Paulo Freire's Philosophy on Contemporary Education

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Abstract

This paper offers a critical analysis of Paulo Freire's philosophy on contemporary education which implies his ideas on reforming education through applying a radical change in the aims of education, the relationship structure, methodology, the materials and assessment strategies. Paulo freire's ideas are very popular worldwide and have been used as guidelines for reforming educational programmes for many disciplines in many

contexts in North America, Latin America, Europe and recently in Asia and Africa. Freire believed that his pedagogy was conceived as significant as a utopian for the Third World and therefore it is worth considering for reforming higher education in Libya.

Friere used the term 'banking education' to criticize the traditional methods of education in which knowledge is transmitted from the teacher to the student through a pre-determined set of curriculum. He called for liberating the education system to offer students the opportunity to develop their ideas and realize their abilities as active subjects in changing the world around them. The most interesting argument of Freire is his belief about the possibility of joining freedom with responsibility and therefore he suggested seeking a balanced approach through which both could be accounted for when educational plans and programmes are designed.

The realization of Friere's ideas on education seems to be a very far reaching goal. Nevertheless, they offer a good model for reforming education especially if the particularities of the context of application are taken into consideration.

Introduction:

Paulo Freire was an influential philosopher and politician. His ideas on empowering and democratizing education were very far reaching. Freire's addressed the education system through proposing a methodology (Dialogical Problem- Posing); contrasted with the traditional authoritarian

approach (Banking Education). Torres (1993) pointed out the use of Freire's pedagogy in social studies, curriculum studies, adult education, secondary education, higher education, and educational planning. Although Freire's critical pedagogy (1970) originated in the Brazilian context, he claimed that it was conceived significant widely in the Third World as a 'utopian' pedagogy (Freire , 1985: 57). His ideas were later adapted in North America, Latin America and many parts of Europe. Worldwide educational programme innovations in literacy, English second language (ESL), peace education, health education, teenage school discipline, youth centres, adult education and community development were guided by Freire's ideas (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988, Macedo & Freire , 1998; Aronowita, 1993). Therefore; these ideas are worth considering for reforming higher education in Libya.

In most of his work, Freire argued for liberating the education system to allow students develop their ideas and realize their abilities as active subjects in changing the world around them. He criticized those who dominate in society and rejected the traditional methods of education (Banking Education) in which knowledge is 'gift-bestowed' by the teacher through a pre-determined set of curriculum. He described the national curriculum as a prescribed knowledge authorizing teachers to instruct and impose ideas on students (Freire , 1972).

Freire's philosophy of education is based on a critical and liberating dialogue between teacher and learner which encourages responsibility and

autonomy for both. This results in an appreciation of the dialectical nature of knowledge and thought as it leading to realize humanity. To achieve these objectives, Freire (1974) proposed a dialogic and problem-posing approach rejecting rote and mechanical learning and encouraging teachers and students to develop their critical thinking and enhancing self-confidence. In his words, it is "an active educational method whieh helps a person to become consciously aware of his context and his conditions as a human being a Subject, it will become an instrument of choice" (Freire , 1974: 56). Shor (1993) described Freire's student-centred dialogue approach as participatory, situated, critical, democratic, dialogic, dissocializing, multicultural, research-oriented, activist and affective.

Although Freire's educational revolutionary programme was developed in an earlier time and for another place, many significant lessons could be drawn from it to be applied today. His ideas about the 'progressive' teacher and problem-posing approach offer an alternative methodology for those contexts dominated by traditional approaches namely 'banking education'. As empowering students, accounting for their culture and context and engaging them actively in problem-posing dialogues to achieve their critical consciousness and to become autonomous learners are fundamental principles of Freire's approach, its implications in the field of language teaching (English) proved to be promising (Freire , 1992; Lee , 1998; Cotterall , 2000; Field , 2007).

Banking Education:

According to Freire (1974) banking education implies manipulating learners through forcing them to conform to the objectives of the dominant elite who do not wish to lose their power. By accepting their passive role in the learning process, learners encourage more manipulation to be practiced upon them. Lankshear (1993) described banking education as a means for maintaining an oppressive social order because the more students allow teachers to deposit information in their minds; the less they can attain the critical consciousness. Students who are taught through banking education are likely to internalize the same rigid patterns of relationship structure of paternal authority. This explains the prevalence of this model of education in many parts of the world.

