

## Reflections on Teaching Practices through Conditioning in Turkey

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### Abstract

*This paper seeks to picture the politically and ideologically-oriented power relations and inequalities that link to their social, economic, and cultural relations in the education system of Turkey. An in-class project is conducted with students learning English in a preparatory class in a state university that concentrates on scrutinizing the existing curriculum with a critical intervention in order to ensure a more meaningful student-teacher interaction, a reciprocal learning and teaching experience and knowledge (re)construction for their further studies. Informed by the critical pedagogy, this project aims to develop a deeper insight for students' education practices. The data collected through the project suggests that inviting critical pedagogy to the language learning classroom contributes to the participants both in terms of developing critical awareness and English language competence.*

**Keywords:** critical pedagogy, conditioning, curriculum, English language teaching and learning, transformative education.

### Introduction

The schooling experiences of students play a significant role in determining the person they become. These experiences may include all the teaching methods, textbooks and other materials used, the tests and quizzes within the curricula that are imposed on students. There is limited possibility to “tap the sociopolitical consciousness that students bring to class with them” that would in fact serve “as a catalyst for a continual quest for identity formation and social transformation” (Kumaravadivelu, 2003:37). To overcome the schooling boundaries that operate against both students and teachers, teachers need to take action as what Gramsci (1971) emphasizes as “organic intellectuals” and empower themselves as what Giroux (1988) puts it as “transformative intellectuals”. Thus, this is the way to maximize the learning opportunities for their students.

It is not so easy to get away from what Kumaravadivelu (2003:45) calls the “long-cherished notion” of pedagogical success that is built upon a “well-planned teacher’s agenda” supported by a “well-designed textbook” within a “well-conceived syllabus”. Whose interest do teachers serve? What are the ways that will enable teachers to reflect upon the ideological principles that inform their practices? How can they establish an “interested knowledge” (Pennycook, 1989) that serves a critical mind for both themselves and their students?

The starting point of a transformative education in all education systems is to know that education is *political*, and that all knowledge is *interested*. Educators need to perceive the *political* as an involvement connecting all relationships within a society, digging up all the fundamental inequalities, predominantly those based in class, race, and gender differences that cycle around the (re)production of social and cultural

inequalities and of particular forms of culture and knowledge. Educators also need to see all knowledge domains as *interested*, namely, that knowledge is socially constructed and engraved in relationships of power, representing particular ways of understanding and explaining the world according to the interests of certain individuals or groups (Pennycook, 1989).

Considering the school as a place of political struggle and holding the possibilities for producing change in and through the educational system involves the need to recognize that those who wish to deny the political nature of schooling are clearly showing an ideological position pro the *status quo*. (Pennycook, 1989). Paulo Freire explains how the retreat from the political is managed through means that suggest the superficial appearance of education serving everyone, thus assuring that it maintains to function in the interest of the dominant class (Freire & Macedo, 1987: 122).

Forcing in more centralized curricula, the increasing state intervention in schools, the development and legitimization of teacher-proof materials and prescribed teaching methods have all lead to the gradual de-skilling of the teacher's role and has put greater institutional control over classroom practice (Apple,1986).

The fundamental aspect of critical pedagogy is the role of educators in the process of developing educational critique. A good visualization of the situation would be to suggest that educators make decisions about teaching based on their own educational experiences, their personalities, their particular institutional, social, cultural, and political circumstances, their understanding of their particular students' collective and individual needs, and so on. Henry Giroux (1993) has described educators as potentially “transformative intellectuals” because they take a critical stance toward their own practice and the practice of others. In doing so, educators become active in shaping the curriculum, having a role in shaping school policy, defining educational philosophies, and working with their communities in various capacities. Giroux argues for the Gramscian concept of praxis, or theoretically oriented action, and that of the intellectual, who has the leading role in promoting an agenda for change. Transformative intellectuals, as Giroux (1993) rightly puts, realize their own theoretical convictions and are capable of diverse strategies for translating their own theories into practice.

This paper seeks ways to picture the politically and ideologically-oriented power relations and inequalities that link to their social, economic, and cultural relations in the education system by challenging the standardized curriculum of English in the preparatory school of a state university in Turkey. In order to present a thorough discussion, firstly, it reviews the main assumptions of the test-approach and some of its practices. After that, it gives a discussion of the critical pedagogy. Then, the paper relates the discussion of the critical pedagogy to an in-class project conducted with students learning English in a preparatory class at university level. The project concentrates on scrutinizing the existing curriculum with a critical intervention in order to ensure a meaningful student-teacher interaction, a more thriving learning and teaching experience in general and better outcomes in projects and in their further studies. Informed by the critical pedagogy, this attempt aims at suggesting a deeper insight for students' education practices.

