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# **Introducing Critical Pedagogy to English Language Teachers at Tertiary Education in Oman: Definitions and Attitudes**

Thuraya Al Riyami  
Ibra College of Technology  
Salah Troudi  
Graduate School of Education, University of Exeter

## **Abstract**

Based on critical theory, the aim of this study is to introduce critical pedagogy (CP) to English language teachers in four higher education institutions in Oman via an action research methodology. Eventually, the ultimate purpose of this study is to create a change by raising teachers' awareness of CP. Although CP cannot be reduced to a monolithic body of discourse, through a review of literature, unified principles have been put forward by various critical educators that shape this study: (1) the political nature of education, (2) the nature of knowledge, (3) education for empowerment, (4) education for transformation, (5) integrating the world into the classroom, and (6) the meaning of 'critical' within CP framework. The interventions of this study are an article which is sent to teachers and a workshop on CP which is conducted for 160 English language teachers in the four colleges. The study implements semi-structured interviews with 15 teachers to elicit how teachers define CP and what are their attitudes towards it. The findings reveal that teachers define CP in different ways and they have various attitudes towards applying CP, ranging from caution to full support. Some teachers resist some of CP's premises while others are in-between. These findings are discussed in light of the existing literature and the Omani context. Implications for teachers, teacher education programmes and policy makers are drawn based on the study's findings.

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Keywords: Critical pedagogy, English language teaching, power, ideologies, attitudes

### **1. Nature of the problem/ issue**

In recent decades, the Higher Education (HE) system in Oman has achieved substantial growth in the number of institutions, students, teachers and specializations. Every year hundreds of Omani students join HE institutions to continue their first degrees where English is used as a medium of instruction (EMI). These students aim to develop their English because it is considered the gatekeeper to technology, jobs and modernity (Al-Jadidi, 2009; Al-Jardani, 2011; Al-Issa, 2014). However, as in other Arab countries, there is a lively discussion about the quality of graduates of these HE institutions including their proficiency in English (Mahmoud & Al-Mahrooqi, 2012; Tanveer, 2013; Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2014; Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2016). This could be attributed to the fact that education in general, and English Language Teaching (ELT) in particular, are centred around passive learners, authoritative teachers, centralized systems, ready-made materials that do not correspond to students' needs or cultures, and tests that require mostly memorization. Al-Issa and Al Bulushi (2012) asserted that "students exiting ELT system in Oman suffer from various inadequacies in their English language proficiency, which has had negative implications for Oman's national development" (p.141).

Thus, there is a pressing need to revolutionize the ELT system in Oman in order to overcome the challenges facing the country including globalization and the advance of knowledge and technology (Al Nabhani, 2007) where English is used as the main global language. Moody (2012) argues that this status of English calls for changes in approach, methodology, curriculum and overall perceptions. In addition, Al-Issa

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(2007) asserts that "times have changed and so have the reasons and purposes for learning English and the way through which it is learnt" (p.213).

Adding to this, there has recently been a growing interest in viewing the learning of English as a complex sociopolitical process which cannot be achieved through the mainstream teaching methodologies in which the student's role is marginal and the teachers are consumers of Anglo-American materials (Norton & Toohey, 2004; Kumaravadivelu, 2011). Thus, Critical Pedagogy (CP) has been viewed as one of the alternative pedagogies capable of meeting the demands of the complexity of teaching English within its sociopolitical context (Canagarajah, 1999; Norton, 2000; Penneycook, 2001; Norton & Toheey, 2004; Akbari, 2008). Although CP is not an easy philosophy to define, it is mainly

"a perspective on teaching, learning, and curriculum that does not take for granted the status quo, but subjects it to critique creates alternative forms of practice, and does so on the basis of radical theories of language, the individual, and society that take seriously our hopes for improvement in the direction of goals such as liberty, equity, and justice for all."

(Crookes, 2013, p.1)

In light of the above issues, there is a pressing need to seek new ways of conducting ELT in which the social and political issues affecting students are taken into consideration; where Anglo-American textbooks, materials and methods are problematized; and where teachers' and students' voices are heard and given legitimacy. The top-down approach to ELT cannot last forever. This study does not claim that implementing CP can solve all the problems of the ELT system in Oman, but it does provide a window on to what critical teaching is all about and on to the possibility of critical reflection, thoughtful questioning and creative action. Thus, the aim of this study is to introduce CP to ELT teachers at territory level in Oman

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because teachers are "the ultimate key to educational change and school improvement" (Hargreaves, 1994, p.ix).

## **2. Critical agenda**

The critical agenda of this study can be summarized in the following points:

- Rejecting the idea of the banking model and teaching for the test and believing that "what happens in the classroom should end up making a difference outside the classroom" (Baynham, 2012, p. 28).
- Rejecting the idea that ELT teachers are skilful technicians whose role is to explain a grammatical rule or teach a reading passage, and who are told what to teach and how.
- Raising ELT teachers' awareness of their role as intellectual transformative agents who are able to empower their students by questioning the assumptions and materials governing ELT, including themes from the wider society, in their classes, incorporating topics from students' day-to-day lives to enable them to think about their situation and explore possibilities for change.

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

This study is based on Freirean Critical Pedagogy (CP) (1973). CP is primarily concerned with challenging individuals to investigate, understand and intervene in order to ameliorate their life. CP is not a method, rather it is "an attitude to language teaching which relates the classroom context to the wider social context and aims at social transformation through education" (Akbari, 2008, p. 276). Freire (2000), based on critical theory, develops his influential book "*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*" where he calls for emancipatory and liberatory education. He criticizes "banking model" in which

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education is an act of depositing, where by students are depositories and the teacher is a clerk with good attention. The educational process is seen as an authoritarian transfer instead of a democratic experience (Shor, 1993). The banking model dehumanises learners and perceives them as objects in the classroom. Thus, Freire puts forward problem-posing education as a way to empower learners, since it involves "a constant unveiling of reality" (Freire, 2003, p.64). This can be achieved by presenting knowledge as problematic, whereby teachers negotiate with students about the problem through five essential stages (Izadinia, 2009, p.13):

1. Describing the content: the teacher presents the students with a code which can be a word, a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph or a picture, a drawing or a video clip. The teachers ask the students to describe the code.
2. Defining the problem: the students uncover the problem or the issue.
3. Personalising the problem: the teacher asks the students about their feelings so they can relate the problem to their personal life.
4. Discussing the problem: the teacher leads the discussion and encourage students to think of the social and economic reasons for the problem.
5. Discussing alternatives to the problem: the students think about solutions to the problem.

