

EDUCATION FOR CONSCIENTIZATION: CULTIVATING A LOCAL ELT COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE THROUGH A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY PERSPECTIVE ON ACTION RESEARCH

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Abstract: *Although an ever-increasing amount of intercultural communication takes place in the cyberspace, local practice has not yet developed language teaching materials and methodologies geared towards preparing EFL learners to perform effectively in virtual intercultural encounters, where asymmetric relations of domination and subordination loom large. Empowering EFL learners and enabling them to assert more agency in intercultural communication in today's increasingly hyper connected world demands the involvement of EFL teachers in a coordinated reflexive practice centered on conscientization, a concept introduced by Freire (1970) to refer to a principled process for instilling critical awareness about social reality. To foster an English language teaching (ELT) community of practice which is more attuned to Algerian EFL learners' conscientization needs, the present conceptual article argues that action research should be assigned a pivotal role. It also contends that Critical Pedagogy—one of the four major perspectives on action research—possesses an enormous potential in the maintenance of such a community through inculcating the bottom-line critical attitude among its members. The paper closes with some suggestions for organizing and sustaining an ELT community of practice in the Algerian context.*

Keywords: English language teaching, conscientization, community of practice, Action research, Critical Pedagogy.

1. Introduction

Globalization, mass media, communication technology, and internationalization are some of the most important modern phenomena that have rendered a revamping of English teacher education in Algeria an urgent matter. While communication technologies have compensated to a large extent for the deficiency in exposure to the target language outside the classroom, these advantages have also brought about unprecedented challenges, thus imposing on EFL teachers' new social responsibilities. Given that the development of learners' intercultural competence is now largely accepted as being the more realistic aim of foreign language teaching (House, 2007; Holliday, 2005; Byram, 2008; Byram, 2009), more attention needs to be paid to the structure of intercultural communication in the cyber space. In Freire's (1970: 77) words, EFL teachers need to "understand the structural conditions in which the thought and language of ... [intercultural speakers] are dialectically framed" in the space in question. The uncontrolled flow of communication in the online digital space puts users in asymmetrical relationships that make them prone to the hegemony of the center cultures. One of the most destructive outcomes of this hegemony in the long run is casting doubt on the relevance of their cultural references, thus depriving the victims of having any common core values that would enable them to engage in any constructive dialogue or cooperation among themselves—a necessary preliminary step towards taking collective action to act upon their reality to improve it.

Consequently, in an era where constant contact with the other in the digital world has become prevalent, a shift towards adopting conscientization as the primary goal of education becomes vital. Conscientization construed as the process whereby "... learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1970: 35). It follows, then, that conscientization work should aim at equipping learners with critical thinking that would enable them to take a distance with what they encounter in the virtual space in such a way as to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the new communication technologies without falling prey to the risks of subordination and marginalization looming large in the virtual world. The fact that most of international communication is carried out in English puts an additional burden of responsibility on the shoulders of English language teachers who are expected to play avant-garde roles in assisting the new generations of EFL learners to assert more agency in intercultural exchanges in the cyberspace.

However, to live up to these unprecedented and considerably more demanding challenges, it is not sufficient to resort to hitherto customary response consisting of the adoption of a new methodology or teaching method. What is required at this juncture is rather a far more ambitious and thorough reform capable of mobilizing a collective, coordinated response among all ELT practitioners. This response should

be geared towards putting conscientization to practice. To accomplish this purpose, there is a need to embed English language teaching in a truly intercultural context aimed at allowing EFL learners to simulate the roles they are usually supposed to play in the online digital spaces and to gain an in-depth intercultural appreciation of the themes and topics that hold sway therein.

This is obviously a daunting task that requires allotting teachers a large margin of maneuver in designing and implementing an emergent curriculum, which is susceptible to be continuously updated and fine-tuned to the hot debates of the moment. To attain this goal, there is a need to foster ELT as a community of practice “the simplest social unit that has the characteristics of a social learning system” (Wenger, 2010: 1). For this community to teach for conscientization, it should first be responsible for its own learning through engaging in large scale action research. To ensure the sustenance of its reflexive practice, the community needs also to instill a deeply held critical attitude among its members. Hence, the need to adopt a critical pedagogy perspective on action research. Based on the above, the present paper seeks to answer the following question:

To what extent is the adoption of critical pedagogy perspective on action research amenable to the cultivation of an EFL teachers’ community of Practice capable of catering for an education for conscientization in the Algerian context?