## Ritualization of Exams

As Foucault (1977, in Lauder, Brown, Dillabough & Halsey, 2006: 131) argues, many universities “normalize” students by comparing them with each other at many times and hierarchizing them when needed, and homogenizing them no matter how different they are and also excluding them when necessary. The majority of universities in Turkey are very good examples of these ideologically constructed practices. One of the most obvious examples of this kind of a normalizing process in Turkey is found in the preparatory schools of universities in which students are trained to learn English along with never-ending exams. These exams - as clearly identified in Foucault’s words - are *highly ritualized* since they play an important role in marking the gaps, hierarchizing qualities, skills and aptitudes, as well as punishing and rewarding. All these rituals make the exams serve for a *normalizing judgment*. Under the disguise of getting across the students to the same level of language proficiency, the whole set of the practices of preparatory system contributes to the homogenization of students in line with the larger educational philosophy followed in Turkey. Homogenization derives from the monoglot ideology which is based on an ideologically configured belief that a society is *in effect* monolingual (Silverstein, 1996) and the effects of such an ideology are immense for all peoples living in the particular region in question. One effect is related to maintaining practices that efficiently restrain linguistic diversity in the public domain and one other effect is related to how monoglot ideology produces and regulates identities that are constructed within the country, leading to the homogenization in question. To quote Blommaert (2006), “the state often appears as the guardian of the monoglot idealization of the link *language-people-country* and thus “offers and often imposes by coercion” a homogenization of mind into its citizens.

The preparatory school is a one-year period (two semesters) at most of the universities offering courses in English in Turkey. Training of English in the preparatory school in which this study took place begins in October and ends in June for the students. There are three different proficiency levels, that is, students are placed into one of the three levels according to their proficiency test results as a beginner level, an intermediate level or an upper-intermediate level. Teachers teach in one of these levels throughout the year. The main objective is to take the proficiency test given in June so that students can start their classes in their own departments the following year. The proficiency test held in June is a common standardized test that is one for all students from all levels in that specific university. Students who fail this test have the chance to repeat the preparatory class one more year. If these repeater students cannot pass the preparatory class in their second year either, they are not allowed to study at their own department which is based on English-medium instruction. Thus, the students who fail the preparatory twice, lose the chance to attend an English-medium department but are sent to a subject-equivalent department at any particular university in Turkey that provide Turkish-medium instruction. That is to say, the students who obtain the right to study at a particular English-medium university<sup>1</sup> may lose their chance to study in their own department if they are not marked as proficient enough in English. It is a tough deal for students who have already taken a rather challenging

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<sup>1</sup> There are few universities in Turkey such as Boğaziçi University, and Middle East Technical University where the main medium of instruction is English. There are also some universities such as Marmara University, and İstanbul Technical University where some departments offer courses in English, but the rest of the departments offer Turkish medium instruction.

university entrance exam to be able to attend a university that provides a department in English. In other words, these students lose the acclaimed right that they already gained by another exam; the university entrance exam.

The students who start classes in that preparatory department are already stressed out with the knowledge that they need to pass the English proficiency test in June. Hence, they concentrate mostly on what the curriculum offers to them to achieve the proficiency test. This is how the story is viewed from the student perspective, yet a similar story is read from the institution itself. The curriculum of preparatory department is arranged accordingly and the teachers are routinized to follow the strict program made to back up the tests. The ritual takes place with pre-arranged books and materials as well as timely exam schedules. Teachers and students attend classes and cover lessons exactly as it is stated in the curriculum so that students do their best in the quizzes, achievement exams and lastly in the final proficiency test. In fact, setting up and running a separate department with the name of “testing office” in the school instead of having an “evaluation and assessment department” is a clear indication of how gaining competence in English is perceived and how objectives are met within the preparatory school.

### **How the Curriculum Is Viewed**

Knowledge encompasses a territory of objective facts in the visible curriculum: it is stated externally both to the teachers and to the students which is an imposition on the person who deals with it. That is, knowledge is not questioned, not analyzed, and not negotiated but mastered to be pronounced as it is to the students (Giroux, 1988). Traditional curriculum, as stated by Giroux supports an “ahistorical, consensus-oriented, and politically conservative” view (p.14). The preparatory curriculum implemented in the said department follows the footsteps of this view of traditional curriculum. The curriculum of the preparatory department, controlled and managed meticulously, disregards any kind of extensive reading, does not promote critical thinking and does not provide a space for discussions.

Nevertheless, Giroux (1988) explains how a curriculum should be viewed as a part of the wider societal interactions. The focus is on two different levels. Firstly, it is on the relationship between schools and the dominant society, which is politically and ideologically-oriented. It is about how schools serve for the larger social order both with the hidden and visible curricula. Secondly, the focus is on everyday classroom relationships, suggesting underlying meanings, restraints, cultural values and social relations.

Keeping in mind such foci, it is necessary to go through some of the key assumptions of the critical pedagogy to see how they relate to the student projects.

### **Reflecting Critically about the Conditioning Process**

“We are not totally ‘determined beings’ since we can reflect critically about our conditioning process and go beyond it”.

(Freire as cited in Au, 2009: 223)

In its broadest sense, critical pedagogy concentrates on emancipation of mind through the development of critical consciousness, which is the repositioning of oneself through the eyes of the dispossessed and struggle against the ideological and institutional processes and forms that reproduce oppressive situations (Apple, 1995). Critical pedagogy renders various power relations and disparities circulating around us. These powers and disparities, however, are not finite and not fixed. They cannot be explained in a vacuum either. Hence, critical pedagogy attempts to disrupt the effects of oppressive regimes of power both in the classroom and in the larger society by developing critical consciousness.

Some of the essential components of critical pedagogy, namely problem posing, dialogue, role of teacher, personal narratives, and positionality, are very much relevant to a discussion about curriculum and language teaching practices.

### **Problem Posing not Solving**

Problem solving comforts whereas problem posing disturbs. Problem posing leads to asking questions that many do not want to hear (Wink, 2005). It is a matter of both visible and the hidden curriculum. Problem posing can interfere with the routine curriculum and make people question the mundane tasks and commonplace practices. It is “a critical inquiry into the existing curriculum” (p. 51) and it is a robust way to crack the hidden curriculum; the policy of the institution, the methodology, the politics. A possible attempt of problem posing can be what Anyon (as cited in Apple, Au & Gandin, 2009) refers as a ‘power analysis’ (p.393). It suggests evaluating the causes and solutions of current challenges in societal respect. She believes in the need of answering such questions as: Who is impacted by the problem? Who makes decisions that determine what those individuals or groups do and say? What kinds of informal influence or formal power do they have? What kinds of informal influence or formal power do community residents have over the situation? Whose interests are affected by decisions that have been made? Who are potential allies in an attempt to solve the problem? Only after these questions are researched, do students engage in posing problems leading to practices in line with the critical pedagogy (p. 393).

### **Dialogue Finds Its Way**

Cummins (2001) calls on educators to promote critical dialogue in the classroom in numerous micro-interactions negotiated between educators and students daily. He contends that it is in the interpersonal spaces of those interactions that knowledge is acquired and identities negotiated. “Dialogue is talk that changes us or our context... is a two-way, interactive visiting... is communication that creates and recreates multiple understandings” (Wink, 2005:41). Students are elevated from that “uncomfortable place of relearning and unlearning” to a transformative stage of learning (p.42). It is a stage when students and teacher(s) become aware of the hidden curriculum to face what is pushed into the zone of dark, dangerous and unseen. Dialogue interrogates the normal. That is to say, it is nearly impossible to perceive the world outside our own bounds of normality, to acknowledge and identify issues other than our universal truths, because we have been constructed by our own unique identity and experiences in the world. Takacs (2002) suggests that “we live much of our lives in our own heads, in a reconfirming dialogue with ourselves” (p.168). Thus, “even when we discuss crucial issues with others, much of the dialogue is not

dialogue: it is monologue where we work to convince others to understand us or to adopt our view” (p.168). Engagement in a dialogue in the critical pedagogical sense enables both students and teachers to question this kind of a normality that surrounds us and impels us to take further steps for multiple understandings.

### **The Role of Teachers in Critical Pedagogy: Critical Educators Step In**

Cummins (2000:10) suggests that “to create a future we need to rupture the past”. Change in the deep structure is only possible when educators walk into their classrooms “burdened not by the anger of the past and the disdain of the present, but with their own identities focused on transforming the social futures towards which their students are travelling” (p.11).

The critical educators are involved in a vital process of reimagining schools and classrooms as social justice building spaces (Anyon, 2009: 390). Maybe developing critical consciousness in students through dialogues, and readings would not induce them to participate in transgressive politics but would help students to a crucial base of understanding. Au (2009:228) suggests that Freire urged the teachers for the struggle against hegemonic ideologies of inequality in their classrooms with the realization that any kind of struggle of any context means an inclusion of oppressive forces as well.

