A Freirean approach to English as a Second Language literacy

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A Freirean approach to English as a Second Language literacy

by

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This is to certify that the Master’s thesis of
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I would like to dedicate my entire work to the memory of Paulo Freire. I would not be the person I am today if I had not read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* back in 1988. He was my inspiration and many times his books were my only companions. His work reminded me about the person I am and the person I want to be.

I would like to thank my father for showing me that honesty is one of the most important values of a human being and my mother for never letting me give up. I also would like to thank all the members of my committee, specially Dr. Vann for agreeing to be my mentor and for her willingness to learn more about Freire's work.

My students back in Brazil also deserve credit. I am sure they do not know where I am or what I am doing but their words when I left Brazil, my home country, touched me deeply. They were angry and disappointed with my decision of leaving my country. They did not understand how somebody who talked about social justice for all in Brazil, about loving and fighting for a better country could just abandon it. I did not abandon my country and I never will. I hope they, one day, understand my reasons.

I am very grateful to all those people who, in a way or another, dedicate their lives to fight for issues of social justice.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

"The world may be read and expressed in spoken words, but sooner or later the speech needs to be complemented through writing. It is for this reason that there cannot be reading of the text without reading of the world, without reading of the context". (Freire, 1994).

Interest in critical pedagogy and critical literacy as alluded to above is growing in North America (Faigin 1985; Graman, 1988; Pennycook, 1990; Wallerstein 1983; and others). Recently, some second language teaching scholars have suggested that education is a political act, thus requiring Second Language Education (SLE) to be seen within a broader range of social and even political thoughts as well (Hammond & Macken-Horarik 1999; Rivera 1999; Frye 1999; and others). There is a need to see SLE “tied up with the most crucial educational, cultural and political issues of our time” (Pennycook, 1999, p. 346). In other words, there is a need “to read the world” in SLE as well. Yet, at present, we have seen few specific examples of attempts to apply critical pedagogy and systematically study its affects to non-cohesive groups of students. To learn more about how SLE can go beyond the conventions of language form (Price, 1999) requires that more research be done, particularly research which examines how critical pedagogy might work with a more culturally and linguistically mixed ESL group.

One of the most prominent forms of critical pedagogy can be found in a method developed in Brazil by Paulo Freire in the early 1960’s. The Freirean method views education as a political act and language as an "ideational, signifying
system that plays a central role in how we understand ourselves and the world" (Pennycook, 1990, p.304). The present study applies the Freirean approach to the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) literacy. The results of this study suggest that social and political issues are an important aspect of ESL as well.

The Freirean Approach

The Freirean approach to literacy is highly political in that it invites the learners to see themselves as agents of social transformation. Yet, while political, it is also an approach that talks about love, respect, and compassion in everyday life. Freire used critical literacy as the fundamental base of his approach. In this form of literacy a “Text is but one way in which we express our literacy. We not only read and write (make sense of and from) the alphabet in connected passages, but we also read other types of symbols embedded in social practice and institutions and write other types of symbols through our social action to define ourselves and affirm our cultural and social histories” (Shannon, P. 1992; p.1).

In the early 60’s, while working with illiterate people in Brazil, Paulo Freire introduced his concept of critical pedagogy called pedagogy of freedom. Critical pedagogy can be understood as a “notion of critique that also carries with it a sense of possibility for transformation, and an exploration of the nature of an relationship between culture, knowledge and power” (Pennycook, 1990; p.307).

Chacoff (1989) defines Freire’s ideas as “deeply contextual” (p.49) because learning to read and write is related to the discussion of themes that are important
to the learners. Learners acquire writing and reading skills through a process of inquiry into the nature of real-life problems facing their community.

Freire (1970) worked with “generative themes”, that is, he looked for themes that would generate discussion in the classroom (interestingly, Chomsky also used the word generative to refer to the idea that a set of syntactic, semantic, phonological, and morphological rules can generate infinite set of well-formed sentences in a language, quite different meaning from Freire’s). In the first phase of the project, he researched the community he was going to work with. The second phase involved choosing “generative words” for the classroom. Freire believed that such words should have special importance to learners and, above all, should evoke the social, cultural, and political contexts in which learners used them. He presented the generative words in the classroom through pictures, thus inviting students to think about the social meaning of the word first before codifying it as a graphic symbol.