2. Education for Conscientization

Simply put, conscientization is the process whereby achieve a subjective position in developing a deep critical awareness about their social reality and build self-confidence in reversing the socio-cultural status quo to their advantage (Freire, 1970). Day (2012: 103) defines conscientization in pithy terms as “...a primarily epistemological move from a naïve to a critical awareness of reality. It often begins in ontological disturbance...[a] cognitive dissonance when the perception of a fact, image, or interaction conflicts with one’s beliefs about reality.”

According to this view, then, conscientization is a series of sequenced steps, the first of which consists of destabilizing the innocent perception of reality to replace it with a more realistic one that takes into consideration the positive as well as the negative sides of experiences and phenomena around us. Articulating English language teaching around relevant cultural contrasts between the core values of the mother culture and those of the dominant cultures in the global village may prove to be an effective tool for causing “the ontological disturbance” necessary for triggering conscientization. Depicting the contrast between naïve and critical thinker, Freire (1970:73) points out that while the former is inclined to prioritize “...accommodation to...[the] normalized world today”, the latter prefers “...the continuing transformation of reality „thus leading to the “continuous humanization” of human kind.

In the Algerian context, two sources of predilection for mother tongues core values are Islam and national history—especially the war of liberation—given the crucial roles that these two elements played in the forging of Algerian identity. Aspects of social phenomena related to these values can be systematically compared to and contrasted with manifestations of the values of liberalism and mass consumption society which are the dominant values of the target language cultures. It is worth noting that, since the 1970s, there have been continuous attempts at integrating elements of the national culture in Algerian textbooks in tandem with aligning teaching methodology with the most recent international trends, but these attempts lacked a clear theoretical articulation as well as a research agenda aimed evaluating their true effects on the learners, especially from the perspective of conscientization. There may have been individual efforts at experimenting with the afore-mentioned elements in the classroom, but the effects of these salutary efforts remain insignificant unless they are performed within the realm of a community of practice. As Day (2012: 103) put it, “while this work can be engaged by individuals, communal engagement is both more effective and consistent with the development of ethical... communities. „Hence, it is important to research and teach conscientization within the framework of a community of practice.

3. Community of Practice

What, then, is a community of practice? The term “community of practice” was given by Lave and Wenger in 1991. For Wenger (2015), the term “communities of practice” refers to “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”. Wenger (2010: 1) defines more succinctly as “a social learning system”. The corner stone in building a community of practice, Wenger (2010: 2) adds, is the construction of a „history of learning” about its practice. Which is the *raison d’être* of such a community. To accumulate such a history, the members of a

community, according to Wenger (2010: 1) should engage in two forms of “meaning making”: different forms of participation and the production of physical and conceptual artifacts. Some of forms of the latter, according to him, are “words, tools, concepts, methods, stories, documents, links to resources, and other forms of reification. „Engagement in “meaning making” is beneficial both to the community and the individual participating in its activities. The participant, Wenger (2010: 2) further adds, does not only acquire a set of competences and skills, but more importantly asserts the identity of “a knower in a context where what it means to know is negotiated with respect to the regime of competence of a community.” Regarding the activities that are susceptible to improve the quality of practice, Wenger (2015) lists the following: problem solving, request for information, seeking experience, reusing assets, coordination and synergy, building an argument, growing confidence, discussing new developments, documenting projects, visits, identifying gaps in competence.

A community of practice, therefore, situates learning in a social context where participants learn; grow, and improve the quality of the service they offer to others as they go about practicing the activities related to their profession. The resulting learnedness is reified, recorded, and shared with all the members, thus guaranteeing the sustainability and flourishing of the community.

During over sixty years of independence, ELT practitioners in Algeria have cumulated a heritage of saviors and savoir-faire’s in the domain of foreign language teaching, yet a host of factors still stand in the way of synergizing their efforts in line with the defining features of a community of practice, the most important of which is the restricted space allotted for teachers’ research and the absence of institutional support for the organization and maintenance of an ELT community of practice.

As far is research on language teaching/learning is concerned, an ever-growing number of the new generations of teachers have been introduced to research methodology along with the standards for academic writing within the framework of master and doctoral dissertations. However, few of them if any do engage in research when start teaching. As for the research produced in academic settings, this type of research has generally no significant bearing on practice despite the fact that almost all dissertations comprise a pedagogical recommendations section intended for improving the quality of different aspects of teaching. A real solution to this anomalous situation consists of granting ELT teachers a larger autonomy in taking initiatives to improve the quality of their practice through the adoption and valorization of the results of an alternative type of research, namely action research.

4. The Role of Action Research in Cultivating a Community of Practice

Action research came into being as a reaction to discontent with the schism between the investigation and the corresponding action required to tackle social problems which characterize academic research, hence rendering it ineffective in addressing social problems (Burns, 2019). Hadley (2017: 3) attributes the gap between theory and practice to the flawed design of this type of research. According to him, “Researchers devise [...] studies that could be confirmed either by statistical analysis or by quasi-experimental of revered intellectuals in their discipline or academic community.” (Hadley, 2017: 3). This dysfunctional relationship between theory and practice holds also true for applied linguistic research where it has long been established that the results of academic research are not immediately applicable to language teaching classrooms: (Nunan, 1992)“. The question that raises is whether there another research alternative, which is more susceptible to improve the quality of English language teaching practice in the local context ?

Action research is a term that was proposed by Kurt Lewin (1890-1947), a social psychologist who realized that the group has a tremendous potential in changing the behavior of individual members and, hence, social change can be brought about more rapidly through active participation in social action. AR was introduced in the field of education in the first half of the last century to allow practitioners to investigate their problems by themselves as a result of dissatisfaction with the little impact that traditional scientific research does have on practice. Although AR has fallen of grace momentarily towards the end of the nineteen fifties as a result of some doubts about the validity and scientific rigor of its methodology, this type of research has been rehabilitated starting from the mid 1970’s the U.K and the U.S amid growing skepticism about the appropriateness and the applicability of the experimental method to teaching practice. Ever since, it has received worldwide a growing attention among practitioners who found in it a practical research procedure allowing them to take decisions while engaging in action.

Burns (in Cornwell, 1999: 5) defines AR as “a self-reflective, systematic and critical approach to enquiry by participants who are at the same time members of the research community. „According to Burns (2019: 168), AR consists of “cyclical phases of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting” and has two major aims: “to improve and to involve.” The former refers, according to (Burns, in Cornwell, 1999: 5), to “...bring[ing] about critically informed changes in practice.” As for the latter, it refers to involving

practitioners in all the phases of AR. In other words, AR strives both to refine the quality of practice and to solve the problem of discrepancy between theory and practice through involving teachers in the implementation and decision-making in all the cyclic phases of a piece of this type of research. Burns (1999) showcases the importance of collaboration in conducting AR to the emergence of a professional community. The same idea is echoed by Reason, P. & Bradbury (2008: 1) who do not consider AR as a methodology, but rather as “an orientation to inquiry that seeks to create participative communities of inquiry in which qualities of engagement, curiosity and question posing are brought to bear on significant practical issues”. The idea of professional community evoked here meshes with the concept of community of practice. AR, therefore, possesses a huge potential in boosting the capacity of a community of practice to acquire and sustain a “history of learning” of its own.

To ensure a gradual move from researching individual to collective practice, Reason and Bradbury (2008: 6) proposed a practical framework for organizing the variety of the available types of action research: first-, second-, and third-person research practice. According to them, first person research practice refers to initiatives taken by individuals to assess the effects of an action related to their practice on their social context. Regarding second-person action research/practice, it denotes the stage where more than one individual become involved in discussions over and evaluation of the impact of specific actions on the quality of their practice, thereby constituting the foundational act of a community of learning. Eventually, the restricted scope of the initially small scale and scattered case studies may be broadened to obtain a more significant and larger social impact. In this regard, Reason and Bradbury (2008, 6) point out that “third-person strategies aim to create a wider community of inquiry involving persons who, because they cannot be known to each other face-to-face (say, in a large, geographically dispersed corporation), have an impersonal quality. At this stage, establishing conventions for writing action research and sharing its results among the members of the community become primordial.

Action research, therefore, does not only fit to the concept of community of practice, but it also provides a practical tool for the creation and maintenance of its proper history of learning that grants a given community of practice autonomy and continuity. What renders this type of research more conducive to the aspired-for change—and work on conscientization is no exception—is the coordination large scale action taken at the level of the whole community rather than in the form isolated individual cases. Yet, the danger that the community falls into a state of lethargy after a period of intense action and engagement in the construction of its own history of learning looms large amid the prevalence of centralized policies, on one hand, and the abundance of language teaching resources in the online digital space, on the other. In the long run, the sustainability of the community’s action depends on inculcating a strong critical culture among its members. The choice of an approach to action research among the ones which exist and the literature should be contingent upon the potential of the approach in question in instilling the right critical attitude especially one the goal of education becomes that of conscientization. In this regard critical pedagogy holds a special promise.