The educators who can transform coercive power relations into collaborative ones- even if this transformation is at a very micro level of interactions, that is, in the interactions of individual educators with their students- it still serves as “the threat of a good example” (Chomsky, 1987, as cited in Cummins, 2000:10). Hence, only if teachers are centrally involved in critical pedagogy, will it be possible to develop the curriculum and the minds in a truly critical way.

Critical educators, on the one hand, involve students with societal issues in classroom settings, and on the other hand, introduce them into social networks which they may further contribute to. Yet all teachers as educators can in fact encourage students to critically examine the existing images of one-sided judgments and conditionings we receive through various circulating discourses and the power relations that link to them. Yet as Harris and Morrison (2003) claim, teachers in general are indifferent, even against one may claim, to engage their students with something controversial that would rock the boat. It is a matter of ‘rocking the boat’ by considering the unconsidered. It is a matter of dredging up what is embedded in the power disparities in relations among groups and in their positions within society.

### **Seeing Beyond: Personal Narrative/Literacies**

“Critical pedagogy offers a way of combining a trenchant critique of previously unquestioned practices in education with concrete ways of introducing change - that is, with a belief in the transformative power of the individual teacher” (Johnston, 1999: 557). The teacher leads the way to deeper insights by creating such projects that enable students to think and act out of the mainstream.

Discovering the beyond starts with narratives and grows into a deeper sea. Every student has their own telling, their own story. Teachers need to share these personal

experiences in order to feel the students. Intimacy is getting one step further from the distanced teaching- learning atmosphere of the classroom setting. Personal narratives or as Wink (2005) describes “personal literacies” are the background knowledge and life experience that students bring to school with them. Yet personal literacies are to serve as a complement to critical literacy. Cummins (2001) views critical literacy as one of the mainstays of ‘meaning,’ alongside comprehensible input. He suggests that educators can make meaning comprehensible by tapping into students’ personal literacies, thus allowing students to examine meaning at a deeper level. This fosters the development of critical literacy, and lays the groundwork for students to achieve maximum cognitive engagement and identity investment. Thus, for educators to develop students’ critical literacy, they must first grasp their students’ personal realities so as to become learners and identify with their students’ (Nieto, 2002:217). Schools need to become two-way ‘learning institutions,’ with educators learning from their students (Cummins, 2001: 123).

### **Positionality**

Shared personal narratives provide personal transformation. Every student holds a positionality, or even multiple positionalities in tandem with their background experiences. That is how students position themselves in relation to others as: “dominant/subordinate, marginal/center, empowered/powerless” (Takacs, 2002:168). That is how they judge the world. Takacs defines positionality as “understanding where you stand with respect to power. From this understanding, we have a standpoint from which to challenge power and change ourselves.” I not as a teacher but as a person listen to and am aware of readily-made or formerly gained perspectives of my students. Embedding the context of students’ lives into the teaching-learning experience runs against the “banking model of education” and serves for the needs of critical pedagogy. Freire (2000:75) in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* argues that the efforts of the teachers “must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization.” The teachers “efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their relations with them (p.75).” It is only when students can see outside the bounds of their positionalities, there will be a transition towards an understanding of differing standpoints. And it is only when the teacher becomes partners of the students that there will be a possible crack in their positionalities.

### **The Project on Conditionings**

#### **The Notion of “Conditioning”**

"And that," put in the Director sententiously, "that is the secret of happiness and virtue-liking what you've got to do. All conditioning aims at that: making people like their inescapable social destiny."

(Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, Ch. 1 p.16)

The notion of “conditioning” was taken from Huxley’s novel, *Brave New World*. Every person in the new world of Huxley is conditioned to fit the society's needs: to like the class they are in, to get pleasure from the work they do, to enjoy the clothes they wear, to take pleasure in the hobbies they take up. People are psychologically

conditioned, primarily by hypnopaedia or sleep-teaching. Sleep-teaching is employed on all babies to condition them to like or dislike certain things. The World State brainwashes its citizens by conditioning techniques underlyingly, and ensures social stability surface-wise. The World State constructs people, or in a way educates them according to its wishes, needs and wants but nobody understands they maintain in a world made of orders due to their conditioning.

### **The Emergence of the Project**

From a Freirean perspective, class projects within a critical pedagogy framework cultivate a deeper questioning of the world in which we live. In our project the problem-situation finds base through the conditionings we have as human beings. In other words, the main motif of the project was to create an environment in which my students and I critically question the world we are living in and how we are surrounded with conditioned people - including ourselves. Meanwhile, the project was also employed to upgrade all learning and teaching skills in a language classroom.