Freire’s method helped to empower students and made them agents of social transformation (Faigin, 1985; Shor, 1989). Not only that, his method proved to be effective in making people think about their lives and be actively engaged in society. An example of such effectiveness can be noticed by the high levels of political awareness detected among the masses in Brazil when the Freirean approach was used to teach adult illiterates.
Critical Pedagogy in North America

The use of Freire’s ideas is relatively new in North America. Some educators have developed well-regarded Freire-based programs (Graman, 1988; Faigin, 1985), but they are limited to cohesive groups of single cultures and language backgrounds.

Graman (1988) applied Freire’s ideas to his ESL class while teaching Spanish-speaker farmworkers in a rural area in Colorado. Graman reports that “generative themes are the sort of activity in which learners must engage in order to construct knowledge and language both actively and critically” (p.437). According to him, incorporating Freire’s generative themes into teaching is basing teaching on real human needs and concerns.

Faigin (1985) also applied Freire’s ideas in the development of a curriculum unit for farmworkers’ education in Canada (whose native language was Punjabi). Using photostories, Faigin generated words to be used in the classroom that helped the students’ descriptive and questioning abilities. She used generatives to teach other words with the same sound-letter or similar morphological structures. Faigin suggests that “Freire’s ideas provide a philosophical support and forward impetus, a motivating framework that is good pedagogy” (p.84).

While these studies help us learn more about Freirean-based programs in a North American context, each is limited to a culturally and linguistically cohesive group of students, rather than the more typical culturally and linguistically mixed ESL groups.
The Current Study

The purpose of this pilot study is to examine the possibility of using Freire's approach to teach ESL literacy to a non-cohesive group of students, where students do not share the same mother tongue and come from different cultures. In this study, I share Shannon's view that literacy is the ability "to read other symbols embedded in social practice" (Shannon, P. 1992; p.1) critically, in other words, "to read" between the lines of a given problem (that is, critically interpret a problem) and seek solutions for this problem (s). However, I have chosen to interpret literacy as not merely reading but dialogue (spoken language) among the participants about their worlds as well.

The role of pictures that could generate themes to be worked in class was highly important when Freire first began implementing his pedagogy in Brazil. It is important for the development of this study as well. The use of pictures in literacy is important since the students can discuss what they are seeing before codifying the graphic symbols.

This study is a student-centered study. It relies on the students as a source of useful insights into the method of Freirean generative themes. Students were asked to bring pictures that were meaningful to them to the classroom, and they were encouraged to share their knowledge about the world through the pictures represented and take action to change such a world if desired. I include four basic principles of Freire's approach in this study. They are as follows:
• **Identifying problems/themes**: using pictures, students identify problems (themes) through dialogues;

• **Raising awareness**: using dialogues, students and researcher raise awareness about themselves and the world;

• **Taking action**: students act to change a situation for the improvement of their lives.

Using the above principles, my study addresses the following questions:

• Will the use of pictures, pertinent to the students’ experience, be useful in eliciting meaningful discussion in my ESL literacy classes?

• What are the limitations of using such an approach with this particular group of students?

• How will the students respond to such an approach?

• Will the use of Freire’s approach help these students increase their critical literacy and self-awareness?

**Thesis Contents**

In the next chapter, I discuss Freire’s approach in Brazil and the application of his method in other settings, specifically in second and foreign language education. Also, I review literature dealing with the use of pictures and the incorporation of Freire’s generative themes into the teaching of ESL. In the final chapters, I describe the methods and materials, present the results of my study, and make suggestions for future research in this area.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

It would not be possible to develop this study without describing where one of the greatest influences of critical pedagogy took place. Although Freire may not have been the first to combine socio-political ideas with education, his method has had a lasting impact on language literacy.

Freire in Brazil: Where It All Started

Freire’s experience with hunger, poverty, and class oppression in Brazil made him aware of the power structures within his country. For more than 15 years, Freire researched and gained experience in adult education. His main goal was to create a method that would enable those who lived in the culture of silence to speak up and make their voices heard.

Freire started implementing his method while working with illiterate people in Recife (a city located in the northeast part of Brazil). His method was called “pedagogy of freedom” because it was based on the critical awareness of self and society. Freire believed that the learning process should be a process in which the learners (a) analyze their social reality (b) become critically conscious of such a reality and (c) finally learn how to write and read (Brown, 1974).