The problem posing model helps students to reflect on the proposed problem and create their knowledge about it, which leads to empowerment since this method gives them a voice that can be heard by their teachers and their peers in the classroom. Students are subjects who, with help from their teachers, develop "their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves" (Freire, 2003, p.65). This problem posing models enables teachers to generate their syllabus based on students' experiences and concerns, engage in dialogue with their students and raise their consciousness of the social and economic ideologies surrounding their communities. This means students are empowered when education is used as a means to attain personal growth through "developing strong skills, academic knowledge, habits of inquiry, and critical curiosity about society, power, inequality, and change" (Shor, 1993, p. 15).

CP is also a moving to address "the marginalization and exclusion of schooling by encouraging students to develop their own voice" (Pennycook, 2001, p.130). Voice refers to "a broader understanding of developing possibilities to articulate alternative realities" (ibid., p.130). This can be done through promoting and practising dialogue, problem

posing, shared decision-making, valuing students' previous experiences and their ways of knowing (Freire, 2000; Breunigm, 2011). Within CP, any educational institution should be "a place where teaching is not reduced to learning how either to master tests or to acquire low-level jobs skills, but a safe space where reason, understanding, dialogue, and critical engagement are available to all faculties and students" (Giroux & Giroux, 2006, p.30).

### **3.1 CP in ELT**

Recently, ELT has moved from technical approaches to more critical work, where it is essential to teach students how to be aware of the world in conjunction with teaching them how to communicate in English successfully. This is to say that criticality in ELT does not only involve thinking about theories and assumptions; rather, it should address change, resistance and alternatives (Pennycook, 2001). This means, in a simple way, "to use English as a weapon for social transformation"(Kubota, 1998, p. 304). Such a critical turn in TESOL has resulted in the appearance of CP as one of the alternatives to mainstream methods.

CP has increasingly been implemented in ELT in different parts of the world. For example, Fredricks (2007) underscores how critical pedagogy was implemented in an EFL reading program in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. He concluded that CP allowed EFL students and teachers to explore issues of power through dynamic student-led discussions about cultural and political issues that they encountered in readings as reflections of their lives. Fredricks' study is quite relevant to this study since it highlighted that although EFL instructors may know little about their students' cultures, they can still create a dynamic learning environment using culturally relevant pedagogy as a bidirectional tool in which both the teacher and students gain cultural insight through discussions of texts. Similarly, Derince (2011) studies the effectiveness of applying CP in a Turkish EFL classroom which was test oriented. She concluded that through interaction that addressed social and political issues related to local concerns she and her students were involved in real learning and teaching experience. Through such discussion, her students were able to develop their English proficiency and to question the power and ideology that govern Turkish schools and society in general. However, she stressed the importance of the teachers' readiness to implement CP since it requires the teachers to work hard taking extensive time to work collaboratively with their students to challenge the hidden curriculum of

education with its wider power relations where it influences teachers, students, individuals and communities. The two previous studies are important in relation to this study because they emphasize the role of the teachers in the success of CP, including their willingness to implement it although they know little about their students' cultures. Teachers who follow CP should view themselves as agents of social change (Breunigm, 2009). Therefore, they are required to have certain characteristics that ease their path to play such a role, including compassion, patience, respect, impartiality, care and dedication.

In addition, Chi (2011) details how CP can work in Taiwanese EFL writing classrooms at university level starting from negotiating the topics for writing assignments, limiting the teacher's power through giving a voice to the students and problematizing the issues that are taken for granted in the educational system in Taiwan. However, he stresses the importance of minimizing the grade threat in order for the CP to be successful and for education as a transformative process to be achieved. He highlighted that although teachers tried to minimize their power and authority, the moment teachers started assessing students and giving them grades was the moment when the teachers' power came to the forefront, which creates a paradox for teachers who want to implement CP.

Despite the challenges that teachers may face when implementing CP, most of these study findings suggest a promising future for using CP in EFL/ESL classrooms. However, what will happen when teachers practise CP in other countries, especially in Gulf countries including Oman, remains unknown. This study aims to address this research gap by exploring the potential and challenges of integrating CP into the territory of EFL classes in Oman from the perspective of teachers. I decided to examine teachers' perception because any reform of the educational system depends on the teachers' willingness to apply it (Al-Lamki, 2009).

### **3.2 Teachers' perceptions and beliefs as a crucial element for any reform in educational system.**

It is needless to say that the way teachers perceive the importance of implementing a new teaching method will to a large extent determine the level and degree of its usages. According to Al-Nadabi (2003, p.12) , “ teachers are viewed as important agents of change in the reform currently under way in education and are expected to play a key role in changing educational patterns and practices” (p.12). In addition, it is

found that teachers' perceptions and beliefs play a major role in accepting new approaches and proposed changes. Thus, such perception needs to uncover for development and change can occur (Al-Lamki, 2009). Consequently, it is vital to understand teachers' beliefs about CP because such perceptions will affect their willingness to implement it or not, especially that teachers bring to the classroom their own agendas, experiences, beliefs and hidden curricular (Al-Issa, 2015).

There have been many studies that investigated EFL teachers' perceptions of CP. For instance, Aliakbari and Allahmoradi (2012) surveyed Iranian school teachers' perceptions concerning CP using a questionnaire. The results indicate that teachers had full agreement and approval of CP; however, centralized top-down educational management in Iranian schools is considered a major challenge for teachers to put the principles of CP into practice. Norooziasiam and Soozandehfar (2011) surveyed EFL teachers' perception of CP in three institutes in Iran through observation and semi-structured interview. The results showed that teachers believe that teaching English should go beyond words and texts and learners should question the discourse, ideas, words and their implications. However, there are many challenges that face teachers while implementing it which are centred around the lack of the necessary resources to update curricula or materials to better match learners' needs, interests and experiences. Cox and Assis-Peterson (1999) examined 40 Brazilian EFL teachers' awareness and attitudes towards CP. The results showed that Brazilians EFL teachers were unaware of it. The authors suggested that for CP to find its way in the Brazilian education the EFL teachers need to question the ready-made packets of principles, methods and materials in teaching English and they should stop emphasizing only linguistic competence while teaching English.

From the above, CP can be implemented in EFL classes and teachers have crucial role in establishing such an approach towards teaching English. Thus, the aim of this study is to introduce CP to EFL teachers in my college and examine how they feel about it. However, it is worth mentioning that from the above studies that CP is not easy to implement and teachers may face a lot of challenges that should be highlighted, especially "dialogues about the difficulties in practicing and implementing critical pedagogy strategies in everyday classroom life are less common" (Fobes & Kaufman, 2008, p.26). However, Freirean pedagogy, in essence, is "pedagogy of hope" (Freire, 2000) and without hope, education will not make much sense at all. Thus, this

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study is also looking at the potentialities of implementing CP in teaching English in ELC.

## **1. Research design**

### **4.1 Research methodology and methods**

This study adapts Action Research (AR) as its methodology. AR has a long history in educational research that makes it hard to pin down its meaning. However, since its emergence, AR has been always associated with "promoting positive social change" (Lewin, 1946, cited in Noffke, 1997, p.311). It starts from the assumptions that reality is produced by human beings and they are themselves able to change it through their realization of problematic issues and taking action towards improving them. Reviewing the literature, there are three types of AR that serve different interests: technical, practical and critical or emancipatory (Punch, 2014; Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2013). This study espouses the critical vision of AR, which sees it as "a social practice – a special kind of social practice that aims at transforming other social practices" (ibid, 2013, p.27). Thus, this study sees AR as part of a broader agenda where raising teachers' awareness of their role as intellectual transformatives and resisting the technicality in their profession can change the ELT realm at tertiary level, which could promote positive changes in schools, education and society in general.

The study utilized Interviews as its data collection methods. Interviews are considered to be one of the powerful data collection tools. This is because they "give voice to common people, allowing them to freely present their life situations in their own words, and open for a close personal interaction between the researchers and their subjects" (Kvale, 2006, p.481). In this study, interviews were used to trace teachers' perspectives of CP after the intervention and tackle how they defined it. In

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this study, interviewing is seen as "not simply concerned with collecting data about life: it is part of life itself, its human embeddedness is inescapable" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 409). In other words, the interview has been seen as a social endeavour, not merely a data collection tool. Therefore, a decision was made to use a semi-structured interview approach because of its advantages in terms of giving the interviewees a degree of power and control over the course of the interview and giving the interviewer a great deal of flexibility (Bernard & Ryan, 2010).

#### **4.2 Research questions**

1. How do teachers define critical pedagogy?
2. What are ELT teachers' attitudes towards Critical Pedagogy?

#### **4.3 The study interventions**

In order to introduce CP to ELT teachers in the four institutions, two main interventions were used. First, sending an article entitled ***Transforming lives: introducing critical pedagogy into ELT classrooms*** by Akbari (2008) via email to ELT teachers in the four institutions before conducting the workshop. We chose this article because it has sufficient background about CP and includes some practical examples of how to implement it in the classroom. It is also short (only eight pages) to encourage teachers to read it and think about its applicability in their contexts. In addition, the article was written by an Iranian scholar which sends a message to teachers that CP is not only about Anglo-Saxon countries, rather a neighboring country like Iran has encouraged it in their ELT setting.

Second, conducting a two hour workshop for 160 teachers. The workshop included 8 tasks, as shown in Table 1.

Task		Aim
1	Introduction	Talk about the factors that shape learning experience and show participants that the teacher plays a great role in shaping students' learning experience
2	Types of Pedagogy	Introduce models of pedagogy (Transmission, Generative, Transformative) and relate them to the participants' context
3	Introducing Critical Pedagogy	Understand the meaning of critical pedagogy
4	Introducing the banking model and the problem posing model	Differentiate between the Banking Model and the problem posing model
5	Examining ELT textbooks used in their context	To raise ELT teachers' awareness of the ideologies presented in ELT textbooks; realise the importance of implementing aspects of critical pedagogy in the ELT realm
6	Critical Pedagogy in practice	Give teachers examples of how to put critical pedagogy into practice
7	Classroom Scenarios	Determine the level of criticality in the given classroom scenarios
8	Comments and feedback	Complete the workshop evaluation forms

Table 1: Workshop Tasks

#### 4.5 Interview participants

20 teachers were interviewed based on their willingness to participate in the study. Those teachers' age ranged from 33 to 62 years old. Their nationalities included eight Omani, three Indians, two Filipinos, one Armenian, and one Pakistani. The information about each participant is summarized in Table 2.

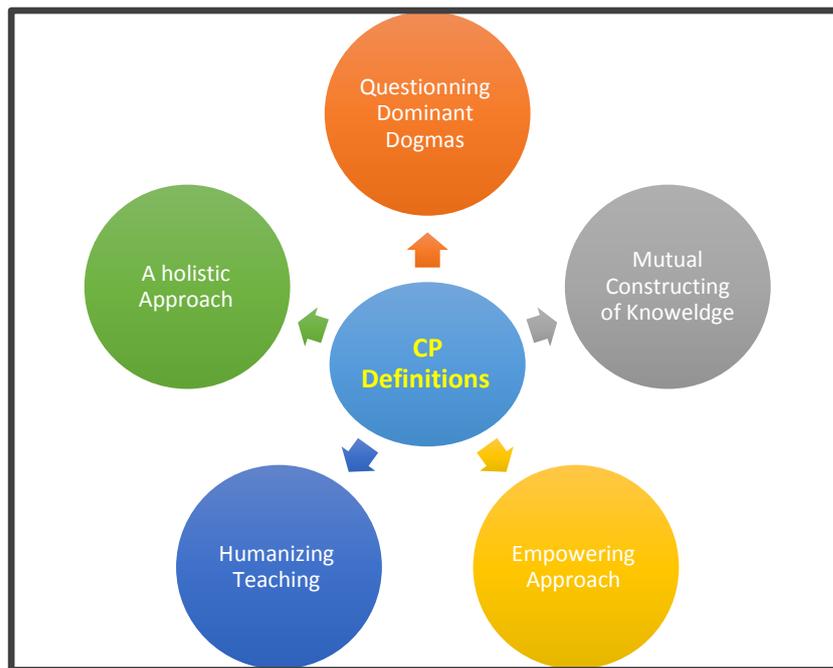
pseudonyms	Gender	Nationality	Qualification	Years of Experience in the ELT	Years of Experience in the college
Joseph	M	Indian	PhD in Applied linguistics	25 years	17 years
Nasra	F	Omani	MA in TESOL	5 years	5 years
Fatma	F	Omani	MA in TESOL	2 years	2 years
Don	M	Filipino	MA in Applied linguistics	6 years	1 year
Ahmed	M	Omani	MA in TESOL	15 years	3 years
Linda	F	Indian	PhD in TESOL	16 years	1 year
Saif	M	Omani	MA in TESOL	6 years	2 years
Jack	M	Filipino	PhD in Educational management	10 years	1 year
Sofia	F	Armenian	PhD in Applied linguistics	28 years	1 year
Amal	F	Omani	MA in TESOL	6 years	2 years
Emran	M	Pakistani	MA in English literature	20 years	3 years
Nasser	M	Omani	MA in TESOL	8 years	2 years
Sara	F	Indian	MA in TESOL	13 years	6 years
Azza	F	Omani	MA in TESOL	6 years	4 years
Aysha	F	Omani	MA in TESOL	11 years	9 years

Table 2: Interview participants

## 2. Findings and discussion

### 5.1 How do teachers define CP?

Teachers came up with different definitions as shown in Figure 1



*Figure 2 definitions in teachers' own words*

### **5.1.1 Questioning dominant dogmas**

Teachers associated the meaning of CP with the ability to question and reflect. They defined CP as an approach that enables both students and teachers to question the common ideologies around them. First, teachers thought that CP assisted students to question what was going around them, so that they could think differently about things. For instance, Don, during his interview, said that CP served "*to encourage learners to become critical individuals and take active parts in the debated issues in and outside Oman*". This corresponds to Grioux (2011), who maintained that part of CP is concerned with addressing problematic issues in society inside the classroom and scaffolding students to form their own understandings. What is more, the teachers underscored that this ability to question and reflect necessitated giving students the opportunity or 'space' to rethink about themselves and their societies, which was currently unavailable to them due to the hegemony of the banking model. This resulted in full power being in the teachers' hands, while students were totally passive. Amal explained:

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*"Critical pedagogy [CP] for me is to give our students space to think and question things around them and even to be by themselves in the classroom. Unfortunately, what we are doing here is the teacher-centred approach; we are trying to control everything. We do not give students a chance."*

Other teachers associated the meaning of CP with the teachers questioning their teaching. In other words, CP is about moving from a level where the teachers' teaching may be guided largely by routine to a level where their teaching is guided by interrogation and reflection. This is to say that the role of the teacher should be that of a transformative intellectual (Giroux, 2007; Kincheloe, 2008) who can analyze and problematize their teaching rather than technicians or materials implementers who approach their teaching blindly and technically. For instance, Aysha said CP is "a *reflective approach which helps teachers to learn better ways of teaching*" Similarly, Saif emphasized that CP is about pushing teachers to critically examine their performance, think about ideas to enhance their students' learning and create change in their lives. Saif summarized his understanding of CP by stating:

*"It is about questioning our teaching. It is not a matter of teaching level after level but instead it is about questioning ourselves about how much our students can learn from the opportunity they are given here in the college. By learning I mean affecting them in one way or another by making a change in their life."*

### **5.1.2 Mutual construction of knowledge**

Like the teachers in Ruiz and Fernández-Balboa's study (2005), teachers in the current study viewed CP as a way in which students and teachers equally construct the knowledge addressed in the ELT classroom. In other words, CP rejects the teacher/student dichotomy where teachers know everything and students know nothing, as in the traditional methods that render students passive (Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011). Rather, CP views both students and teachers as lifelong learners who construct knowledge together. Sara underscored that CP is about:

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*"giv[ing] students and teachers an opportunity to construct knowledge in the classroom. Teachers are no longer the sole authority inside the classroom. Students are not blank tablets who need to be fed with information, as it is readily available everywhere."*

### **5.1.3 Empowering approach**

The third definition of CP provided by teachers in this study is that it empowers learners to think critically in order to improve their lives. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2007) underscore that CP is meant to empower individuals to play their role as agents of social change. Similarly, Jack in this study believed that "*CP empowers my students, so they can participate in building a better tomorrow*". This can be done via raising their awareness of what is going on around them locally and globally, as teachers maintained in various data tools. For instance, the majority of the teachers interviewed mentioned that, in order to empower learners, the content of the textbooks should reflect the students' communities and concerns. This is in tune with Akbari (2008) and Chandella (2011), who stated that localizing the ELT materials enables learners to ponder about the society where they live and think about ways to change it. This is because addressing local concerns makes learners feel connected to what they learn. In addition, students would be able to use their schematic knowledge to learn the language. It would thus be easier for the students to comprehend and understand the issues discussed and teachers would be enabled to discuss them in depth. The following extract from Linda's interview demonstrates this:

*"In order to empower our learners, it is necessary to base our teaching on students' background, so it becomes easier for the students to personalize, comprehend, and digest."*

In addition, the teachers in this study attributed the meaning of CP to empowering students through raising their awareness of the global issues around them. They

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underscored the necessity of raising students' awareness of what was going on around them in order to empower them. For example, Joseph defined CP as a way of:

*"Empowering students by using English classes as a springboard in introducing the social issues faced by a particular group of people, so learners can become aware of the world and their social responsibility."*

#### **5.1.4 Humanizing teaching**

The fourth definition of CP provided by participants was of CP as a humanizing approach which encourages teachers to look at students as people who have their own opinions, values and interests. This is in line with how teachers in Sadeghi and Ketabi's study (2009) viewed CP as a way to respect learners' opinions and thoughts. For instance, Linda, in the interview, stated that CP:

*"is a matter of opening up the person and looking at students as subjects, as people, not objects, loaded with a lot of information. They are not washing machines, they are people with their interests, values and priorities."*

#### **5.1.5 A holistic approach**

Some teachers mentioned that CP for them was a holistic approach. Within these responses, teachers emphasized that, unlike other approaches, CP does not consist of steps to do things inside the classroom. Rather, it is a way of looking at teaching as consisting of intimately interconnected aspects related to how to teach and deal with students which lead to development in students' lives. This definition is exemplified by Crookes and Lehner's ways of looking at CP not as a pedagogical method but as a social and educational approach that is rooted in how ELT can enhance students' personal and social growth (1998, p. 327). For example, Aysha summarized this by stating:

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*"When I read the article you sent to us... It is as a writer of the article said: it is a way of doing teaching, so it is not a technique or a method. I came to know in the workshop that there are not certain steps of doing it like 1, 2, 3 but it is a way of how you behave in the class, how you deal with students and even how to introduce the content of the lesson."*

Other teachers emphasized that CP as a holistic approach enables teachers to achieve large goals such as going beyond the classroom, exploring new ideas and developing students' personalities. For instance, Jack maintained that:

*"CP means that we should not be limited to the classroom but we should go beyond the classroom and discuss issues that are current and relevant to students' life and culture. Students should be allowed to explore new ideas, not within the limits of the classroom but should be outside the classroom and that should be incorporated into their own personality."*

From the above, it is not surprising that teachers provided various definitions of CP, including questioning dominant ideologies, the mutual construction of knowledge, empowering learners and being a holistic approach. This is because, as discussed CP cannot be reduced to a homogeneous body of discourse. In addition, I could observe in the interviews how teachers struggled to give a definition of this approach, especially those who were hearing of it for the first time. Some of them could not even articulate its definition in words. This is in line with Ruiz and Fernandez-Balboa (2005), who found that most teachers were unable to define CP when required to do so.

## **5.2 What are ELT teachers' attitudes towards Critical Pedagogy?**

After attending the workshop, the findings suggested that the teachers had various attitudes towards CP, ranging from full support for applying it to caution about its implementation. There were also teachers who resisted some of CP's premises while others were in between (Figure 2). The following four sub-sections detail these various attitudes toward CP.

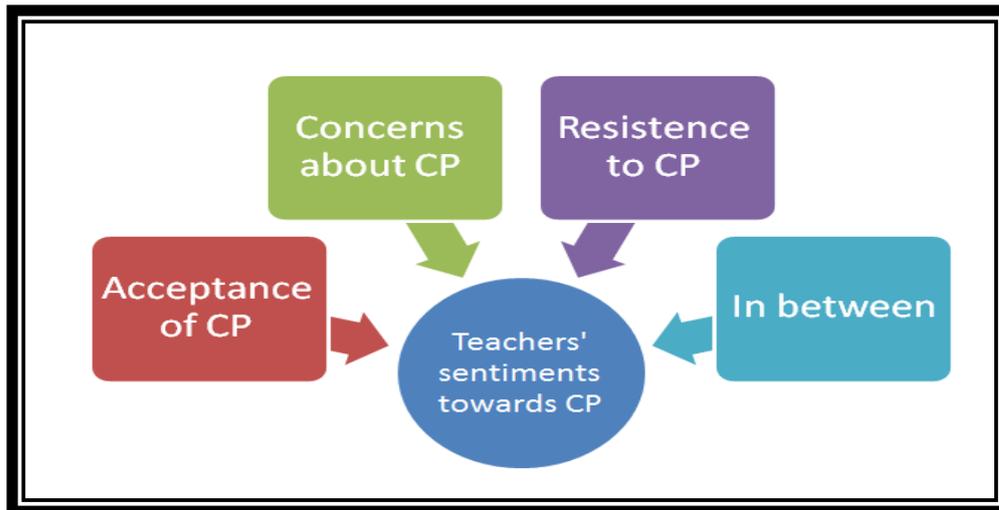


Figure 2 Teachers' sentiments towards CP after the intervention

### 5.2.1 Acceptance of CP

Majority of the teachers showed willingness and enthusiasm to incorporate CP in their teaching after attending the workshop. This is in line with other studies which found that teachers are willing to teach through CP after they are introduced to it (Ko& Wang, 2009; Baladi, 2007). Emran in this study expressed:

*"I totally agree with critical pedagogy and I totally believe in bringing the world to the classroom and discussing relevant issues in the society, especially about marginalized people like old people and disabled people."*

Therefore, Sofia was enthusiastic to implement CP in her teaching since she believed that the teacher's role should be more than one of transferring the language to the students but should also involve adapting the materials to suit the students' backgrounds. Put differently, she believed that the ideas and thoughts carried in the language classrooms were as important as the linguistic elements of the language *per se*. She asserted:

*"I believe in CP because you cannot just teach any content for the sake of language. You have to choose the content very carefully to serve your educational objectives, so this content must be adjusted according to the existing traditions, historical scientific traditions and see how the nation is shaping."*

Other teachers expressed their positive attitudes towards CP because of the students' age, which necessitated taking their voices and opinions into consideration.

Amal expressed this view by saying:

*"Implementing CP is necessary, especially when we are dealing with this critical age group, so their voice can be heard, because this is what they need at this age. If you try to listen to them and get them to discuss some of the issues that are related to their age, then you are helping them to learn."*

Other teachers had positive attitudes towards CP and considered it a necessity since they were living in an era characterized by a "global spread of English and the growth in regional varieties of English" (Troudi, 2005, p.127). Therefore, in the interviews, some teachers expressed the inevitability of addressing other varieties of English and not concentrating on teaching centre varieties. For instance, Nasser clearly stated that:

*"When students are exposed to different varieties of English, at least at pronunciation level, students come to realize that English is an international language that belongs to different people, not just British or Americans."*

### **5.2.2 Concerns about CP**

When asked about their willingness to implement CP, some teachers expressed their concerns about it for several reasons. First, some teachers were concerned about implementing CP because they believed students did not have sufficient foundations in language or critical thinking, which are two conditions for implementing CP. They claimed that implementing CP without these conditions would shock students and negatively affect them. This is in line with Pishghadam and Meidani's study in Iran (2012), which found that introducing CP to students who were not used to critical thinking created negative feelings such as anxiety, confusion and depression. The

following excerpt from Don's interview, in reply to the question about his willingness to implement CP in his teaching, exemplifies this point. Don believed that:

*"CP is something that would have to have a foundation, because without a foundation, students will lack exposure to sensitive issues and concerns, and then it would affect the real purpose - maybe because it would shock them. It would not transform them in a positive way but rather it would make them negate more of the ideas."*

Other teachers were cautious about implementing CP because the ELT system in the four colleges was heterogeneous in terms of teachers' nationalities and backgrounds. Therefore, the introduction of CP by such a varied group of teachers might not be safe, since they did not know the students' cultures and concerns. Sofia asserted that:

*"It [introducing CP] is very dangerous, especially in a multicultural setting like ELT here in the college, because imagine that all teachers with their different backgrounds start to question and think about alternatives to the topics discussed in the classroom!"*

Thus, Sofia and other teachers voiced their concern about the implementation of CP by teachers from various backgrounds because of their lack of understanding of the cultural and religious backgrounds of students. However, even Omani ELT teachers, who were supposed to be familiar with their students' background, clearly articulated the danger of implementing CP in the college. Azza stated that:

*"We need to be careful and make sure that we are not giving the students the wrong thing. Like what I understood from critical pedagogy that there is no absolute truth. I do encourage deep thinking, deep reasoning, but I need my students to reach a conclusion, a right conclusion."*

From the above, it appears that being ill-informed about the students' cultures and beliefs was not the only reason that made the teachers concerned about CP. The teachers' technical backgrounds, which reflected a right-wrong dichotomy, gave them reservations about implementing CP in which such absoluteness is rejected and continuous questioning is encouraged. It seems that teachers had internal

hesitations about CP's aims, especially about taking a skeptical stance towards the issues under discussion. This is because CP requires students to challenge assumptions or try out new alternatives, which could be dangerous from the teachers' perspective, since change is not easy. Jack said: *"Change is precarious and a person needs to be somewhat cautious as an agent of change"*

Other teachers justified their concerns by stressing the point that the students were not yet mature enough to decide for themselves, so introducing CP might lead them in the wrong direction. Fatma expressed this by saying:

*"We should ask questions but while we are mature enough to do that, our students are too young to do that - I mean, we do not want our students to misunderstand what we are doing, especially at this age, since the students can believe in anything very easily."*

Another teacher (Sara) asserted that she was worried about implementing CP because it meant questioning, which could lead to dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Thus, it seems that teachers would avoid implementing CP in order to be on the safe side emotionally (to avoid unpleasant feelings). Sara described this by saying:

*"You know, being a critical person means being a suffering person. If you want to be happy, just accept everything and do not question. For me it is a double-edged sword. We must be careful at all times."*

On the other hand, some teachers, especially expatriates, were concerned about implementing CP because they felt that they were outsiders who did not have the right to question issues related to Omani students' lives. For instance, Joseph was not willing to implement CP because *"I do not feel I have the right to implicitly question my students' beliefs in this context"*. In addition, such questioning could mean that their job in the college would be threatened. Therefore, questioning the givens, including rules and materials, was seen as impossible by the teachers because they were afraid of losing their jobs. This is to say that some teachers were hesitant to implement CP for practical reasons (to keep their jobs), especially in a

managerial system where teachers were powerless and voiceless. This relates to Akbari (2008), who asserted that if the expatriate teachers started to question and be critical of things around them in the Arab world, where Oman belongs, this could cost them their career. Jack expressed this by saying:

*"Questioning the materials given or decided by the administration is very hard for us because, based on my experience here in the college, we are not into the questioning of the materials directly because at the end you are a teacher and you need your job and you do not want to put yourself in a critical situation that could affect your existence in the college."*

### **5.2.3 Resistance to CP**

From the data analysis, there were very few teachers who clearly showed resistance to CP because they regarded their role as solely to teach the language and not to create changes in students' lives. This is in line with Sadeghi and Ketabi (2009) and Baladi (2007), who found that some teachers who participated in their study felt that their main responsibility was to teach linguistic skills to their students rather than to question students' beliefs about various social issues. Two teachers in the current study clearly stated that they favoured the communicative approach over using CP. For example, Azza stated in the interview:

*"I think, as teachers, it is not our job to question students' beliefs and assumptions. Our job is to teach language without interfering with students' beliefs ...if I had a choice to do critical pedagogy or communicative approach, I would choose communicative approach because it is more beneficial for my students than critical pedagogy."*

Although we did not ask participants to define what they meant by 'communicative approach', we had the sense that this approach was sometimes used by teachers, as it is self-evident. Additionally, in Oman, the communicative approach has been popularized among ELT teachers as the best way to assist students to gain competency in English language, especially after the educational reform that took place in 1998, which was heavily based on this approach (Al-Issa, 2015; McLean, 2011). Actually, the communicative approach has become a buzzword that one can

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repeatedly hear at the levels of policy making, institutions and research, which emphasizes the necessity of teaching communicatively as the best method for ELT. Therefore, teachers might assert that they use this approach more than any other teaching method because they want to be associated with a more contemporary methodological style (Al-Mekhlafi & Ramani, 2011).

This great emphasis on the communicative approach might partially result in some teachers abandoning L1, which is regarded from the CP perspective as a source that should be utilized in ELT classrooms. To illustrate, some ELT teachers in the four colleges perceived Arabic as an obstacle that inhibited students from learning English. For instance, Emran, who is Pakistani and thus does not speak Arabic clearly, maintained in the interview that:

*"English is a foreign language and when we learn English we should not use our mother tongue because when we translate from our first language, the whole structure in the target language will change, so we should learn English as it is through English and getting exposure to it."*

Surprisingly, some Omani ELT teachers who shared the same linguistic background with their Omani students were also intolerant of the usage of Arabic inside the classroom. Amal explained that Arabic was totally unacceptable in her class and students were not allowed to use it at all. For instance, she explained:

*"I do not use any Arabic word in the class. If I open the door for the students to use Arabic and explain things for them in Arabic, it will be an Arabic class. This is why I start my classes with an agreement between me and my students that we should not use any Arabic in the classroom because if I allow them to use Arabic, it will be like a habit, so I totally avoid using Arabic in the classroom."*

Teachers presumably pointed out that allowing students to talk in Arabic meant less opportunity to learn English. However, many studies conducted nationally have reported that most students prefer to use some Arabic when they learn English as it helps them to understand the complexity of the content (Al Bakri, 2014; Ismail, 2011; Al Jadidi, 2009). It seems the majority of the interviewed teachers viewed the usage

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of L1 as a way to help in explaining vocabulary or grammar rules and giving instructions to save time, especially at lower levels. They did not see using Arabic as a way of respecting students' identities and backgrounds, taking into account that Arabic is part of students' identity, which may result in students feeling inferior from the CP perspective, as the workshop and article emphasized. For instance, Nasra said:

*"I am towards using Arabic with low level students in level 1 and 2 ...So I can say we need to use Arabic with low level students and then you try to minimize it when they reach higher levels like level 3 and 4."*

Furthermore, one of the CP tenets challenges the appropriateness and relevance of ELT materials that are designed by the Centre's authors (Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011). Thus, it encourages developing ELT textbooks locally. However, during the interviews, some teachers, especially Omanis, resisted this tenet and asserted that they could not design ELT materials. For instance, Saif said:

*"They [British or American ELT expert designers] have been designing ELT materials for a long time, so they can be ideal designers; they have a lot of experience. Frankly speaking, we Omanis do not have enough experience in designing curriculum and we are not expert in it."*

Two issues arise from the excerpt above. First, it seems that Saif believed that Omanis have less knowledge than materials designers from the inner circle countries, who have a lot of experience which guarantees the design of good ELT materials despite their limited knowledge about the Omani context. Second, this excerpt exemplifies the dichotomy of others as superior or experienced (British and American designers) and the self as inferior or inexperienced (Omani designers) which perpetuates the centre-periphery dichotomy that legitimizes knowledge from the centre and neglects what is produced in the periphery. This can be attributed to the experience we have undergone in Oman of importing readymade materials from big publisher names to teach English and bringing consultants from the inner circle

countries to establish programmes at HE institutions (Al Issa, 2006; Karmani, 2010). In addition, based on my experience, professional development programmes that aim to promote teachers' knowledge and skills about designing materials seem to be scarce. Therefore, teachers seem to be accustomed to believe that they are incapable of designing English textbooks. However, looking at reality and what was happening in the classrooms, many teachers said that students reacted to teachers' handouts better than to the activities designed by these experienced and 'superior' ELT designers. For instance, Ahmed, an Omani ELT teacher, said "*I can assure you that whenever we prepare a handout, students like it more than the activities in the textbook*". Nonetheless, like Saif, Ahmed asserted that he was capable of designing separate handouts but incompetent to design a whole textbook.

#### **5.2.4 In-between: Inner Pull vs. Outer Pull**

A number of teachers seemed to experience a disjuncture between what they wanted to do as teachers who believed in CP and what they were required to do by the current system with its goals, syllabi and assessments. On one hand, they were impressed by CP and believed that it could make the students' learning experience better (**inner pull**). However, if they did that, then they would find themselves straying away from what they were expected to do (**outer pull**). In the next excerpt, Joseph encapsulated this dilemma by maintaining that:

*"For example, if I expose them to critical issues and that is what I really want to do and believe in, what if other groups are not given this kind of materials, they would make a comparison; they would have to question 'why do you have these materials? Why are you teaching this?' You become in a way disconnected with the rest of the system. So for me I can do so much, like making them explore their creativity and their imagination, but in the overall trend, I have to look at the curriculum that runs in the college."*

Fatma, an Omani teacher, in the following extract, she expressed her willingness to try it out because CP could achieve, in her words, the '*true meaning of education*'.

Nonetheless, she believed that the administration would not support her because of the critical age of the students, who were perceived by the administration to be powerful, since they were the ones to resist the regime in the country and protest to demand changes in 2011 (Arab Spring in Oman). Fatma explained that by saying:

*"I would like to try CP in my classes because it represents the true meaning of education, but thinking about the administration here, especially in our country, are in their comfort zone and getting such an approach would make them ask 'why is she doing it?' especially after the Arab Spring. They are afraid of any new approach which may affect the way students think because they strongly believe that students at university level have power and they might threaten the whole country if change leads their thinking to a way that they think is unsafe."*

This echoes the findings of Kress, Degennaro and Paugh (2013) who found that their pre-service teachers in Boston University believed that CP might not be aligned with the administration in an era characterized by neo-liberalism and accountability discourses. Therefore, ELT teachers emphasized the need for the college itself to adopt this approach in order to enable teachers who support CP to implement it. Based on my experience as a teacher in these colleges, teachers within a level conduct meetings every two weeks, held by the level coordinator, to make sure that everyone is following the syllabus and they are covering all topics at the same time, because the tests are central and students need to get an idea about all of the topics in the syllabi. Thus, a single teacher implementing CP might contradict the goal of the institution, which could put the teacher under a lot of pressure. The following extract from Jack's interview exemplifies how the current ELT system pushed him to stay inside the institutional box despite his positive attitude towards implementing CP:

*"I am into CP but first it must be part of the vision, mission, goals and objectives of the institution because as a teacher, as a lecturer, you cannot do so much and if you are doing like something that is not in line with the college's vision, you are not into this kind of general direction, then it becomes a struggle on your part."*

### 3. Theoretical contributions of the study

First, this study is based on four colleges in Oman, with student and teacher bodies typical of other Omani colleges, so it adds to a growing body of international literature exploring CP, which is deemed to be one of the most analytical contested approaches in teaching. McArthur (2010) states that CP "needs to gain strength from different perspectives, contexts, and ideas – shared and argued over in safe, creative public spaces" (p. 501). Therefore, this study exemplifies an attempt to strengthen CP in ELT via scrutinizing CP in the Omani ELT context, which may contribute to deepening the understanding of CP and how teachers perceive it, especially that "very few studies have intended to explore [CP] on the part of [in service] instructors and consider their attitudes toward this approach" (Sahragard, Razmjoo, & Baharloo, 2014, p.180-181).

Additionally, since this study tackles how teachers define CP, it contributes to the literature on teachers' conceptualization of CP, especially as there is a "paucity of empirical studies related to definitions and aims and purposes of [CP]" (Breuing, 2011, p.5). The findings of this study reveal two issues with regards to the definition of CP. The first question relates to the heterogeneity of CP's meanings and its ability to be used for transformative education in various ways and from multiple perspectives (Smith, 2014). The second issue relates to the indefinite and partial definitions of CP that were articulated by the teachers in this study might lead to teachers' unsuccessful implementation of it. Given this situation, this study highlights the necessity of consistent work at the level of making teachers more aware of this approach via providing them with more guidelines of what CP is about which could assist them to understand its meanings, central tenets and aims.

This study has also filled a lacuna in studies related to CP in the Arab world in general and Gulf countries in particular as few studies have been conducted to

investigate CP (Abu-Shomar, 2013; Raddawi, 2011). These few publications on CP in the Arab world have dealt with theoretical aspects such as its tenets and the rationale behind the necessity of implementing it (Raddawi & Troudi, 2013; Raddawi, 2011; Chandella & Troudi, 2013). Also, others have concentrated on introducing CP to students and discussing its impact on their learning (Ibrahim, 2013; Chandella, 2011). Teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards CP were not considered.

#### **4. Pedagogical contributions of the study**

In what follows, we draw some pedagogical implications based on the study's findings. However, these implications should not be seen as a step by step blueprint (Kincheloe, 2012) for how CP should be implemented; rather they should be seen as multiple discourses of how and when CP (s) could be implemented in the ELT realm in Oman. To this end, these implications are concerned with teachers and policy makers.

##### **7.1 Implications for teachers**

The findings of the study reveal that very few teachers showed resistance to CP for different reasons. Therefore, to introduce CP into ELT, teachers should have qualities of openness and flexibility (Sadeghi & Ketabi, 2009; Chandella, & Troudi, 2013). With such qualities, teachers become willing to explore this approach and critically engage in debate in order to embrace changes in their practice and their students' learning experience. Such openness itself is a kind of critical awareness. So, the principle message of this research for ELT teachers is that they should not close the doors against any opportunity to know about a new approach, and they should not be prisoners of conventional methods such as the communicative approach.

## **7.2 Implications for policy makers**

In order to instill criticality within HE institutions, all parties including the authorities at ministry level, the deans in the institutions, the teachers and the students should be involved in the criticality project. Such involvement of all stakeholders could minimise the fear and resistance to inject criticality with HE institutions as they feel that their voices are legitimatised. This can be done through forming joint committees to establish a mutual rapport among all the stakeholders, which might result in agreement regarding the aspects that are needed to develop in order to approach teaching and learning as critical enterprises.

CP as an approach for teaching has been constantly developed and debated, it is important for the HE authorities to set up a particular agenda to organize an international conference concerning CP and related issues. Such conference would help in introducing CP to teachers who may not have heard of it. In addition, it will assist teachers who have knowledge of CP to exchange their knowledge and experiences about CP locally and internationally which would result in widening their perceptions of CP and relevant issues.

The current limited PDPs that focus mainly on teaching methods and strategies are not adequate for enabling teachers to critically teach English. What is needed is a constructed system of in-service teacher education programmes in HE institutions to raise ELT teachers' awareness of the socio-cultural and socio-political complexities surrounding learning and teaching English (Mohd-Asraf, 2005). Hence, teachers could be prepared to move beyond 'how' to do things to question 'why' certain things are the way they are. Put differently, "to put such issues on the agenda, to question the hegemony and supremacy of English and to engage teachers in discussions and projects about them" (Troudi, 2005, p. 121).

The results of the study reveal that teachers need more workshops on CP to be capable of implementing its tenets in their teaching. Therefore, serious workshops or

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a whole course on CP should be conducted. Nonetheless, "one cannot give a procedural guideline for implementing critical pedagogy into a program of teacher education" (Bercaw and Stooksberry, 2004, p. 3). Consequently, this study's findings indicate that one way to introduce CP to ELT teachers is through presenting the teachers with their situations as problems where they can analyze, reflect and act.

It is naively assumed that EFL teachers will manage the implementation of CP by themselves, especially at the beginning of the implementation process. Thus, regular meetings should be organized between teachers, experts, and administrators in order to keep track of the kinds of challenges EFL teachers might encounter so that ongoing support can be provided for them.

### **Further Readings**

Critical ELT in action: Foundations, promises, praxis by Crookes (2013) which gives ELT practitioners background information and about CP and its main tenants. Also, it details a step by step description of how to implement CP in their classrooms.

Language teacher education for a global society: A modular model for knowing, analyzing, recognizing, doing, and seeing by Kumaravadivelu (2011) which aims to empower teachers by situating their pedagogy through executing five modular models for knowing, analysing, recognising, doing and seeing

Implementing critical pedagogy in EFL contexts: closing the gap between theory and practice by Suzani (2018) which provides basic concepts and objectives of critical pedagogy and gives some practical applications for implementing CP in EFL classrooms,

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