Metamorphosis of a teacher educator: A journey towards a more critical self

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Keywords

Abstract

Critical teacher education emerged as a response to the liberal, hegemonic, and power-oriented world that affected teacher education as well. Albeit widely discussed, moving towards becoming this type of teacher educator is neither easy nor fast. This autoethnographic narrative study describes my journey as a teacher educator from a non-critical, product-oriented, passive teacher educator to a more critical, process-oriented, active teacher educator who learns, questions, relearns, and unlearns. The data are gathered from different sources of my personal portfolio, including training diaries, field notes, memories, feedback, and observation. The findings of the study reveal the underlying factors that shape our thoughts, beliefs, and practices and how we can gain voice and agency and transform into critical teacher educators.

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Article Info

Introduction

The influence of power and hegemony are traceable in education, where the theories are mostly created in the West and are practised worldwide. The field of education is filled with political consideration (Akbari, 2008) in choosing what, how, and whom to teach, and this influences the educational life of us. It becomes more critical when it comes to teacher education as teacher educators play a crucial role in the teachers' preparation and professional development (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). As a response to this power-oriented educational context, some movements came into existence, which we can call critical pedagogy (Freire, 1979). Critical pedagogy posits that the traditional form of education, which oftentimes reinforces current power principles and maintains social inequality, should be replaced by a more liberatory form that is able to empower students by hearing their voices and promoting social change. This concept has gained momentum in education hitherto and entered the field of applied linguistics by Pennycook (2001) when he relates the "micro relations of applied linguistics to macro relations of society" (p. 2). Critical teacher education, as the offspring of critical pedagogy, gained momentum by "loss of equity, economic and social justice and the polarisation of the labour force" (Hill, 2007, p. 210) as a result of the liberal and neoliberal impact on education. The literature on critical teacher education is rich, encompassing a wide range of concepts such as social justice teacher education (McDonald, 2008), teacher agency (Tao & Gao, 2021), reflective teacher observation (Javahery & Kamali, 2023), reflective practice (Farrell, 2019), and critical reflection (Bassot, 2023), to name a few. These concepts assist the researchers in exploring various aspects of criticality in teacher education, and contributions to this concept are multimodal.

Hawkins and Norton, (2009), reviewing the literature on critical teacher education, attributed some principles to this type of teacher education. First, it is context-specific. They state that "teacher educators drew on their cultural and historical knowledge of the context and the students in order to work innovatively with teacher-learners" (p. 36). The second principle is being responsive to learners. In this principle, "language teacher educators took into account their knowledge of their teacher learners' languages, cultures, desires and histories, and connected learning to the backgrounds and experiences students brought to the learning environment" (p. 36). The third principle which is dialogic engagement deals with respecting learners voices by stating that "language teacher educators used collaborative dialogue to construct and mediate meanings and understandings... to promote reflection among participants, and to link explicit critical awareness of social justice issues to educational practices" (p. 36). Reflexivity is the next principle which means an "insightful analysis of what occurred, and how they might use what they have learned ... to re-design future possibilities" (p. 36). The last principle, i.e. praxis, is "... integrating theory and practice in the interests of educational and social change" (p. 36).

One of the qualitative methods to explore critical teacher education is autoethnography. Autoethnography, as a form of ethnography, was widely discussed by Denzin and Lincoln (2005). They made the first attempts to apply the concept to qualitative research. Later, Canagarajah (2012) defined autoethnography by dividing it into its components, namely *auto, ethno*, and *graphy*. He defined *auto* as a type of research "conducted and represented from the point of view of the self, whether studying one's own experiences or those of one's community" (p. 260). *Ethno*, in his thoughts, highlights how culture and society (re)shape in connection with personals. Lastly, *graphy* as a form of "writing is not only the means of disseminating one's knowledge and experiences; there is an emphasis on the creative resources of writing, especially narrative, for generating, recording, and analyzing data" (p. 260). Different scholars have employed and approved the advantages of autoethnography to examine an emic insider view in teacher education (e.g., López-Gopar, et al., 2022; Weng & Troyan, 2023; Yazan, 2019; Yazan et al., 2023). This approach became prominent on the ground that I was gathering data on myself where I employed a meta-awareness of my actions which not only helped me conduct research but also influenced and informed my actions. Furthermore, as reflection can help educators to have a better understanding of their environment, their interactants, and themselves, this study uses a self-reflective autoethnographic approach to examine a change that has occurred in the author during his journey since 2006 as a teacher educator and how a shift towards a more critical teacher educator has emerged.