While developing his literacy method in Brazil, Freire met his students every weeknight for one hour during a six to eight week period of time (30 hours). In 45 days, Freire and his group were able to teach 300 workers to read and write. The
Brazilian government was impressed and invested more money in the project, turning it into a literacy campaign on a national scale. Soon after, the government noticed signs of increasing political awareness among the masses, such a political awareness was perceived by the upper class as a threat. As a consequence, Freire was arrested in 1964 when the military forces took over the government.

**Freire’s Method**

In the first phase of his literacy program, Freire and his team selected a list of words that contained all the phonemes in Portuguese. He believed that if the students learned these phonemes they would be able to sound out any other word in Portuguese. These words were carefully selected to make sure they were meaningful to the community of students he was working with. Such words were called “generative words” because they were able to generate discussion among the learners.

In the second phase of the process, Freire prepared a picture to illustrate each word he had selected. After discussing the social implication created by the word, Freire gave the students a series of cards showing the generative words broken into syllables with phoneme sequences corresponding to each word. Let’s take as an example the word “comida”, meaning “food” in Portuguese. After reading aloud each individual syllable, Freire presented the first one: co with the contrasting vowels, as in ca , ce, ci, co, cu. The word “comida” has three syllables. Freire, then introduced ma, me, mi, mo, mu, as well as, da , de, di, do, du.
After he presented all the syllables with the contrasting vowels to the learners, he combined the presentation in a chart he called the "card of discovery" (Figure 1) and asked students to make new words from the chart.

Freire accepted any combination given by the students (even words that made no sense in Portuguese language). He discussed with the group if a combination given was acceptable or not based on their knowledge of the spoken language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ca</th>
<th>ce</th>
<th>ci</th>
<th>co</th>
<th>cu</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ma</td>
<td>me</td>
<td>mi</td>
<td>mo</td>
<td>mu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>da</td>
<td>de</td>
<td>di</td>
<td>do</td>
<td>du</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Freire's card of discovery

**Freire in North America**

Freire's philosophy became known to the U.S. adult education community in the late 1960's at a time when education in the country, according to Heaney (1997), had no connection to social and political issues. Stanley (1972) described Freire's method as a "revolutionary dilemma for U.S. adult educators" (p.36) who were unable to grasp the fundamental premise of the socio-political as a catalyst for literacy. Smith (1972) echoed this view when he described Freire's writing as "abstract and dense almost to the point of impenetrability" (p.4). In other words,
what Freire was proposing was so distant from what literacy educators were doing in the U.S. that his writing was considered highly abstract.

Freire's own perception of American society was fraught with a sense of bewildered frustration. He was struck with two things: “the massive oppression in a place which he had previously thought of as the center of material prosperity, and the degree of alienation which an entire series of social control institutions imposed on large section of the American public, including the working class” (Illich, 1974, p.10).

Educators in the U.S. were nevertheless enamoured by the success that Freire had achieved. They were impressed with the end product and were keen on the solution. North American adult educators, literacy and community workers subsequently tried to elicit from Freire solutions to the problems they faced at their local sites but Freire, according to Facundo (1984), refused “to provide cookbook-type instructions on implementation of his philosophy” (p.19). His refusal can be explained by the idea that “methods cannot be transplanted but re-invented” (Freire in Macedo 1994).

Freire's ideas have been dismissed as unimportant and irrelevant to many North American literacy experiences. According to Reed (1981), “Latino groups in various parts of the United States tried to implement Freire’s literacy method and concluded that Freire’s technique is irrelevant to the people of North America” (p.29).
Some educators, on the other hand, have succeeded in transplanting the Freirean method to the North-American university classrooms. Shor (1989), who employed Freire's theory in one of his university writing classes at City University of New York, reflected upon his teaching and examined it with his students. He was interested in knowing to what extent the learning in his classroom was moving forward. In order to find out, Shor asked his students to design a questionnaire about the arms race and administer it to people from their community in general. In doing so, the students became interested in the research and a broad discussion about the theme was carried out in other instances of the academic setting, such issues of diversity on campus. His goals were to give the students the opportunity to research their own community and to use their own language. Shor worked with Freire's idea of praxis, that is, the connection between theory (what they were learning in a classroom environment) and practice (research their community) in education.

