

A Study of Narrative Teaching in Pakistani Universities in the Backdrop of Critical Pedagogy

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Abstract

This paper highlights one of the key pitfalls of Pakistani educational system i.e. the pedagogical process based on narrative teaching that makes learners incapable of thinking critically which ultimately converts them into memorizing machines. In the backdrop of critical pedagogy as presented by Freire (2005), the pedagogical process prevalent in some of the selected Pakistani universities has been analyzed critically. Based on these theoretical underpinnings, the researchers observed some class-rooms of the selected universities. They found that the pedagogical process in Pakistan lacks the enhancement of the critical thinking and self-reflection among students along with their teachers who seem to ignore such elements in their pedagogical process. Thus, education can only serve its basic purpose of humanization by developing critical consciousness of learners; otherwise, it will merely keep on producing passive robots.

Keywords: Narrative teaching, critical pedagogy, critical thinking, class-room discourse analysis.

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Introduction

Background of the study

Learning is a way of human life (Hogan, 2003). Human beings spend their whole lives in this process of learning by adopting various ways. Education is among many such ways. The primary objective of education is to bring humans to the light of knowing reality around in its true sense (Cole, 2008). There is a hot debate on the issue of knowing whether it means bringing some information to human mind or something else. It is established by various scholars in the fields of education and psychology that knowing is actually activating human mind to function by itself (Sanderse, 2012). Educating means to enable one to observe first then bring it to one's mind and evaluate the provided information. It is in a way activating one's cognitive faculties. These faculties are enhanced by various ways, self-life experiences are there to work for their enhancement (Fry, 2015). But the formal and more important way of this process is education. Education serves multiple purposes, humanization is at the forefront. In education system, there are various elements which have been designed to achieve the ultimate end that is the establishment of humanization process. The role of a teacher in pedagogical process is vital and primary. The whole education system along with the learners depends on a teacher who has to perform the following three very important functions for learners (Shim, 2007):

1. The function of making learners understand something appropriately.
2. The function of making learners think rationally.
3. The function of making learners behave ethically.

William Ayers (1995) elaborates the role of a teacher as the one who leads learners to read, write, speak, think and evaluate critically besides working cooperatively by linking consciousness to conduct. The later element of nexus between consciousness and conduct is worthy to be noted which works in the humanization process. Various other scholars and thinkers have been arguing in favour of such element since Plato (Beck, 1985) but unfortunately the drawbacks in educational system could not be removed especially in under-developing countries like Pakistan. The learners here do not seem to practice their human traits whether it is the issue of conduct or otherwise. There may be various reasons behind it but the role of a teacher cannot be ignored which seems to be at forefront. The teachers seem to be involved in narrative teaching where they consider transferring of information as their basic job and ignore deliberately or unknowingly the other issues relevant to their role. Underneath we see a big name in the field of critical pedagogy who pointed out such issues.

Critical pedagogy and Freire

In modern times, when there is so much scientific and technological progress around, still educational system is debated hard for its shortcomings. One such prominent name who spent his whole life trying to revive the true spirit of education is Paulo Freire, the Brazilian critical thinker, political activist and educator. In his renowned work, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed", Freire (1970) stresses on the human liberation and that is only possible through critical pedagogy. He is of the view that humanization is the basic trait with human beings but through oppression of political restrictions, unequal power relations, and socio-economic exploitation they are dehumanized because their thinking abilities are ruined by the oppressors who try to forge them according to their needs and wishes. This process does not just affect the oppressed only rather both oppressed and the oppressors are dehumanized (ibid. 1970). The current study revolves around such thoughts that need to be explored and verified in Pakistani pedagogical context.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the current study are:

1. To observe the role of a teacher at university level in Pakistan whether he/she is involved in narrative teaching or not.
2. To see whether the teacher is playing the desired role of creating critical faculties among his/her students or not.
3. To evaluate the role of university teachers in Pakistan under the ideas of critical pedagogy.
4. To try to create awareness among teachers about critical pedagogy.

Research questions

Following are the research questions in this study raised by the researchers:

1. Of what type of teaching do Pakistani university teachers involve themselves during pedagogical process?
2. How do the university teachers work on the enhancement of critical thinking among their students?
3. What effects do these teaching methods bring about?

Theoretical framework

The ideas of Paulo Freire (1970; 1998; 2005) have been taken as theoretical frame work for the current study. These ideas can be summed up as under:

Oppression makes humans dehumanized. Only freedom and justice can make them humans. Education's basic role is to liberate humans from injustices.

Narrative teaching is a type of teaching in which static information is infused into the minds of the learners who only rely on memorizing the provided information. In narrative version of teaching the learners are like machines which only work for gathering data and do not know the real application of the provided data in the real life. In the process of the narrative teaching, the will of the learners is completely constrained and estranged and they move into such a state where they cannot decide or think freely (Freire, 2005)

In the process of narrative teaching, the teacher involves himself in the following actions (ibid.):

1. He selects the contents of teaching.
2. He delivers the contents to the learners.
3. He delivers the contents with full authority without being challenged by anyone and has full authority to talk in the full time of the class.
4. The learners only listen and conform to the given contents passively without questioning or reasoning.
5. The learners only reproduce the given data when they are asked for it.

The narrative teaching promotes dehumanization of human beings and goes against the basic aim of education that is humanization.

The narrative teaching is like banking system where everyone acts in fixed and predetermined way. It holds back the critical consciousness of the learners. Against banking educational system, Freire proposed problem-posing educational system.

The problem-posing system is of dialogic nature in which a teacher presents a problem and students have equal opportunity to share their views on particular contents freely. In this conversational way, the cognitive abilities of students are enhanced and they start to think about their ways of life critically and evaluate matters logically. The teacher's role in this system is that of a co-investigator and a learner (ibid.).

In this system, the role of a teacher is also that of a learner who learns along with his students "to teach is not to transfer knowledge but to create possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge" (Freire, 1970, p. 80).

In this argument, Freire (1998) stresses the production or construction of knowledge on the part of a learner and that is only possible when the learner is provided with a chance of being self-important. The sense of self-importance and subjectivity create curiosity for learning among students who begin to solve problems themselves. In contrast if the teachers only pour knowledge on learners, they go into the state of boredom where they lose self-interest and curiosity. But if the students participate in the learning activity freely, they will feel freedom and rely on their subjective abilities and eventually they will construct knowledge themselves. The teacher should not guide or try to teach his students the objective reality rather he should encourage them through dialogic co-investigation to form their own subjective approach to the world around them. In this way, they will not act as mere machines rather they will become humans.

Another important element regarding the role of a teacher is that he should respect his students to give them chance to say their subjective opinions freely (Freire, 1994, p.65). He should lead his students to co-investigatory environment where he should also have the courage to listen to the counter arguments of the students. Such democratic environment results in tolerance which is a necessary element for the peace of a society.

As education is to bring humans to light which can be dangerous if it is put on learners abruptly without any context (White, 1976; Roberts, 2003; Rosen, 2005), thus while teaching some subject, the teachers should describe the cultural, historical, political backgrounds as well and try to relate that subject with the prevalent conditions of a society. It will enable the learners to think about the issues of their own context. It will eventually result in creating critical consciousness among the students.

Teacher's role is that of a politician who should prepare their students to raise their voices against the oppression and social injustices. Freire (2005) stresses that teacher's role is not merely to communicate the subject matter of the set curriculum and set policies rather he has to contribute to build a democratic society. He has to prepare his students politically and morally.

A teacher should love his students. Freire (2005) calls this love as "armed love" where the rights of both the student and teacher should not be violated. The relationship of mutual trust and respect between teacher and students enhances pedagogical process (Buber, 1965; 1958).

For Freire (2005), the role of a teacher is different from that of parents. He should be selfless regardless of any reward. On the other side, he should be intellectually sound so that he could spell bound his students.

Methodology

The methodology for the current study is exploited from qualitative paradigm of research where researcher has to explore the phenomena by adopting bottom-up approach and following inductive method of reasoning (Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Gay, 2005; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000). On the basis of the exploration, description has been made keeping in view the context of the study especially the local and particular individuals and groups.

Being the primary data-collection instruments, the researchers have collected qualitative data with the help of participant observations by acting as complete participants, participant-as-observer, observer-as-participant and complete observer. 50 teachers who were involved in teaching MA English (Drama) classes from four universities have been selected through homogeneous sample selection of purposive sampling technique. Intensive qualitative observations of the selected teachers have been made while they were busy in their pedagogical processes in the classrooms of around 20 to 30 students. Their interactions were observed not only with their students but with their colleagues as well. They were observed purposefully while delivering lectures and discussing issues on the topics especially regarding literature, society, politics, religion and culture. All the mentioned teachers were observed only once during their lectures. Their consent was taken before the study and they agreed on the condition of keeping their names secret. This condition was fulfilled and their names are not disclosed in this paper. The observations according to the given framework by Freire (2005) were noted by the researchers.

In the following section, the analysis of the data which were collected during classroom observations and discussions with the teachers is presented. They were especially observed while teaching literary texts. Underneath, some of the portions of data are being shown along with the analysis that is done keeping in view Freire's ideas of narrative teaching and critical pedagogy.

Analysis of the data

In class-rooms of Masters in English, some teachers have been observed while delivering their lecture on a literary text of Shakespeare named "Othello". They were observed during the description of the theme of the said play. In a class of one and half hour, they continuously spoke on various aspects of Othello. They concentrated on the jealousy factor found in human nature which caused the tragedy of Othello. The following elements have been detected in their discourse:

1. They took most of the part of the time allocated for the class.
2. The class room remained teacher-centered.
3. The students acted as passive listeners. Though a few of them raised some questions but they were directly relevant to the text.
4. The teachers' focus remained on the text most of the time and they kept on informing about the various aspects of the play and Shakespearean tragedy.
5. The teachers did not relate the story of the play with the prevalent issues of the immediate context.
6. The relationship between the teachers and the students was not so warm. They seemed two different entities.
7. Most of the students remained completely silent during the class hours.

These were the general observations of the researchers for that particular class-room keeping in mind the theoretical framework adopted from Freire (2005). The seven observations made above are quite contrary to the ideas given by Freire. These elements are the manifestations of the narrative teaching where the teacher does not help to enhance the analytical skills of the learners on the issue at hand. Rather his focus remained on communicating information regarding some specific topic. In such a monologic state, the learners remain passive listeners like robots. Though, they get information but that information only goes to their memory and does not enhance their cognitive abilities. They are also expected from the narrative teaching based educational system to behave in mechanical way of reproduction and reconstruction. When such students were asked to talk about the worldly affairs, they talked but their views were superfluous and seemed artificial. They looked like copying somebody on the given issues. For example when they were asked to talk on human nature and jealousy factor, rather than constructing and producing their own views, they only reproduced whatever was delivered to them during lectures. They remained unable to go beyond their memories. Most of the teachers could not form a friendly relationship with the learners which resulted in the shy and feared behaviour of the students who seemed reluctant to talk with teachers freely. Another fact was observed informally that the students tried to comply their teacher in every matter just to have good grades because at university level teacher had the authority to award grades. So the students are bound to respect their teacher in every way. Though, in a few cases, the situation was different when some of the teachers were found friendly. In their classes the students participated and some glimpses of critical thinking were quite obvious among them.

The intellectualism of most of the teachers was also questionable. They seemed to concentrate on the information provided in the key books on the subjects. When talking on the jealousy theme of “Othello”, the teachers’ focus was not on production or construction of their own ideas rather they described whatever was around traditionally in the forms of books, the lectures of their own teachers or otherwise. They did not relate the story to their immediate context. They could have asked and discusses various other interesting elements regarding the above mentioned play e.g.,

1. The black man, Othello, married a beautiful lady, Desdemona. Could their relationship last long naturally?
2. The attraction of Desdemona towards Cassio was natural or otherwise?

Such questions regarding the play could have invited the cognitive consciousness of the students and they would have relied on their own thinking abilities but unfortunately during most of the observation sessions no such element was noticed by the researchers. Though a few teachers tried to adapt dialogic nature of teaching but consciously or unconsciously they also remained self-centered during the teaching sessions.

Some other observations were made by the researchers during teachers’ conversations and discussions among themselves to observe their intellectual soundness. One such example is quoted here.

(A bomb Blast in Gulshan-e-Iqbal Park, Lahore, Pakistan just happened few days ago, a group of teachers in their staff-room have discussed this sad rather tragic incident (the researchers have asked them to talk over the issue freely). Here a few portions of their discussions are being reproduced. The names are changed on the request of the participants).

Ali: I am feeling so sorry about the bomb blast in the Park on the eve of Easter, I went there and listened to the screams, saw the fire and blood that was awful to see a child with blown off hands but alive, his parents were killed in the blast.

Shahid: It saddened me too but do you have any idea? Who are they? Who don’t want us to be progressive and prosperous? Who is our enemy?

Ameer: I tell you, these are bloody Americans, who are using our peaceful religion to give the world the message that it’s radical; moreover they are defaming us with the terms as Islamists and terrorists.

Hanif: As long as I know our religion it does not give any teaching to kill human beings except to fight against the infidels (Kafirs) and Blasphemers.

Raza: These are American jerks with Jewish thought who are planting this all in the name of Islam just to defame our religion in the world, they are jealous of our glorious history when Islam was spread over with its great expeditions, they are afraid of Islamic rise again in the world as many of non-Muslims converting themselves to Islam . They know if Islam comes up, they will be going down so they are defaming it, they are using our masses, and brainwashing them and planting them for terrorism.

Ferhad: Yes this is all about American conspiracies just to let down Muslims. Otherwise no Muslim can involve himself in such heinous and inhuman acts.

Rabia: Yes rightly said and I have a say regarding the history how America started terrorism at our land, since 1980 in the name of Jihad against communism in Afghanistan, America began this all, America used our land to run the arms for Mujahidin to save their land, they intentionally planted it, otherwise our religion is peaceful and it's not written anywhere in Quran to kill anyone, it states "to kill one is equivalent to kill the whole humankind", then how can they be Muslims who bomb, they look more like us they are not Muslims.

Raheela: But the question is whenever and whoever bomb, always shout Allah 'o' Akbar and seem to be Muslims what benefit America can possibly get from this, they can kill people in the name of Christianity so their religion could be popular and people would fear more of America?

Hamid: What you are talking about Raheela, you mean these are really Muslims who are butchering their fellow beings? No they are not, they cannot do it, a Muslim who recites Kalama can never kill anyone but these are American Christians and Hindus and the RAW who are involved in such activities but bringing us bad fame in the world.

Raheela: My take on the issue is different of you guys, I assume these are Muslims because Alqayeda, ISIS and Taliban all are proclaimed Muslims and even they are threat for America herself, as I hear the international news ISIS is chopping off heads of Christians on the very tradition of Islam asking people for Tax Money, leave the land or ready to be killed.

Hashim: Raheela are you a liberal? Do you know what connotation this "liberal" takes in our context? It means Blasphemer, if you will keep saying such arguments you will be held as blasphemmer, so I suggest you to quit saying it around

Raza: Yes Raheela! Hamid is saying right, don't ever say it again or never join us, I can kill and can be killed for the honor of Islam and the Holy Prophet.

In the above discussion which went on between some teachers from a single subject, the intellectual confusion is quite visible. These views regarding terrorism are the popular ones in Pakistani society and can be easily summed up as under:

1. Islam is the religion of peace, so it cannot allow any Muslim to kill anyone. So, the terrorists can't be Muslims.
2. We should negotiate with terrorists to stop killings of innocent civilians.

These versions are all around Pakistan on media or other sources of information. TV talk shows, seminars, discussions of different forums, newspaper columns and social media are full of such arguments. Most of Pakistanis rather than relying on their own critical consciousness believe in these views. Unfortunately, most of the teachers being part of the whole social community have similar views. Thus when they go for teaching, they reproduce the same arguments in their lectures – if they happen to talk about such issues. Consequently, students who are under much influence of the teachers and lacking their own critical thinking ability also replicate the general claims. This is one of the reasons of the sustenance of terrorism that Pakistanis are in the state of ambiguity. Though there are some voices of reason but they are very few and easily overlooked. Most of the time, they remain involved in blaming others for their own faults. Even they have become so undemocratic that they began quarrelling on their false assertions. It is the basic job of education to create a democratic and tolerant environment where people should be given right to say whatever they think as right. They should be convinced for some issue on the basis of logic than force. So, when teachers themselves remain confused on the dire issues of the society, what else can be expected from the students except perplexity and disorientation!

Conclusion

The positive and good role of a teacher is of primary importance for the progress and prosperity of a society. Besides, it is also beneficial for a teacher as well. When a teacher performs well, he gets pleasure that leads to satisfaction which is the ultimate aim of the human beings. Thus the role of a teacher is intrinsic as well as extrinsic because working well for others is working well for oneself. But unfortunately there are violations in the expected and desired role on the part of a teacher. When such role was observed and measured on the guidelines provided by the great educator and pedagogical theorist, Paulo Freire, very depressing situation came to light. It was observed by the researchers that most the university teachers in Pakistan are not fulfilling their jobs properly. Therefore, the following steps keeping in mind the ideas presented by Freire are being suggested:

1. Homogeneity of thought and ideology among teachers is necessary to avoid ambiguity and anxiety among students.
2. Teachers should be intellectually sound so that they can guide the students in right direction favourable to their society.
3. They should relate the subjects with the immediate context so that the students can also involve themselves in thinking process that would enhance their critical faculties.
4. They should create the critical ability among their students.
5. They should work on the morality issues of the students as well.
6. The teachers should create a friendly relationship with their students so that they can work and think freely.
7. The teachers should rely on the construction and production of new ideas rather than reproduction and reconstruction.

Thus, this equation would be very true if we say it is the teacher who can construct or destruct. Pakistani society also needs better education for its construction and progress. A renowned Muslim thinker, Imam Al-Ghazali (2012) once said:

“All the human beings are dead, the alive are those who have knowledge. All the knowledgeable are in sleep, in waking are those who are functional and practical. All the practicalists and functionalists are at loss, in benefit are those who have good behaviors. And all the good behaviorists are in danger, the successful are those who shun arrogance and vanity.” (Imam Al-Ghazali)

Thus intellectual knowledge along with humility is the essential component of a good human being as well as teacher. These elements eventually result in humanization.

Limitations of the study

The study could have encompassed other educational institutes too but it only took a few selected universities. It could have taken a larger population of teachers and administrators but it took just fifty teachers.

Recommendations

For the further researches and researchers, it is recommended to take schools and colleges beside universities. The same framework can be applied to administrators too who run the educational institutes.

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