Teacher metamorphosis (Kamali, 2014, 2021) was characterized as a type of shift from a one-role approach to a teacher to a package of other roles such as assessor, material developer, iconoclast, and the like. It was introduced as a remedy to some criticisms of post-method pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). Kumaravadivelu (2006) attributed three principles to post-method, which seem to be the cornerstones for critical pedagogy where teaching is possible, particular, and practical. Therefore, in this post-method era, teachers take a more participatory approach to teaching and, by giving voice and agency to students, bring their life into the classroom. This is the teachers' duty, then, to design specific content which is context-specific.

This study, in the same vein, portrays the metamorphosis of myself as a teacher educator to explore the underlying agenda of this journey. To depict the shift in myself from a passive recipient of knowledge to a critical teacher educator, I provide narratives from my reflective notes and diaries, field notes, memories, colleagues' and trainees' feedback, and observation that I have collected in all these years. Therefore, the research question this study tries to provide an answer to is as follows: How did I transform into a more critical teacher educator?

The data gathered from 325 pages of electronic and handwritten reflective notes (from my colleagues and trainees); 145 pages of my own diaries and reflective notes (handwritten and electronic); trainees' feedback on 63 training classes (handwritten and electronic through email and Google forms); and almost 80 hours of classroom observations (both teachers and trainers), out of which almost six hours were transcribed. These have been gathered since 2007.

In order to analyze the data, deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed since the data were codified according to the predetermined mode of critical teacher education (Hawkins & Norton, 2009). The emerged sub-themes from the data were categorized into the critical teacher education themes: context-specificity, responsiveness to learners, dialogic engagement, reflexivity, and praxis. Then, the most critical subthemes, which I believed made a significant impact on each theme, were selected and analyzed. For example, in the first theme, i.e. context-specificity, there were different sub-themes gathered from my diary, classroom observation, and reflective notes. The one that I considered the most influential in my journey towards my critical self, however, was my experience with the reading-aloud technique in reading classes, for it was the most remarkable thought-provoking encounter with a concept that I discovered was not always applicable in my own context.

The transformation journey

From a context-negligent to a context-aware teacher educator

My first training diary in June 2009 read as follows:

> Today, I had a great time teaching the trainees how to teach reading. They were very cooperative and learned a lot. Mohadeseh told me that she didn't know that reading aloud is wrong in the class. She said she used it in her classes, and since the students liked it, she thought it could be a good idea. I also taught them the steps in teaching reading as … and I think now they can teach reading well.

As the diary shows, I adopted a one-size-fits-all approach in which I dictated the steps of teaching reading, not leaving any room for alternative lesson shapes. In effect, the sheer example of the prescriptive approach is traceable in the prohibition of the reading-aloud technique in the class. There was a time that reading a text aloud was assumed to make boredom for the students and since it is for the purpose of reading comprehension, not reading for pronunciation, I presumed it was wrongdoing in the class. Reading Ur's (2016) book "100 Teaching Tips", I realized there were numerous benefits for this technique in language classes. As Ur (2016) pointed out, by reading aloud, "you intuitively use appropriate prosody: group the words into sense-patterns, insert pauses in the right places, and add appropriate intonation. This is what clarifies meaning" (p. 161). It is also "easy to stop every now and again to explain new words as you feel necessary. And you can keep an eye on your students, pick up any expressions of incomprehension and respond as necessary" (Ur, 2016, p. 61).

Therefore, training in one of the in-house training sessions for an institution in Iran in September 2018, I designed and delivered a session on reading-aloud techniques and their benefits. I asked the teachers to apply these techniques in their classrooms and complete a reflective note about this based on their own experience. One of the trainees completed the reflective note as follows:

> When I was reading the text to the students, I saw some of them smiling, and at the end, they told me that they loved my accent and they wanted to speak like me. I think reading aloud could make an emotional bond in us, and I could make them more motivated to learn English.