Shannon (1990) also employed Freire's theory to one of the graduate courses that he taught at the University of Minnesota. Shannon adapted Freire's theory "in order to stimulate discussion of the realities of schooling and classroom life, challenges to official rhetorical explanations of that reality, examination of their work, and possibly movement towards change through thought and action" (p.379). He concluded stating that "most participants and I struggle toward our individual and collective liberation from the limitations of our previous thoughts, work, and lives. Our efforts during these courses demonstrate, at least to me, that there is
hope" (p.387). Shannon's approach invited students to think critically about schooling and act upon changing the situation through action. His approach is Freirean in nature in that it invites students to take political action for the improvement of their lives.

The use of a Freirean-inspired approach to teach adult literacy in the United States is also supported by Fallon (1995). She applied the generative theme notion to teach a group of adult students from a program in Endewell, New York. She stated that the role of a Freirean-based literacy program is “to help students experience the transformative moments that give them compelling reasons to speak, to write, and to read” (p.146).

These examples have provided evidence of Freire's influence in North American first language education. Below, I outline examples within second and foreign language education.

**Freire in Second/Foreign Language Education**

In the domain of second/foreign language teaching, Freire's generative theme approach was adopted with arguable degrees of success in the U.S.

Crawford-Lange (1981), making a connection between education and politics, described language curricula in which she applied Freire's theory. Again, she addressed the idea that “one contemporary thrust which is affecting curriculum development is the recognition of students as persons, especially in relation to their environment” (p.257). Crawford-Lange goes on to say that “the literature of the
second language teaching profession acknowledges the importance of this thrust and asks for its inclusion in the development of curricula” (p.257). She believes that Freire’s theory of education can provide a good basis for such curricula since it acts on “perceived reality in order to change it for the improvement of life conditions” (p.258). Crawford-Lange worked with the idea of perceiving reality (identifying themes) and take action to change such a reality to improve people’s life conditions.

The problem-solving (or problem-posing) approach was also adopted by Wallerstein (1983) to teach ESL. According to Wallerstein, the three main stages of such an approach are listening, dialogue, and action. By listening she suggested that we educators “need to know about our students, their cultural traditions, their strengths in starting a new life, and their daily concerns” (p.191). Cultivating a dialogue with students “makes ESL more than just learning a new language. As students exercise control within the classroom by choosing which issues are crucial, they will gain confidence to use English and to make changes in their lives outside of school” (p.194). Finally, in taking action they will be more confident to make whatever changes they see necessary in their lives and their community. While she warns that “action and change do not come easily” (p.196), she believes that if we educators create an atmosphere that “allows students to say what they think, they will have made a step toward control in one aspect of their lives” (p.196). Wallerstein states that ESL classes need to be places where students are in constant dialogue about their worlds. This dialogue can lead students to analyze their realities and take action to change them if they desire to do so.
Graman (1988), using the Freirean approach while teaching ESL to Spanish-speaking farmworkers in Colorado, consciously acknowledged the political nature of the educational task at hand. Graman's first encounter with Freire's ideas was through *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970). After reading Freire's book he understood the important “notion of learning as self-generated rather than merely receptive” (p.434). Graman saw the need for “tying students' experience to the process of learning language” (p.435). He states that “students are more likely to develop intellectually and linguistically when they analyze their own experiences and build their own words to describe and better understand these experiences” (p.435).

Schleppegrell (1995) also adopted the problem-posing approach on her EFL curriculum renewal in African secondary schools. She claimed that the first step of a problem-posing curriculum was “to identify topics of concern to students” (p.298). Such concerns, according to her, can be presented to the students using “visual linguistic input: a picture, a dialogue, or other text” (p.298). Schleppegrell believes that the problem-posing approach “has much to offer teachers who are working in difficult circumstances. It helps teachers learn more about their students' needs, it gives students experience in dealing with real issues, and it establishes a community of learning in the classroom” (p.304).

Schleppegrell (1997) believes that ESL educators need to be exposed to the Freirean method and adopted the problem-solving approach to a TESOL methods course for MA students. She stated that “problem-posing is one technique for
explanatory research that can inform teachers about the learning process and cultural issues and help them make curriculum decisions” (p.12). She also stated that applying the problem-solving approach “enriches the experiences of students and teachers, while building prospective teacher’s skills in reflection and inquiry” (p.12).