In order to achieve these goals, I selected a book which was not a part of the curriculum. Students are sometimes provided with books selected by teacher's choice for different skill practices. I chose this book because critical educators should make decisions about teaching materials by taking into consideration the social, cultural, and political circumstances and their students' collective and individual needs (Apple, 1986). Thus, we started reading the book "Brave New World" written by Aldous Huxley in 1932. This book, a dystopia, chosen as an in-class reading, suggesting many topics to be discussed among which are the State, hierarchically ranked groups in societies, (non)citizenship, cultural and ethical values to be the most prominent. The World State of Huxley exercises discipline by means of observing each class citizen. It exploits its citizens by offering happiness through drugs, hypnotizing them for standardized living conditions they need to fit in. A kind of *normalizing judgment* is inscribed at the heart of this World State to increase its efficiency.

### **How We Proceeded**

Students and I read the book, discussed many themes that came into question from the book for a whole semester. One theme usually led to another one, the world in the book led its way into our world. Esra<sup>2</sup>, one of my students, wrote down her opinion about the book:

"First of all, I must say Brave New World added so many things to my life, my mind and my personality. I was so glad we read this book, no matter why. I started to think about my opinions, people, system and life again by means of Brave New World..."

In fact, this book was a warm-up leading to the project on conditionings, as the book overall covered the concept of conditioning citizens. Thus, I raised a question in class after reading *Brave New World* and expected students to critically focus on it. The question was: "Take the concept conditioning and apply it into your life. Give examples of your conditioning or of people that you know." This question was the beginning of the problem posing stage. Although this project was not intended to be in the pre-established visible curriculum, with the arousal of the problem-situation, that

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<sup>2</sup> The names used for the participants in the study are not real. They are pseudonyms.



is, my question that led to the discerning answers I obtained from students, suggested more than the visible (curriculum), unwrapping its way “to reflect the curriculum of the students’ lives” (Wink, 2005: 51).

Another student, Ahmet, explained the emergence of the project as follows:

“Everything started off due to our in-class reading book *Brave New World*. *Brave New World* is a dystopian and it discusses people of future. *Brave New World*’s purpose is to show how people can turn into machines. Aldous Huxley, the writer of *Brave New World* wanted to show how all humans can have the same ideas and perceptions about life, and how they can think the same. Writer claimed that if you are conditioned about something, you can’t think about something wisely and from many sides and you can live with your conditioning. Therefore, if everyone is conditioned about the same thing, they become the same. We considered about our conditionings after reading *Brave New World* and our projects came into being”.

### **Project Groups**

We formed groups to work on themes on conditionings, namely conditionings on Kurds, Atatürk<sup>3</sup>, Armenians and Greeks. In fact, these themes derived from student papers among many others such as gender issues, media, and so forth; that is, these were the themes my students considered the need to focus on the most and felt the urgency of discussing and researching in their groups.

My students started with the first impressions, knowledge and possible conditionings related to their themes. Then, they collected data from various resources some of which were from the seminars they attended, from *Newroz*<sup>4</sup>, people on the street, people working for certain organizations, newspaper agencies, from their families, neighbors and friends. They discussed their findings and ideas in class for many days. The changes in thoughts and possible conditionings came about in time. Lastly, students had their presentations on different conditioning themes stressing out the issues in question and the strengths and weaknesses of each project, and pointed further implications of their study.

Below, I share some of my students’ first thoughts, their data collection procedure, their subsequent changes, their after thoughts of the themes they selected.

### **First Thoughts**

Sertan, who comes from a family with a military background, participated in the project as a member of the “Conditionings about Kurds” group. He explicated his feelings as:

“Before this project I did not have a wide knowledge about Kurdish people and their traditions or anything about their beliefs. I couldn’t believe when

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<sup>3</sup> Atatürk, or Mustafa Kemal, was the key figure of the newly founded Turkish Republic in 1923, after the collapse of Ottoman Empire. He led the military of the country during the war, and was the head of the State until he died in 1938. Kemalism, is a philosophy based on his thoughts regarding such issues as nation, culture, politics and modernism, which have been reproduced over and over.

<sup>4</sup> *Newroz* is known as both the beginning of spring and political struggle of Kurds for social, political and cultural autonomy. *Newroz* in Turkey is attended and celebrated mainly by the Kurdish movement in Turkey.

somebody says I'm Kurdish, especially my closer friends. I was shocked and couldn't say anything".

Ece, a student in the same group, shared her first impressions as follows:

"I had a fear about Kurdish people. When I saw Kurdish people on the buses or somewhere else, I used to feel harshness and unfamiliarity in their eyes".

Belçin, taking part in another theme group, expressed her first thoughts later on:

"I have worked on conditioning about Armenian people. I had different ideas and prejudices about them. I was a conditioned person. The historians, my friends and people around me are really conditioned about this subject".

Mehmet uttered his voice about conditionings in his paper:

"Mine asked us "what is your conditioning?" I wrote what came to my mind first. My conditioning was about the leader who established the Republic of Turkey. Mustafa Kemal always kept my mind busy. When I was a child I used to think Mustafa Kemal was a great man and he had not done any wrong. However, I didn't know why I thought about Mustafa Kemal like this; I mean I actually I didn't know why he was a perfect man. Nobody taught me why Mustafa Kemal was a perfect man, I just learned that he was a great man, that's all."

And he went on explaining his conditioning process:

"Mustafa Kemal Atatürk... He is the founder of Turkish Republic and our hero. We should appreciate and be grateful because we own a lot of things to him. Thus, there are pictures and statues everywhere. We should respect. It is not true to say something bad about him. He is not a normal person with all senses or emotions. He is different. He is like a ghost or like God (!)..."

Mehmet became an active participant of the "Conditionings on Atatürk" group, and dwelled on the theme with his friends effectively.

### **Conditioning Discourses**

Students started questioning themselves while they proceeded with their projects. Lara, a student in one of the group projects, expressed how she felt throughout the process:

"During all period of studying this project, we did so many things with my friends: interviews, searching, meetings... At the beginning, it was just an assignment for me but in time, I started to realize something interesting. I was searching about conditioning but I was also conditioned. While I was asking questions to people about their own conditioning, I tried to answer to myself without control..."

Students and I talked over the significance of discourse, how to collect discourse from various sources, including interviews, discussions, simple talks, and observations. I explained to them the importance of looking into the data analytically and encouraged them to consider deeply every sentence people uttered during their interviews. For instance, students who concentrated on the reasons behind conditionings on Kurds,

came up with various discourses during their observation and data collection process as: “Kurds are considered as ignorant people due to various reasons such as birth control and manipulation by external forces; they are thought to have bad intentions towards the Turkish population (changing the Turkish alphabet) and they want to divide the State; they are not equal citizens and should not be given any rights because they misuse them; high population among Kurds is a source of ignorance, therefore the fate of Kurds should not be in their hands- only the Turkish state can give them rights.”

These students from the same study group analyzed the sources of the conditionings they revealed during their study process. While they were pondering upon the conditioning discourses, they searched, read different sources (some of which I shared with them) and suggested the followings as underlying conditioning mechanisms: lack of knowledge about the history of Kurdish people because of the dominant ideology; misinformation about the thoughts and ideas of the Kurdish people about the Turkish society and State; lack of information and lack of appreciation of the people about the Kurdish community and culture; self-centeredness: giving rights to “them” by “us”; xenophobia; dominant “national” education system; mainstream media; one-sided evaluation of events and phenomena.

Esra who worked in the group of “Conditionings on Kurds” expressed her involvement in the process with following words:

“We did interviews, surveys and we shared our ideas. We learned how not to talk one-sided and discuss public’s problems more. Interviews we did were the best part of project because our interviewees mentioned very sensitive points related to our subject and their examples showed what they were subjected to. The memories... they affected me a lot. Also the notions we learned, like orientalism, critical pedagogy, xenophobia added a lot to my personal thinking. Especially critical pedagogy and the opinions it brings...”

### **Welcomed Changes**

The data collection, analysis and evaluation took more than a month. Lastly, I asked them to reflect upon their study through presentations so that they could share ideas with the whole class. In addition, they wrote essays to evaluate the outcomes of their projects. There were many comments in these essay papers one of which is presented partially below. Ruken titled her essay as “How I was before and how do I think now”:

“Actually, I thought I didn’t have strict conditionings about Kurdish people. I cannot say I hated Kurds and their culture. But I should confess that I had thought they were no successful Kurdish businessmen, politicians and even students. The worst degrees in OSS<sup>5</sup> were in the Eastern cities<sup>6</sup>. But, then I learnt children there were deprived of education opportunities. It is also forbidden to study in their own language. In spite the fact that there are so many German and American schools which give students education in

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<sup>5</sup> It is the university entrance exam taken by all students who wish to continue higher education in Turkey. It is taken once in a year and students are expected to answers multiple choice questions from a wide array of subjects in three hours.

<sup>6</sup> Kurdish people have historically lived in cities mostly in the eastern part of Turkey, known as Kurdistan before the foundation of the Turkish State.

German and English, there is no Kurdish education in the cities in which Kurdish people live. All of this aside, they weren't allowed to speak Kurdish wherever they want..."

"I can say that, when I saw a politician from DTP<sup>7</sup> on TV, I was getting angry and I was turning the TV off. But now I listen to what they say. Should we accept there is a problem and should we want to find a solution, we have to accept that Kurdish people should have rights as much as Turks. I mean we need to implement critical thinking first in our minds and then in our behaviors. I hope everybody could have at least one chance to realize these realities and how ignorant we are. I wish people would be aware of Kurdish issue instead of just accusing Kurds or doing nothing."

Derin reflected upon critical thinking and pedagogy as follows:

"Critical thinking is very important. If people have critical thinking, they will become more respectful, balanced, and understanding day by day. The aims of critical pedagogy are to show prejudices and to be aware of other people. We have worked on to show these. I believe we have done it nicely by questioning what we saw and did not see beforehand."

Ahmet emphasized his progress as:

"There are so many sides. I know something better now. This project provided me to realize distinctive view points. Diversity contains different colors in every area. This project helped our progress so much..."

Ece finalized her thoughts about the project in the following lines:

"(It) was such a great experience to realize our conditioning together, with brain synthesis and critical pedagogy. It was not good only for our thoughts but also the projects we will do in our departments, even the difficulties we faced taught us so many things. I couldn't believe I was one of the people who look strangely when someone speaks Kurdish or who don't like them. I used to look at things one-sided. However, I can sincerely say things have changed a lot in my mind from sentences I use to thoughts in my mind. I am so glad we did such a brilliant project."

Lastly, Erdem, a student in the group of "Conditionings about Armenians", uttered how he benefited from the project:

"In this project there are so many new things that I learned. Actually realization is a better word for this situation because even I live those things, I didn't notice any of them. Before this project I never thought about why some streets which Armenian and Greek people lived generally are named as Ergenekon or Bozkurt<sup>8</sup>. I never thought about why the surname of a Kurdish politician is Turk.

I'm so glad that I have new opinions and new perspective about this subject. I believe that I can get rid of my prejudices in a very short term. On the other

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<sup>7</sup> DTP: a pro-Kurdish party in Turkey which was closed down. They struggle for the political and cultural rights of the Kurdish people and in particular the democratization of Turkey in general.

<sup>8</sup> These names are symbols commonly used in nationalist and ultra-nationalist Turkish discourses regarding the origin of Turks as a nation.

hand, we did great job by doing an interview with an author from Agos<sup>9</sup>... Now I can understand my prejudices more easily than past and I can get rid of them more easily. I think the hardest part of doing something is the first part and I believe that we all passed the first part.”

### **Where Does English Place Itself?**

Apart from the content-wise discussions and how they contributed to our main goal, it turned out that one of the methodological steps, the medium of interaction, involved in the project also went well with the assumptions of the critical pedagogy. The traditional view of language teaching sees the use of the target language as the sole medium of interaction between teacher and students. This view is based on monolingual way of thinking language education<sup>10</sup>. It excludes any use of the linguistic background of the students and deprives them of utilizing them as critical resources for learning. In line with this assumption, the curricula of preparatory schools of English in Turkey are designed only to teach English. Therefore, teacher and student interaction is limited to the point where students can comprehend and articulate in English. Students and teachers are supposed to express themselves only in English, which turns into a conditioning in itself.

Contrary to the general expectations, in our critical thinking projects, the dialogues are not expected to be done only in English. People think in their native language so the dialogue process should proceed not only in English either. At times, English prevents students from expressing themselves fluently, reflecting ideas precisely and understanding one another unmistakably. Kumaravadivelu (2006: 167) ponders that an English-only approach hinders students from ‘putting to use their excellent L1<sup>11</sup> linguistic resource to serve the cause of their second language learning’. And how much it serves for this cause is questionable. Thus, our class project is designed in such methodology that enables students to voice themselves in Turkish (or switch to English when they would like to use certain sentences or phrases) while explaining their personal stories, while discussing their themes in groups and during the interviews for their projects. Students are given the possibility to reflect their (mis)understandings and contextualize their thoughts in Turkish with dialogues during and after class hours. English takes place more dominantly in the product stage when students set up their blogs and when they present their translations, findings, analysis and evaluation.

From the day on this project came into being, my students and I got an intimate click with the help of Turkish. Students who usually stay apart in most of the routine class activities or discussions, students who do not feel apt to contributing to any conversation, became talkers, sharers and doers. Since I also participated in some of their group dialogues in Turkish, the dialogues became more cherished, more personal, and more demanding. They asked for more, questioned more and talked more. They felt the importance of being listened to, not for the sake of saying something to be tested or corrected in a foreign language, but for the sake of uttering their own voices.

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<sup>9</sup> Agos is a weekly Armenian newspaper published in Turkish in Turkey. It is mostly concerned with the Armenian issue in Turkey and other issues related to democratization, human rights and so on. Its founder, Hrant Dink, was assassinated by an ultra-nationalist Turkish group said to be backed by the illegal organizations.

<sup>10</sup> See B. Kumaravadivelu (2006) and J. Cummins (2009) among others.

<sup>11</sup> L1: first language

Some students opened up their personal stories to me during talks before and after class. It was a natural course of action due to the previous readings and discussions in class. They were not complaining about, agitating for or justifying their beliefs on their family life issues and way of life but considering the cause of their feelings and viewpoints at length towards the themes they were about to deal with. They felt the need to question their positionalities. They had worries in their minds, they had questions that had had fixed answers until that point. They wanted to know if *Brave New World* could be the very reality of their own time.

On the other hand, my students enhanced their English language skills through more relevant and meaningful activities. They had to do search the Internet sources, books and articles which were in English mostly. They took notes from these authentic sources, paraphrased texts they had read for their projects, did translations to English, wrote questionnaires, posted on their blogs in English and presented their projects in English. In many personal talks with me, they told me that they became more interested in their English courses and their language proficiency improved considerably.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This class project has led my students and me into the world of critical pedagogy and thus has played an important role in my personal and professional development. By being introduced into the critical pedagogy, the way I see the teaching profession has been redefined. Having a critical perspective enabled my students and I to see what can be achieved when the test-based curriculum is replaced by project-based curriculum grounded on fundamental components of critical pedagogy that includes themes of the wider societal interactions. These interactions, mostly politically and ideologically-oriented, connect the schools and the society with each other. The focal point of such projects is on relationships, suggesting the importance of themes that include a problem posing manner, dialogues, personal narratives, and positionality within the classroom and the society in general. This approach leads to a genuine interaction of teaching and learning instead of an artificially-designed English learning environment with a test-happy approach.

My students learned a lot by their discussions, observations, analyses, and evaluations. However, I must confess that I learned a lot from my students and their work. The momentous side of this study on my part was my growing awareness and insight into the issues discussed in class. I myself worked as much as the students so as to explore, and analyze to a greater extent and to be a better facilitator for the students. I realized how the genuine interaction between students and teachers gave way to better learning environments. From the teacher perspective, I come into a full understanding of the importance of conducting such projects and how these projects influenced us teaching into the class and the society we live in. Due to the conditioning project, I also went beyond the existing curriculum of the preparatory department, challenged the hidden curriculum of education with its wider power relations and where it takes us as teachers, students, individuals and communities.

From their point of view, students became more conscious of the learning practices and they became each other's facilitators when needed not only during these projects but also during their own classroom studies. Students, who were isolated from the rest

of the class socio-politically and culturally merged into a whole, were offered an equal stance and voice during class participation. Students with less proficient English were voluntarily supported by more proficient students during the class hours, not just because the proficient students wanted so but because the less proficient ones had the courage and felt the intimacy and trust of the more proficient ones. Moreover, by doing a lot of readings in English on different social, cultural and political issues, by doing translations from Turkish to English from the data they collected, by presenting their understandings and analyses in English, and by giving English feedback and comments to each other in class discussions, students covered a wide range of vocabulary that was not included in their prescribed textbooks and curriculum, which undoubtedly contributed to their speaking skills, gave them a chance to use their English more productively and at the same time boosted their self-confidence in English.

As a last word, this project is a practice in which students and the teacher explore and rewrite their own stories, and gain new understandings and insights as to who they can become. Such practices enable us to move beyond our present state of being. By applying the Freirian understanding of education where questions and not answers are the core of the curriculum, the critical educators challenge students to think about why they think and act the way they do. In doing so, the critical educators become active participants in shaping educational policies, especially starting from their own school policies; so to say, even with a small intervention to the prearranged curriculum like this project, it is possible for educators to challenge the undemocratic power relations surrounding education that rise from the inequalities in communities.

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