With the advent of movements against linguistic imperialism (Mackenzie, 2022; Philipson, 1992) more awareness was raised towards more critical concepts such as English as a lingua franca (ELF) (Jenkins, 2006, 2007) or world Englishes (Kachru, 1992) in which accents are considered a sign of marginalization by which native speakers of English gain privilege. Nonetheless, this reflective note clearly revealed a cultural peculiarity. Unlike the ELF movement, you may hear that students feel more emotionally connected to teachers with more native-like accents because they see their dreams in assimilation into the Western society where there are more resources, facilities, and quality of life. This is evident in some countries with more social or political challenges; however, in some countries in which patriotism is practiced and valued, you may never hear this sentence (Westheimer, 2006). This is not to confirm or appreciate native accents but to affirm the emotional bonds which can be created differently in different cultures.

What I learned from the experience is that believing and preaching what you have learned in one book or heard somewhere and extending it to all contexts can be counter-productive. This extract showed that the technique opened a new door for the students, without which it would never happen. Context-specificity, then, can act as a source of motivation and inspiration that a top-down, prescriptive form of teacher education can never do.

From a fixed-plan to a trainee-responsive teacher educator Until recently, I have tried to have well-thought, fixed lesson plans for my training sessions which were strictly followed during the session, and deviations from them were sins that should never be committed. It is in line with the literature on reflection to be prepared for a session (reflection-for-action) (Farrell, 2018); however, what I have neglected was that most of this literature discusses plan B as long as we deal with the unpredictability of life and human being as our interlocutors. It was in December of 2017 when I was responsible to train a group of teachers at the Ministry of Education to teach at state schools. Since they were assigned to teach young learners, I designed a session on chants and songs in which I prepared numerous resources they could use in their classes to feel students more motivated and teach them English sounds and rhymes. However, at the beginning of the session, one of my trainees pointed out that they were not allowed to use music (especially English) in their classes due to parents' and schools' resistance to these songs. She said that she had already tested it in her internship, and some of the pupils' parents warned her if she did it again, they would not let their children come to the school. Then, I was in a dilemma of continuing my prepared lesson plan, which I spent hours preparing or shifting to what they wanted to work on, the plan which was applicable to their immediate context. I decided to continue with my fixed lesson plan; however, that session was one of the least

favourite sessions of the course, as the end-of-the-course survey indicated. The reason was explained by one of the trainees in the comment section of the survey.

> I know that our teacher [trainer] did his best to tell us how to integrate songs in our sessions, but it was not helpful since it is not in our hands to use them here. We just follow the rules because if we don't, we'll be fired. So, what is the use of it when we can't use it? I know songs can make students motivated but I can't use them. I really preferred a session about how to deal with students' parents instead of that session. I want to know how to deal with their orders and how I can convince them about something I do in the class and I know it is true.

The extract clearly evidences Kumaravadivelu's (1994) parameter of particularity by which he argued that language pedagogy should be relevant to a group of learners. The influential role of context in language learning is acknowledged by different scholars (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2008; Moranski & Zalbidea, 2022) who claim that context is an inseparable part of any language learning milieu without which language is meaningless, nonsense, and hard to remember. This experience has also added to the existing literature on the use of context in teacher education (e.g., Adonious, 2013; Bax, 1997; Zhao, 2022) by asserting that context is even more critical in teacher education as it might make teacher education inapplicable to teaching. This experience suggested the significance of the role that the trainees and their context can play in the content of the session. From then on, I attempted to analyze the trainees of a program and their social, cultural, and educational backgrounds to avoid any similar experiences.

From an authoritative to a dialogic teacher educator

In conceptualizing anti-Machiavellian teacher education as a type of critical teacher education, I argued that Machiavellian teacher education is one that prefers fear to love (Kamali, 2022). In this education, it is beneficial for both groups if trainees are afraid of the trainer. Unlike that, an anti-Machiavellian approach prioritizes love and posits that this phenomenon can inspire and develop teachers professionally. Sources of teachers' beliefs are abundant, one of which is our learning experience which has a profound impact on how we teach and train (Karaca & Uysal, 2023). In the first years of my training career, being surrounded by my learning experience in a formal teaching context in Iran, where classes were places for practising teachers' authority, I was excessively obsessed with the belief that authority (of which people are afraid) can earn me respect, dominance, and dignity. However, I was proved wrong by co-training with one of my colleagues between the years 2017 and 2019. Seeing the trainees' evaluation surveys at the end of the course, I was always thrilled by how popular he was. Therefore, I decided to observe him. He was generous enough to accept, and I observed a series of his sessions to find out the reasons for his popularity. His training sessions were fun and gamified in which the trainees had voices and could contribute freely, criticize sharply, and disagree

fully. It was odd for me because I considered it a sign of failure when a trainee disagreed with me. For him, however, it was a moment he could reflect and convince others to do. The following extract is from one of his sessions in June 2018 on teaching through text, where he demonstrated a mini-lesson on the grammar of present simple and present continuous using the PPP model (Presentation, Practice, Production) (see Anderson, 2017). He started by talking about his daily routine and ended with a discussion about a favourite place. In the evaluation part of the demo, one of his trainees disagreed with it, saying that he did not follow the same context in his demo.

> Trainer: Ok, now, tell me how you found the session.
>
> Trainee 1: It was really good, but I think you didn't keep the context in the session. In the preparation phase (referring to the PPP model), you discussed the daily routine, and in production, it was changed to a favorite place.
>
> Trainer: Great, very good point. Do you agree with her (addressing the class)?
>
> Trainee 2: Yes, but I think sometimes it is good to change the context to add more variety to the class. You know, such as a fresh start.
>
> Trainer: I do agree. So, now we have two opinions. 1. We have to keep the context 2. It's better to change it. Go back into your groups and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each.

The extract evidently showed that not only the trainer was not defensive and did not try to justify his actions, but he also seized the opportunity to promote reflection in the classroom. This is in line with magic moments introduced by Harmer (2017), who argues that these are off-plan moments in the classroom. Having observed his sessions and the way he gave voice and agency to his trainees and exploited the magic moments of the sessions, I decided to run more dialogic sessions where I welcomed contributions and valued opinions. The implication of this observation for my training sessions was that I added one part to all my tasks for teacher education with the name "my suggestions". Adding this column, I ask the trainees to openly discuss their opinions and add to the existing body of knowledge in that field. This is how I can promote dialogue and interaction in the training sessions.

From a passive to a reflective teacher educator

Active learning is defined as peoples' "initiatives and responsibilities for their own progress" (Niemi, 2002, p. 763), which can be synonymous with agency. On the contrary, and based on this definition, passive learning can be characterized as learning in which the learner does not have any responsibility except for being the recipient of knowledge. As a novice teacher educator, my sources of knowledge were the books I read about teaching, the sessions I observed, and performing them as they were without reflecting upon their benefits and demerits for my

context, my trainees, and society. I have de facto heard about reflection all the time; however, I did not have it in my own training toolkit. I really cannot name a single moment as a turning point in this journey that suddenly changed me from a recipient to a reflective educator; however, some elements were remarkable. One of these elements was the love of writing. I cannot recall the exact time it flourished in me; nevertheless, I have been always mesmerized by Persian literature and wrote some poems, albeit not professionally. Writing journal diaries about my teaching and training helped me to reflect and re-reflect on what I had done in my classes. One of the clearest reflective moments for me occurred in one of my journal entries when I watched my own sessions of training in January 2014.

> Today, a trainee asked me about "withitness" and wanted to know how she could apply it in her classes. OH MY GOODNESS. I hadn't heard that before. It was embarrassing. At first, I tried to think and made up a response based on my discretion, but it was unsuccessful. Although then I honestly said "I don't know what it is, I search and let you know", I think I will lose their trust in me. I don't feel well now.

As the diary reads, I noticed a gap in my knowledge. Writing about this moment in my class filled me with a desire to find a way to solve it. It was then I asked some of my colleagues and surfed the net. Searching the net, I came across an article by Alan Waters (1998) about monkey management that argued that problems should be solved at the lowest organizational level. Applying it to English Language Teaching (ELT), he provided clear examples of answering students' questions by proposing the question to the class before providing the answer to it. By doing so, students will become responsible for their own learning. Besides, they do not lose their trust and confidence in you as a teacher. I applied this to teacher education and could add it to my toolkit as a teacher educator. Now, if trainees ask me a question I have no answer to, I am more confident and have more strategies to use since, at first, I pose the question to the class and ask them to find the answer to their questions, then I provide one form of teachers' scaffolding (Tajeddin & Kamali, 2020) for them.

Reflection in the form of journal writing not only could provide me with the answer to my questions but also could persuade me to include it in my professional life because it can enhance professional development and establish a culture of thinking and reflecting. I have found the answer to the question I was asked (withitness); however, the learning that occurred from this experience was deeper than that specific word; that is, I learned how to answer my students' questions and how to reflect on the learning moments of my classroom

From a theory-oriented to a practice-oriented teacher educator

Bridging the gap between theory and practice has always been the ultimate goal of theoreticians and practitioners. Although everyone in the field of education claims to do so, there is a big gap between these two agendas. I can

remember my first training course in an institution in Iran I was employed as a director of studies after three years of teaching in 2007. One of my main responsibilities was to run teacher training courses for the teachers of that institution. Not taking any formal training and not having enough experience in teacher training, I read the book "learning teaching" (Scrivener, 2010) and taught it in a very trainer-fronted environment. I was not informed about the wrong approach I took at that time because Iran is a high-power distance country (Hofstede et al., 2010), in which people do not challenge their authority. Based on Maslow's hierarchy of competence (Franz et al., 2018), one can only move to conscious competence if s/he becomes aware of his/her incompetence. Not being challenged and aware of my incompetence, I continued the way I was training for a while. As I have already mentioned, although I cannot call a point in my professional life when a radical change occurred in my approach to teacher training, an incident had a dramatic impact on my view on training sessions. I applied for a teacher training course in 2016, where I got familiar with the concept of process and content (McGrath, 1997) of training sessions. I learned that due to the nature of the teaching and training career, which is performance-based, trainees should not only learn what to teach but how to teach. Being interested in the concept, I read some literature regarding it (e.g., DelliCarpini, 2009; Woodward, 2003) and found out that teachers need to see how to teach rather than being told. One of the conclusions of McGrath's (1997) paper was a gist of what I have learned:

> If, in training (trainers), we use only those categories of process or process options with which participants are already familiar, we cannot expect them to use other processes in their own teaching. We may even dull their interest in their own learning (p. 172).

As the quote suggests, using different processes in transferring the content can add to teachers' teaching repertoire by which they can run more interesting, engaging, learner-friendly sessions; otherwise, teachers may acquire explicit knowledge about the language which cannot be transferred well to their learners.

Conclusion

The present study depicted my transformation as a teacher educator towards a more active role in my society, the one which reinforced more criticality in me where I asked more questions, reflected more frequently, and provided more opportunities for student teachers to have voices and agency, and criticized more constructively (Figure 1). To be a more critical self, I have suffered pain and experienced failures. However, the key to success in this journey was and is consistency.

My journey illustrates my metamorphosis as a teacher educator. This is significant on the ground that teacher educators are considered powerful agents who dictate the methods, approaches, and techniques to teachers. This is the raison d'être for this group's attitudes, beliefs, and ideologies to be under-researched. Nonetheless, this group is also influenced by social, cultural, political, and ideological
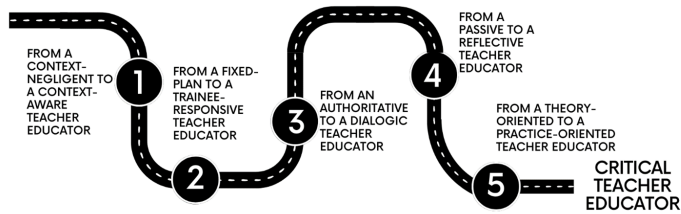
Figure 1. My journey towards a more critical teacher educator.

macro policies which shape and reshape their competence and performance (Hallett, 2010; Maaranen et al., 2019). This is noteworthy that the change is continuous and cannot be attributed to a specific moment; however, the moments that inspire, revolutionize, and challenge us are not few in this journey. It is our duty, then, to embrace them, reflect upon them, and accept them to bring about the change in us and therefore, move towards a better society.

Self-reflective autoethnographies, albeit being recognized as critical tools for teacher education (e.g., Canagarajah, 2012; Yazan, 2019) are not highlighted in teacher educators' learning per se. Therefore, the results of this study aid teacher educators to apply autobiographical self-reflection to their own context by collecting information about the critical moments in their classes, reflecting upon those events and drawing their own map of becoming a more critical teacher educator. This is also applicable for teachers to evaluate their own development and transformation to a more critical self. These reflective maps provide valuable schematic realizations of the teachers' and teacher educators' journey, when, why, and how the changes happen during this journey, and where they are heading in their journeys.

It should be also noted that "narratives are shaped by and imply an analysis of experience" (Canagarajah, 2012, p. 261) which can make it very personal and hard to generalize. Nevertheless, this limitation can turn into a benefit as it can encourage other researchers, teachers, and teacher educators to conduct it on themselves, their trainees, or their students in their own context and map their own experiential, reflective journey.

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