A recent study by Vandrick (1999) re-asserted the need for ESL educators to learn about a pedagogy such as Freire’s. She stated “teachers should be exposed to these social pedagogies during their teacher education so that they can make their own decisions about their philosophies of teaching” (p.9). Pennycook (1990) also saw this need and stated that “given the political issues centred around language and language education, SLE would do well to look at educational theory that is critical, politically engaged and has transformative goals” (p.9).

The literature above shows us that critical pedagogy in ESL gives students the possibility to understand their worlds through their own experiences. Such an understanding might lead them to come up with solutions for the problems they face in their daily lives.

The success of the Freirean approach depends not just on its ideological basis but also on the productive use of visuals in the curriculum since such a use had the greatest importance on the development of his method.
Visual Aids and Generative Themes in the Classroom

The use of pictures (or any form of illustration) in Second Language Education can be used to develop problem-solving skills very early in the students’ language acquisition process. It can be used as a technique to encourage the students to develop their questioning abilities. Examples can be found in the works of Wallerstein and Barndt (Barndt, D. 1981; Wallerstein, N. 1983) in which they discuss the use of pictures to generate meaningful discussion in the ESL classroom.

Wallerstein (1983), for instance, used problem-solving techniques to teach ESL literacy to a Spanish-speaking group of students in California. She stressed that “problem-solving is a tool for developing critical thinking” and that it “directs students to name the problem, understand how it applies to them, determine the causes of the problem, generalize to others, and finally, suggest alternatives or solutions to problem” (p.17). Wallerstein emphasizes that one good teaching technique to use when applying the problem-solving method is the use of pictures to generate discussion in the classroom. She states that the use of pictures in the classroom can provide endless learning possibilities.

The use of pictures in ESL literacy is also prevalent in the work of Barndt (1981) where photo-stories were used with immigrant women in Canada and Peru. Barndt used photo-novellas, a well-known body of literature among the Peruvian women, to explore her subject’s critical thinking. Such photo-novellas were created by the students and the teachers followed by analysis by both. For instance, in Canada she used images she grouped from the mass media. According to
Barndt, these immigrant women in Canada were able to reflect their realities as immigrant women in such a country through the media ads that were used in the classroom.

Barndt's model of teaching invited the students to critically analyze themselves and their community and as such is a good model of Freire's method being applied to the teaching of English as a Second Language.

Crawford-Lange (1981) as cited earlier also incorporated the use of pictures and the generative theme notion when planning the learning strategies to second language education curricula. She discussed that “the first task of planning is first to organize generative themes as problems and second to organize skills-information subject matter as it relates to those themes” (p.265). The positive value of pictures in ESL literacy is re-affirmed in Burstow's perception that students benefit the most from codification pedagogy (generative themes) "in the acquisition of an approach and tool that greatly assists in facilitating conscientization" (p.205). (Conscientização in Portuguese means breaking through prevailing mythologies to reach new levels of awareness. It differs from conscious awareness in that the latter frequently involves the transmission of pre-selected knowledge). However, Burstow also described some limitations of teaching codification and the Freirean approach itself. Codification, according to her, “can easily degenerate into emotionalism on the one hand and polemics on the other” (p.206). Such limitations are understandable since no one can deny that it is difficult for any human being to talk about forms of oppression without getting emotionally involved in them. Burstow believes that “it is
up to the social work educator to clarify these shortcomings, to help learners push against the limitations insofar as possible, and get them in the habit of assessing benefits and deficits on an individual basis” (p.206).

O’Gorman (1978), who also worked with visuals while applying Freire’s approach, describes an experience that the “Grupo de Educacion Popular in Lima, Peru” engaged in in 1975. This group had developed a “good collection of audio-visual materials codifying the life, problems and aspirations of the people” (p.54) but when they were invited by the “Electoral Junta for the Grupo de Educacion Polular” to present their work to a group of people they began to reflect upon their own work. Since they had developed the materials without any student participation, they found out that their work was fragmented, that is, the generative words were “preselected and codified by the educator and not by the participants as an integral part of their growth in awareness” (p.54).

As a result of their reflection, fotomontage or a system where students participated in the selection of audio-visual material, came into effect. They applied three dimensions to it: fotomontage as a technique, a method, and a process. As a technique fotomontage helped the participants, “portray their own reality in order to form a background of reflection (p.55). As a method it “aims to involve the participants in providing input for their own reflective discovery of reality and critical appraisal of the interdependence of the socio-political causes of their deprived conditions” (p.56). As a process the “goal is to foster the initiative for self-developing critical consciousness and practical commitment to values and action in
social justice” (p.56). The project, fotomontaje, “proved to be an efficient and rapid way of stimulating critical reflection on the broad socio-political reality and tying in the conclusions with the proposed functions of the neighborhood organizations” (p.57).

The effectiveness of Freirean-style visual aids in an ESL classroom is further supported in Inlander’s (1990) work. She described a Freirean-inspired video curriculum she developed to teach high school students on a Navajo reservation in the southwest of the United States. Inlander’s students worked together on the production of videotape about their lives. She started with the students’ lives as a “basis for writing, and research” (p.50) which is the starting point of any Freirean-based curriculum. The Freirean-style visual aids, according to her, helped the students “to organize their thoughts and write more clearly” (p.53). She went to say that the students introduced “their topics well visually; consequently, they had to use words to back up the images” (p.53).

The literature just reviewed indicates that Freire’s ideas can be re-invented in the U.S. context. Since few studies have applied critical pedagogy to a typical culturally linguistically mixed ESL group there is a need for more research in this area. My study will research this area, that is, the possibility of using critical pedagogy to a non-cohesive group of ESL students.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS AND MATERIALS

In this chapter, I discuss the method and materials I employed at each step of my study. Following this chapter, I will discuss the data I gathered, my results, and my reflections and recommendation for further research in this area.

The Setting

The program was conducted through the Story County Adult Literacy Program, established in 1987 and located in Ames, Iowa. The goal of the program is to help adults acquire skills needed to make them more active in their society. It assists them in acquiring skills in basic reading, writing, speaking, and math. I contacted the program coordinator in March 1998 and she expressed an interest in my study. In April 1998 I began my study. I met with the students once a week for one and a half hours for a period of ten weeks.

The Curriculum

A semester after I started my Master’s program in Teaching English as a Second Language/Applied Linguistics at Iowa State University, it was clear for me that more research was needed in the area of SLE and critical pedagogy. As a result, I decided to develop a Freirean-based curriculum to teach ESL literacy.

Teaching and learning, according to a curriculum using Freire’s ideas, should reflect the students’ experience outside of the classroom environment. It should
invite the students to think about their reality and act upon changing it. The main goal of the curriculum I developed is to provide opportunities for the students to function effectively and actively as members of the society they are placed in. It is to invite students to think critically about themselves and their society.

**Generative themes and the curriculum**

I included as a major part of my curriculum what Freire called generative themes. Working with generative themes, according to Freire (1971), is to investigate our students' thinking about reality and their actions upon it. Generative themes are built on the notion that the students must “touch the world” before starting to write words about it with a pen or pencil. These themes, which are related to the students’ reality outside of the class environment, should be the basis of any literacy program because they give the students the opportunity to talk about themes that really matter to them. They give the students the opportunity to think about their realities and consequently act upon it. In literacy programs, generative themes connect the world to the word.

**Generative themes and the lesson plan**

How are generative themes selected? Students create the generative themes in their initial investigation of the world. Students investigate their worlds through pictures and themes are generated through their constant dialogues about such worlds. S Fallon (1995), who applied Freire’s ideas to teach ESL literacy in Endwell,
New York, states that “in creating and sustaining a dialogue, a text provides a rich backdrop against which a dialogue can be developed and extent” (p.143). Fallon goes on to say that “a text can be a picture, a letter, a newspaper article or any other written text, but should in some way relate to the students’ generative themes” (p.143). Pictures were our “text” in the classroom. I invited my students to bring pictures that were relevant to them to the classroom and share them with the group. We came to understand our worlds through our pictures.

The basic lesson plan followed each week

Step one: - students sharing their world through pictures to the whole group

Step two: - students selecting of theme (or themes) through dialogue

Step three: - class discussing the theme (or themes)

Step four: - students putting the words which were new to them in writing (graphic symbols)

The Learners

The so-entitled ESL literacy classes attracted five students but only four attended the meetings on a regular basis. The students participating in this study came from four different countries and cultures: Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, and Korea. I informed the students of the nature of my research and they signed a consent form in which they agreed to participate in the study.

Through the essays and questionnaires they wrote and answered during our first class meeting I learned that the students were L1 (Spanish or Korean) literate but at a low-intermediate L2 (English) proficiency and their goals taking the classes
were to achieve a better L2 proficiency which, according to them, would ease the adjustment process to the American culture. I have given the following pseudonyms to the students: Cecilia (Argentinean), Maria (Colombian), Esperanza (Mexican), and Yong (Korean).

Cecilia, a 35 year-old female, was an elementary teacher in Argentina. She had a very good sense of humor, and during the entire tutoring period, I never had any evidence that Cecilia was sad or worried about something. She was able to make me laugh at things that I generally would not. Her husband was enrolled in a Ph.D. program at Iowa State University. Cecilia was very proud of being Argentinean and loved to talk about her country and culture.

Maria, a 34 year-old female, was very critical of herself and her society. A preschool teacher in Colombia, Maria loved to talk and express her ideas. She was a natural observer. She sat quietly and waited for the exact moment to talk and discuss her points of view. She was sometimes very radical and did not accept some peculiarities of the American culture, such as the distance they keep from each other in social gatherings. She expressed a strong dislike for the American government and the way it treats her country.

Esperanza, a 36 year-old female, was a chemistry teacher in Mexico. She was quiet, calm, and a rather shy student. In class, Esperanza took as many notes as she could on what was being discussed.

Yong, a 30 year-old female, was a housekeeper. She immigrated to this country after her marriage. She seemed a little reserved about talking about her life
in Korea and I did not pressure her to do so. Yong’s dream was to get her citizenship, and she was really working hard to pass the citizenship test. She was a good listener as well. She never hesitated in asking for help when she needed it. She loved to write on the board and was always the first to volunteer when asked. Yong was the only student in the group who was an immigrant. The others were in transit, that is, they were going to stay in the U.S. until their husbands finished their graduate degrees.

Method

The research questions this study investigated were:

♦ Will the use of pictures, pertinent to the students’ experience, be useful in eliciting meaningful discussion in my ESL literacy classes?

♦ What are the limitations of using such an approach with this particular group of students?

♦ How will the students respond to such an approach?

♦ Will the use of Freire’s approach help these students increase their critical literacy and self-awareness?

In order to find the answers to the above questions, I investigated whether the pictures were helpful for my students in identifying themes that were meaningful to them. By meaningful I mean if the pictures will generate themes about my students’ worlds. Through our dialogues in class about our worlds, I investigated whether the Freirean approach helped my students to increase their critical literacy and
self-awareness. I investigated how the students, discussing the themes generated by the pictures, saw themselves and their worlds and how they went about taking action to change their worlds for the improvement of their lives. I looked at the three basic principles of Freire's approach discussed in the first chapter. These principles deal with identification of problems/themes meaningful to them through the pictures, discussion of such problems/themes (becoming aware of problems), and taking action to change a problem they perceive through the discussion of themes generated through the pictures.

While conducting this study, I tried as much as possible to use a dialogical approach in my research. By this I mean that my students and I were always in constant dialogue trying to understand our worlds to socially construct new forms of knowledge. Such an approach involves making the student an important part of the research and educational process but it also "emphasizes increasing the awareness of the student." (Wong, 1994). The dialogical approach helps teachers learn more about their own teaching through insights gained from students.

The idea that "involving the students in the research project is a commitment to getting to know students’ needs and experiences, and realities" (Wong, 1994; p.11) is especially appropriate when working with a pedagogy like Freire's which considers students' experience a major role in the teaching process. I investigated my students' reaction to this approach, that is, how making them an important part of the research and learning process helped them to identify problems, discuss such problems, and take action to change them.
The instruments used were: questionnaires, my on-going observations of what was transpired during the lessons, essays given three times during the tutoring period, which helped me to assess their writing abilities, and individual interviews with the students.

Data Collection

Table 1 shows my data collection instruments.

**Questionnaires:** I designed two questionnaires to help me ascertain the students' increase (or lack) of critical awareness during the tutoring period. I also used the questionnaires to assess the students' background at the beginning of the tutoring period. I will describe the questions I designed in the next chapter (also see appendix A).
On-going observations: Since I was present in all class meetings and observing what was transpiring, I decided to take notes on the class meetings.

Essays: Students wrote three essays (in a ten-minute time frame for each essay) during the tutoring period. In the first essay, the students wrote about themselves; in the second they wrote about a social problem in their community or described a perfect world. In the third essay, they wrote about a personal dream they had. The purpose of such essays, which were administered during the first, third, and sixth meeting respectively, was not only to assess the students' writing ability but also to investigate the degree of involvement shown in their writings. The students' writing samples would provide me with evidence that the students were raising their self-awareness (one of the purposes of a Freirean-inspired curriculum).

Interviews: I interviewed each student individually during our final class meeting. The face-to-face interviews were informally conducted; and its purpose was to evaluate the students' increase of critical awareness and the tutoring period. During this informal interview, I asked the students what they thought about the classes and if they were helpful. Also, I invited them to suggest any lesson plan changes they might want. Soon after the interviews, I requested them to evaluate, briefly, the tutoring period in writing.

I chose to use more than one source of data in order to increase the chance that I would receive valid and reliable data.
In the next chapter, I will present my findings including data from the questionnaires, an overview of each of the class periods, an analysis of my students' essays and the results of the face-to-face interviews I conducted.
CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

In this chapter, I present the data in four stages. First, I present the results from student questionnaires given at the beginning and end of the tutoring period. Second, I provide a description of the dialogue from the ten class meetings and then I analyze the students’ essays. Finally, I briefly describe the data I gathered from my face-to-face interviews and writing responses from the students about the tutoring period. Also, I briefly summarize my findings before reflecting upon them in the last chapter.

Data from the Questionnaires

The questionnaires, which were administered at the beginning and end of the tutoring period, were comprised of basic questions which took into consideration the students’ limited English proficiency. In the first questionnaire, I included questions that would enable me to get information about the participants (age, cultural backgrounds, reasons for taking the classes, and L1 proficiency). This information would help me to get to know my participants since it was not possible for me to research their communities before the classes started. But only the last four questions of the first questionnaire were relevant to my study and then they appeared on both questionnaires (I will refer to these questions as first, second, third, and fourth question). The first question, “Why do you think it is important to learn how to write and read?” aimed at finding out what the learners’ concept of
literacy was. The second question was, "Do you feel part of the American society?" It dealt with the adjustment of the learners in the society they were placed in. The third question was, "In your opinion, what is an educated person?" This was designed to measure their perception of education, that is, how they viewed concepts of knowledge in terms of schooling and life experiences. The fourth and last question, "In your opinion, what's the major social problem(s) present in your community? Do you think you can, somehow, help to solve such a problem? Explain why or why not, please". This question was formulated to elicit reaction to problems in their communities and how they would go about solving them (all participants, except Yong, talked about problems in their native countries instead of problems in the U.S.)

Using these questions, I investigated if the learners increased their critical awareness during the time they were exposed to the Freirean approach. (Table 2 contains the students' responses on the pre and post questionnaires).

Cecilia's responses:

As shown in table 2, Cecilia's perception of what it means to know how to read and write changed considerably from pre to post questionnaire. She started with the idea that to read and write would give her the opportunity to improve her grammar. At the final stage of the tutoring period, however, her response to the question had altered dramatically. Cecilia felt that learning English did not have just the finite
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Question #</th>
<th>Pre questionnaire</th>
<th>Post questionnaire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cecilia</td>
<td>reading and writing: why important?</td>
<td>To improve English grammar</td>
<td>communicate with other people and get information about the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>to communicate with other people here (U.S.)</td>
<td>get information about the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esperanza</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>communicate with other people</td>
<td>understand the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yong</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>get citizenship</td>
<td>not completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cecilia</td>
<td>adjusted to U.S. society</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>a little</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esperanza</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yong</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>not completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cecilia</td>
<td>what is an educated person?</td>
<td>people who went to school</td>
<td>people who can write read and understand things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>people who know how to write and read well</td>
<td>people who received formal education and those who have life experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esperanza</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>people who went to school</td>
<td>good people who help others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yong</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>people who went to school</td>
<td>not completed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Question #</th>
<th>Pre questionnaire</th>
<th>Post questionnaire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cecilia</td>
<td>major social problem 4</td>
<td>violence, cannot solve it</td>
<td>family problems, can try to solve them by talking about them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>violence, cannot solve it</td>
<td>violence, can solve them if everybody works towards peace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esperanza</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>economical problems, cannot solve it</td>
<td>drugs, cannot solve it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yong</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>no completed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

value of learning grammar, but it had broader implications of getting information about the world while leaving in the U.S. Her conception of literacy had changed considerably, giving her a more critical view about it. Also, