Furthermore, CL combines reading practice with the practice of other language skills and components. This shows that CL facilitates not only the integration of different ingredients of a second language but also a meaningful synthesis of language practice and development of critical consciousness. This said, there are several challenges related to learners, teachers, and CL itself that need to be taken into account and dealt with in CL practice.

One such challenge concerning students is lack of motivation to develop intellectual skills and creativity largely due to their preoccupation with meeting specific demands imposed on them by educational institutions and international tests such as the IELTS and TOEFL, which do not give credit for critical and creative thinking skills. One way in which this limitation can be overcome is teachers' helping learners understand the limited scope of the skills necessary for taking these tests and the political agenda behind the widespread use of them around the world. Also, teachers should illuminate the significance of being a critical and creative thinker to one's success in different spheres of life such as family, academia, and workplace, so that learners better understand the connections between CL and their personal and social life and, therefore, appreciate and contribute to learning opportunities created in classroom.

L2 learners' limited language proficiency is another challenge in the way of teaching critical literacy as it hinders in-depth treatment of L2 passages. Legitimizing the use of the first language, where possible, partly alleviates this concern in that it facilitates the processes of reading and discussion in classroom. Teachers may also lower the linguistic demands of the classroom content and tasks by, for example, assigning simple texts, using photos/pictures along with or, sometimes, instead of texts, and posing questions which do not necessitate linguistically complicated answers.

Students' age range presents a further challenge in critical classes. Young children, for example, should not be expected to discuss sophisticated issues such as maldistribution of power, misogyny, and globalization. Instead, we should select passages which address concerns related to their age and explicitly appreciate their ability and effort to critically engage with selected texts. Simpson (1996), for example, reports some questions posed and discussed by some young children about *Piggybook* (Browne, 1986) which is a short story about the demands of being a wife and mom: "Why does the mum do all the housework?," "Do the dad and the kids respect the mother?," etc. These questions show that, to think critically, one

does not have to be an adult who is able to think at a highly abstract level and use sophisticated language to express their ideas.

Regarding how teachers go about teaching critical literacy, the first challenge that I should highlight is teachers' impatience for students to put on the critical thinking hat once they receive a text. In many cases, this might lead to learners' confusion and frustration because they have not gained initial familiarity with the text itself. To prevent this happening, teachers should avoid rushing to ask students to analyze a text before they comprehend it well, as poor understanding of a text results in a shallow analysis. In other words, "they cannot be expected to run before they can walk" (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999, p. 531); therefore, prior to any critical treatment of a text, the main ideas, key details, and the structure of the text should be properly worked on, which obviously involves adequate focus on key vocabulary and grammar. This will facilitate a thorough and in-depth analysis of the passage at a later stage. Since students might come from a schooling background where passive reading and thinking habits were promoted, the patience I emphasized above should be maintained throughout a course. This patience will facilitate teachers' help with learners' gradually unlearning those habits and becoming more critical in how they engage with a text. Change is a slow process, and, therefore, small changes observed in learners' reading and thinking habits should be rewarded and built on with a view to making more fundamental transformations possible.

Also, teachers sometimes run the risk of conducting a critical lesson/class in an authoritarian manner and imposing their own ways of thinking about and analyzing texts on their students (Lund, 2005). Instead of requiring students to adopt their definition of critical thinking and reading, teachers should pave the way for them to make sense of what it means to be critical in their own ways (Ellsworth, 1989), no matter how different they are from the teachers'. In addition, throughout the process of a critical literacy course, teachers should gradually step back from their instructional roles and provide more room for learners' independent engagement with texts and their control over the content of the lessons and their pacing (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999). More precisely, the *what* and *how* of a reading course should be decided on in an increasingly negotiated manner. This said, some students may not like, at least as long as they are most comfortable with roles they have adopted previously, to be as actively involved in decision making as we want them to be. They may prefer to be given a less flexible framework in which to work. Thus, it is undemocratic, non-inclusive, and imposing to require them to fulfil all roles that we have in our definition of a critical learner. Failure to identify and acknowledge learners' individual features, learning styles, and the impacts of their schooling backgrounds on their perceptions and approach leads to a "you have to be critical according to my definition" attitude

on the part of teachers. Therefore, teachers should not presume that all students desire the additional roles defined within a CL framework (Lund, 2005).

Those who teach CL are not necessarily any more emancipated from their own biases and tastes than those who do not explicitly favour a critical approach to education. Thus, advocates of CL should remain aware of their own choices and preferences and try to make decisions through genuine negotiation with students in a climate of trust, honesty, and fair, while not necessarily equal, distribution of power. They should also avoid presenting themselves as perfect models of criticality and wisdom (Ellsworth, 1989) and dissuade their students from considering them as such. To this end, they should be explicit about their own biases and perspectives and how they influence their selection of content and classroom procedures (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999). This happens best when teachers' own choices, voices, and attitudes are openly examined as part of critical literacy work (Ellsworth, 1989). Another way in which teachers and students involved in critical literacy work can guard against illusions as to their having particularly superior critical skills compared to others, simply because they are involved in CL instruction, is to maintain a critical attitude to their own standpoints. For instance, the questions posed by the teacher and learners about a text must also remain as open to scrutiny as the text itself since the questions themselves might have been framed within a discourse which they are supposed to challenge (Bertanees & Thornley, 2005).

Finally, critical pedagogy and literacy, as practiced around the world, often has a largely decontextualized, ahistorical, rationalist, and abstract basis (Ellsworth, 1989). Teachers and learners, together with other stake holders like materials developers and curriculum designers, should redefine CL in light of local cultures of and approaches to learning and education and learners' experiences and perceptions. With regard to content, for example, this can manifest itself in the selection of topics which reflect the concerns of a certain group of learners. How to deal with the selected content should also be redefined in local terms. For instance, if emotional expressions and reactions are a conventional way of voicing one's opinions in a certain culture, students' emotional involvement in discussions should not be banned simply because it does not fit the Eurocentric rationalist approach to critical literacy and pedagogy. It can be critically examined and modified though.

A critical course which does not encourage, first and foremost, a questioning approach to its own agenda and practice is bound to be defective, at best, and oppressive, at worst, despite the façade of advocacy of criticality and liberation. A pedagogy which is truly critical is one which genuinely and constantly questions its own credibility as well as contributions to the maintenance of the status quo. The steps suggested above have the potential to contribute to equity and human emancipation, but caution should be exercised in their implementation as misuse

could result in further power asymmetry and oppression. Whether these steps further democracy or oppression depends on if they are approached self-reflexively or monolithically. The moment the advocates of a pedagogical approach start to hubristically romanticize it is the moment they hit the self-destruct button. Let's keep questioning what we think, what we do, and how we question them.

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APPENDIX

A momentous arrest

Martin Luther King, Jr.

On December 1, 1955, an attractive Negro seamstress, Mrs Rosa Parks, boarded the Celeveland Avenue Bus in downtown Montgomery. She was returning home after her regular day's work in the Montgomery Fair-a leading department store. Tired from long hours on her feet, Mrs Parks sat down in the first seat behind the section reserved for whites. Not long after she took her seat, the bus operator ordered her, along with three other Negro passengers, to move back in order to accommodate boarding white passengers. By this time every seat in the bus was taken. This meant that if Mrs Parks followed the driver's command she would have to stand while a white male passenger, who had just boarded the bus, would sit. The other three Negro passengers immediately complied with the driver's request. But Mrs Parks quietly refused. The result was her arrest.