5. A Critical Pedagogy Perspective on AR

Burrell and Morgan (cited in Doblec & Prud’Homme, 2003: 543) distinguished four approaches/paradigms which may guide the implementation of AR in the study of social phenomena: the functionalist paradigm, the interpretive paradigm, the radical humanist paradigm, the radical structuralist paradigm. Inspired by the ideas of the Frankfurt school (Bottomore, 2002), theorists located within the radical structuralist paradigm advocate social change through the emancipation of the subordinated members of human society. To expose the modes of domination and contradiction, the proponents of this paradigm have developed an approach—critical pedagogy—to teaching and AR geared towards empowering ELT teachers in the periphery and enabling them to end subordination to theories, curricula, and teaching materials which do not fit the needs of students in developing countries. This pedagogy of empowerment allots conscientization a centre stage in the teaching/learning process. More importantly, CP deploys a collection of pedagogic tools for accomplishing conscientization. These tools include codification, generative themes, problem-posing education, dialogical method, praxis, and humanization (Izadinia, 2009).

5.1. Codification

Codification consists of assigning a symbolic representation of a specific social phenomenon. Such a representation objectifies the observation of that phenomenon by dint of drawings, images, or any other art forms to spark a critical attitude among learners. The prevalence of online communication necessitates focusing classroom conscientization work on the symbolic representation of phenomena that carry weight

in the cyber space. Special attention should be paid to the striking similarities and differences between the mother and target cultures so as to bring about the needed disturbance of wrongly or superficially held beliefs about those phenomena. This selection should be pursued by systematic experimentation with the resulting representations to assess their true effects on the learners and the sharing of the results with the community.

5.2. Generative Themes

Ethnographic studies of the cyber space are the means whereby a community practice spots the contradictions and the problems in the target culture. These contradictions and problems serve as the basis for classroom debates. But, again, the validity of themes under discussion is to be determined through reflexive practice. By doing so, the community frees itself from potential hidden agendas comprised in language teaching materials produced abroad. Primordial to the success of generative themes in accomplishing the liberating agenda is associating learners in their selection (Freire, 1970). In this context, Freire (1970: 101-102) underlines the importance of embracing an “anthropological concept of culture” because it illuminates the roles of participants as “...transforming rather than adaptive beings.”

5.3. Problem-Posing Education

To foster a culture of debate around sensitive intercultural problems among the new generation of EFL learners forms the essence of conscientization. Such a culture empowers learners and arms them with the measures for resisting domination in intercultural encounters. The extent to which these debates achieve the goal they purport to reach should also be subjected to rigorous research grounded in practice.

5.4. Dialogical Method

Freire (1970:118) defines dialogue as “...the encounter among men to ‘name’ the world...a fundamental condition for their true humanization.” To endow learners with the ability to establish a link between what they learn in the classroom and the requirements of participation to improve their social conditions, CP proposes one and only one method: dialogue on equal basis between the teacher and learners in a way that allows learning to occur in both directions, i.e., the teacher learns from learners as much the latter learn from him. For conscientization on intercultural issues to succeed, the community of practice’s called upon to submit dialogic practice to rigorous scrutiny to ascertain that the expected outcomes are really achieved. Freire (1970:118) stresses that “dialogue... is neither a concession nor a gift, much less a tactic to be used for dissemination”.

5.5. Praxis

To resolve the problem of the much-criticized gap between theory and practice in academic research, praxis was proposed as a nexus between action and reflection. Instead of reducing the role of researchers to mere testers of the grand theories in the field, proponents of CP advocate the establishment of a symbiosis between theorizing and action through engaging teachers in a series of reflections and actions about their practice until a distinctive line of theorizing takes shape. In Freire’s (1970, 106) words, “...human activity consists of action and reflection...it cannot...be reduced to either verbalism or activism”. Large scale action research tackling context-sensitive aspects of practice paves the way in the course of time to the emergence of local theories of practice. According to Reason and Bradbury (2008: 4), such theories are susceptible to “...contribute to human emancipation, to the flourishing of community... can lead us to different ways of being together, as well as providing important guidance and inspiration for practice.” It is the emergence of these theories that would enable the community to make sense of its own history of learning, thus gaining greater autonomy and control in researching and improving its practice. The Bangalore project in India, the task-based approach, the genre-based approach, the Sydney schooling Australia, the Brazilian synthesis of genre-based approaches are few examples of theories in applied linguistics that stemmed from local practice and gained international influence.

5.6. Humanization

Marginalization and domination are forces that deprive the oppressed of their humanity. Conscientization is based on the belief that part and parcel of being human is to be free; liberty is not only a right but a natural inclination in every and each human being. To restore humanity to those who lost it is the perceived end goal of conscientization.