Freire (1973) criticized the content of the traditional curriculum of banking education because it could never lead to developing students' critical consciousness. This is because it is not connected with students' lives, but focusing on teaching isolated words and lacking in concrete activity. He also criticized the external imposition of this curriculum on schools, proposing mutual participation between teachers and students as an alternative approach. To Freire, evaluation is an important part of the learning process. However, the assessment procedures of banking education which aim at silencing constructive diversity, constructive criticism, are manipulation tools used by teachers. Freire's rejection of these procedures was based on their subjective nature and thus, the

possibility of biased judgements. He suggested modifying these procedures to enable the critical teachers to assess students with a sense of serving freedom not of domestication (Freire, 1998: 104-125).

As top-down teaching, a representative of 'banking education', which indicates the absence of democratization still exists in many schools (e.g. Libya), serious and sincere effort with well-planned programmes are urgently needed to democratize these schools. Freire (1992) suggested steering schools towards democratization through introducing innovations into curriculum organization. These innovations should imply more human and democratic relationships between all parts involved in the learning process (teachers, students, administrators, parents, curriculum designers, policy-makers. As vertical patterns of relationship structures do not foster democratic educations, conditions for decision-making of a dialogic approach need to be established before introducing these innovations. One significant condition needed is changing the administrative structures of centralized power which currently exist. Freire's approach to change argues for the possibility of integrating both paternalistic cultural traditions and the new conditions of the transitions, as both are favourable to the development of democratic mentality.

If Libyan EFL teachers are truly interested in making their classes more democratic, more participatory, they need to respond to Freire's (1972) invitation to reject the banking concept of education and to replace it with 'dialogic problem-posing 'approach. Policy-makers and curriculum

designers are also invited to adapt Freire's ideas on curriculum (horizontal relationships, freedom, authority, culture, relevance, identity, motivation, self-esteem, self-confidence, responsibility, subjectivity, autonomy, prior knowledge, critical thinking, and communication) in making their decisions. A participatory problem-posing dialogue including teachers, students, parents, administrators and educational authorities can be useful for making decisions about these issues. The possibility of applying Freire's ideas on empowering education is worth investigating in the Libyan context.

Dialogic Problem-Posing Approach (a critical pedagogy to education):

Freire's methodology of teaching and learning describes the class is a meeting place where knowledge is sought, not transmitted. Freire (1974) argued for an educational approach which enables people to discuss and intervene courageously the problems of their context. It should enhance students' confidence and strength to address their own problems, instead of accepting solutions or decisions offered by others. The main principle of his approach is to present knowledge problematically in a problem-posing dialogue which offers more opportunities for students to participate actively and to reflect critically.

Freire's approach utilizes students' prior knowledge and daily life experiences to empower them to construct their own knowledge. Developing a participatory discourse of a critical language with the

language of possibility enables teachers and students realize that they can significantly contribute in changing their schools, lives and societies. This model of teaching would ensure students' active participation and would enable both teachers and students developing their critical attitude (Freire , 1974). Moreover, it stimulates students' creativity and triggers their curiosity which could be only triggered by an approach of questions, not of answers.

The best way to maintain reflective and meaningful communication inside classrooms is problematizing knowledge. Problematization is a dialectic process characterized by true and equal engagement of all participants. However, mutual respect and understanding, confidence, willingness to take risks, cooperation are essential conditions for the communication act to be successful (Freire , 1972).

Freire's methodology of teaching comprises three interrelated stages. In stage one 'generating themes', the teacher poses a problem derived from students' own context and encourages them to put forward their ideas freely. This is a continuous stage of listening as new ideas may emerge during the discussion. It is characterized by the equal opportunities for all participants to generate topics and themes as far as they are relevant and meaningful. The teacher's role in this stage is to encourage all the students to participate and, most importantly, to keep the discussion relevant. Through this stage, students' participatory, cooperative skills and their self-confidence could be enhanced. As organization is a main feature of the

dialogue, the issues emerged in stage one, are 'codified' in stage two. These 'codifications' represent familiar local situations and presented as challenges to be decoded by the group. Students are encouraged to reflect critically on these 'codes' depending on their prior experience and knowledge. Students' prior knowledge is used to enrich the discussion and as an instrument for acquiring new knowledge. Relating students' prior knowledge and experience with the new knowledge and experience is an essential technique in this stage. By critically reflect on their realities as presented in these codifications, students' critical awareness of problems existing in their context is enhanced. This awareness will lead the group to a more critical consciousness. When the stage of codification revealed the issues of the discussion, more discussions about their implications follow. By collaborating with their teacher, students can discover the dangers existing in their context in the 'decodification' stage. Then, all the possibilities of how these problems can be addressed will be put forward and the debate will be extended. The solutions proposed lead to more discussion and encouraged more criticism. (The more engaged with their context students are, the more increasing possibilities about achieving their critical consciousness they become). As they participate in all the stages (listening, 'codifying' and reflect critically, acting 'decodifying') of addressing their problems, students will feel empowered, and thus, become more responsible (Freire , 1974: 46-54).

In Freire's approach, the teacher is no longer an information giver, but a co-communicator actor with students in the dialogue. The teacher and students share the responsibility of managing and directing the learning process. The teacher should employ his/her authority to encourage students' participation, criticism and thinking, not to impose ideas upon them. As Freire (1970) put it, the teacher's authority in this process serves students' freedom, not against it .The role of the teacher in Freire's approach is important as it aims to make students autonomous learners. He should help students achieve their critical consciousness by engaging them in problem-posing dialogues.

However, teachers should be aware that only dialogue that requires critical thinking is capable of generating critical thinking .To Freire (1985:89) 'conscientization' is a basic dimension of reflective action which should "continue whenever and wherever the transformed reality assumes a new face". They should be aware also that the dialogue is not to invade, or to manipulate, but to exchange thoughts with students on equal rights of accepting, criticizing or rejecting all or some of these ideas. Teachers also need to be aware of the characteristics of critically transitive consciousness as described by Freire (1973):

- depth in the interpretation of the problems;
- substitution of casual principles for magical explanations;
- testing of one's findings by openness to revision;

- avoiding distortion when perceived problems and pre-conceived notions when analyzing them;
- refusing to transfer responsibility;
- rejecting passive positions;
- soundness of argumentation;
- practicing dialogues rather than polemics;
- the receptivity to the new for reason beyond mere novelty and by the good sense not to reject the old only because it is old;
- and accepting what is valid in both old and new (Freire ,1973: 18).

Another interesting argument is Freire's rejection of 'assistencialism' as an approach for teaching and learning because it does not lead to produce critical learners. Some teachers believe that by implementing banking education they assist students through offering them a packed content of knowledge to repeat and memorize. This is a false belief because this assistance will definitely lead to disempowering students and increasing their passivity. Freire believed that 'assistencialism' is based on more paternalism dependency. By adapting this approach, teachers lead students to adapt to what they want them to adapt, but never to encourage them to think or criticize. "…assistencialism is both an effect and a cause of massification..., it offers no responsibility, no opportunities for making decisions, but only gesture attitudes which encourage passivity,...it never leads to democratic destination" (Freire ,1973: 15/16). This approach of teaching will not help students acquire their critical consciousness, but will

lead them to adaptation or manipulation by contrasting between the integrated and the adaptive person through considering the former a person as a 'subject', and the latter is a person as an 'object'.

Research on Freire's approach of problem-posing has revealed interesting findings (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988; Schleppegrell & Bowman 1995; Maddox & Solorzano , 2002; Rossatto , 2002; Mooney & Nolan).

Generally, the findings of this research indicated that the problem-posing approach had useful implications on teaching and curriculum development. It can enhance changes in personal growth, social support, community organizing, policy and environmental changes and increases control over one's life in society. This approach is a useful tool for helping students and teachers to name and reflect on the societal and systematic problems and their effect on their learning process to find solutions for these problems. Rossatto (2002) reported the successful implementation of three learning programme initiatives in Brazil (Sao Paulo Interdisciplinary School Reform, Project Axe-A Street Children Schooling, City of Porto Alegre Participative Citizenship) based on Freire's pedagogy.

However, teaching through a dialogic problem-posing approach may represent a threat to traditional teachers who internalize the misconception of themselves as the only possessors of wisdom and knowledge. The tendency of students' memorization of their lessons is a common practice in banking education. He described those teachers whose teaching

approach depends on memorization as 'anti-dialogical' (Freire , 1985: 55). Overcoming the vertical patterns of banking education is a pr-requisite for problem-posing approach to get its way into schools, and then to fulfil its function of the practice of freedom. As these practices and patterns have been in effect for long time, eliminating them from schools is very difficult.

Nevertheless, there is hope that schools can become more democratic. However, hope alone is not enough. We should not surrender, but attempt with hope until we succeed. Freire (1997:106) insisted that "it is imperative that we maintain hope even when the harshness of reality may suggest the opposite. Increasing respect for teachers through significant improvement of their salaries, through continual development, and through reforming of teaching preparation programmes as an urgent step on the way toward improving their performance.

The most interesting argument of Freire, is his addressing of the tension between freedom and authority and his argument for seeking a balanced approach through which both could be respected. On one hand, Freire perceived "education as the practice of freedom" (Freire, 1974; 147). On the other, he emphasized the necessity of establishing limits to this freedom. He claimed the possibility of joining freedom with authority because separating them leads to the infraction of one or the other. He argued "it is not possible to have authority without freedom and vice versa" (Freire , 1998:99).

However, Freire (1998) pointed out the challenge that democratic teachers need to encounter in transmitting a sense of limit that could be ethically integrated by freedom itself. He did not reject the authority of the teacher but rejected the authoritarian model of teaching. He argued that '''there are moments in which the teacher , as authority, talks to the learners, says what must be done, establishes limits without which the very freedom of learners is lost in lawlessness" (Freire , 1998:63) This should be done in a humble way to admit that students could doubt or reject them.

The above argument defends the claim of some teachers who justify their tendency to implement authoritarian methods because of the need for authority to maintain discipline in classrooms. Freire (1998) argued that neither classes characterized by authoritarianism, nor those of unbridled freedom could maintain discipline. Discipline could be realized only in those classes or practices in which freedom and authority are found together. He explained that this is because the harmony between freedom and authority necessitates discipline. In his dialogical theory, Freire (1970:159-160) affirms the significance of organization and authority to keep classes neither authoritarian nor licentious. Organization is a highly educational process in which leaders and people together experience true authority and freedom. Both teachers and students should work together to maintain organization and discipline during the learning process.

Another aspect of Freire's balanced approach is his acceptance of the role in which teachers offer knowledge to students through explanation in

an 'expository lesson'. However, he criticized the expository lesson which is vertical in nature with a teacher in a sprit of authoritarianism . Teachers can explain during the lesson, but not with the belief that they know everything and their students know nothing.

Freire (1998) addressed the misconception of some teachers of democratic teaching as a free practice in which the respect of their professional position might be lost. He stressed that the professional position of the teacher is highly respected in his approach because without his/her democratic intervention there would be no progressive education. He believed that teachers and students are not identical in any dialogue, as "dialogue between teachers and students does not place them on the same footing professionally" (Freire, 1992: 116-117). By being more democratic, teachers will enjoy more respect and appreciation. Democratic relationships between teachers and students are fundamentals in democratic education. However, these relationships should be based on mutual respect and understanding.

Introducing democratic education into schools requires internalizing conceptions of openness, confidence, trustfulness, cooperation, willingness, but true responsibility stands prior to these conceptions. Teachers and students need to be very serious about the implementation of democratic education. Teachers should keep on updating their knowledge, as new issues expected to be arise during dialogues. This means that it is not enough for the teacher to be professional in his/her subject only, other skills

are now essential to conduct democratic classes effectively. Therefore, teachers practice should be evaluated to ensure realizing learning objective. Students who used to be passive recipients of knowledge are now supposed to be active participants in their learning process. They need to provide meaningful contributions, reflect critically on learning issues and be responsible for their decisions. Freire (1992) stressed that democratic education does not mean that the act of teaching, learning and studying is pure entertainment and permissiveness. It is meaningful, hard and demanding, but still a pleasant task. Freire claimed that the separation between serious teaching and the expression of feeling is a false conception and argued for the possibility of teachers' managing of lessons seriously in a joyful atmosphere. Freire (1985:2) defined the act of studying as "a difficult task that requires a systematic critical attitude and intellectual discipline acquired only through practice.

Implementing Freire's balanced approach in education seems interesting and practical. However, the difficulty of integrating freedom and authority on honest ethical standards is still problematic. For example, the extent of limitation to be practiced on freedom is still not clear. Others might argue that once freedom is limited, it becomes meaningless. Another issue is the tendency of those in power obtained from their authority to dominate others. Such a tendency might lead students, if given the authority , to violate school regulations which are necessary for

organization and discipline as a practice of freedom. Teachers also may not accept handing over the authority they used to enjoy easily.

Despite the belief in the practicality of Freire's approach for teaching and learning, clear understanding of the concept of 'democratic education' need to be conceptualized by all involved in the learning process to ensure correct and effective implementation of this approach. Conceptions of freedom and authority need to be clearly understood in terms of their relation with learner's autonomy.

As our schools can be either places for humanizing or dehumanizing students, places for either liberating or dominating students, let us all work together to make schools places for democracy, freedom and authority. Let us all seek an educational approach which generates active, critical and responsible citizens who believe in their capacities to consciously participate in introducing changes into their societies and in learning independently.

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