All in all, criticality in CP is the nexus of action and reflection. The thread of ideas and principles of CP provide the EFL community of practice with a systematic framework for engaging on large scale series of action and reflection on conscientization work revolving around relevant intercultural themes in the

online digital space. Ultimately, joint effort in taking actions and making sense of the obtained results increases in sophistication until they take the shape of fully-fledged theories, thus granting the community autonomy in appreciating and maintaining its history of learning.

6. Some implications for the Algerian EFL Context

Amid the revolutionizing developments in our increasingly connected world, English teachers as a foreign language are called upon to take charge of conscientization around intercultural themes in the online digital space. To rise to the occasion, Algerian EFL teachers need to organize themselves in a community of practice capable of securing its own history of learning. Action research is the most suitable instrument for endorsing this undertaking. Sustaining the all-important critical attitude among its members is contingent upon the adoption of a critical pedagogy perspective in the design and interpretation of the chosen type of research.

The foundation for the establishment of an EFL community of practice is its institutionalization, i.e., to find an institutional framework ready to provide it with full-scale support in terms of training, coordination, dissemination and theoretical articulation of its history of research. In Algeria, English language teacher training is provided by two types of higher education institutions: universities and teachers' training schools. Universities, however, are devoted to academic research and are, therefore, less likely to be favorable for catering for the needs of the fledgling EFL community of practice. In this vein, Reason and Bradbury (2008, 3) warn us that, "... the structure and ethos of universities often work against the processes of action research. So those who champion action research often need to build institutions to nurture and support themselves and the practice –coalitions..." On the other hand, Teachers' training schools are more practice-oriented and, hence, they constitute the ideal sites for supporting the community in question.

The starting point for implementing the suggested design is the principled introduction of AR in teachers' training school's curriculum and more specifically around the principles of CP to inculcate in future generations of teachers a theory-informed critical attitude. Such a critical attitude will serve as a strong impetus for them to bring their contribution to the ongoing intercultural conscientization enterprise. Would-be teachers should be trained as transformative intellectuals capable of putting an end to subordination to language teaching methodologies and materials developed in center countries.

Equally important, there is a necessity to recognize the status of AR in civil service law to allow in-service teachers and teacher trainers to get promotion and tenure on the bases of the implementation and the publication of the results of AR. In this vein, the recent decision made by the ministry of higher education to include the end term dissertation required in teachers' training school curricula in the assessment grids concerning its tenure truck procedures is a salutary step in the right direction. However, as Burns (2019) emphasizes, action research represents a new research genre. Accordingly, style sheets for reporting this type of research need to be developed and standardized in line with what is done around the world. Moreover, the organization of seminars, conferences, and the starting of specialized journals are crucial activities for the promotion of cooperation among ELF practitioners through the sharing and dissemination of practice and research on conscientization at the national level. Hosting the communities scientific events and publications by the same type of institutions-teachers' training schools in our case-constitute a further insurance for the success of these events and the maintenance of the community.

Last but not least, the production of a community is also contingent upon the ability of the latter to engage in a systematic elaboration of theories grounded in its practice. Seeking to develop theories grounded in the local practice does not mean shying away from embracing existing theories and paradigms in making sense of ongoing actions, or secluding the community away from other communities. Theories and paradigms that are not promoted as standard versions or recipes to be followed can serve as a platform for "...cultivating horizontal communities of practice among local practitioners' as an alternative to 'the vertical transmission of knowledge from north to south' (Wenger, 2010: 7). As far as this issue is concerned, Content-Based Instruction (Brinton, Snow, and Wesche, 2003) and the learning-oriented Assessment model (Purpura and Oh, 2024) are emerging models grounded in classroom practice; therefore, different aspects of these models can be subjected to experimentation to improve local practice.

Conclusion

A shift towards teaching for conscientization is necessary for empowering EFL learners in online intercultural communications. To effectively implement this shift, ELF teachers should organize themselves in a community of practice capable of producing a history of learning consisting of methodologies and materials along with /theories grounded in real problems of local practice. In this

regard, action research offers a plausible alternative. Moreover, the adoption of a critical pedagogy perspective on action research own the ability to instill a critical attitude among the community, thus ensuring its maintenance. As far as the Algerian context is concerned, the teachers' training schools represent the ideal host for the training, the promotion, the organization, and the coordination of the community's activities. Ultimately, the resulting history of learning will facilitate the generation of a national research agenda around conscientization work in intercultural online communication.

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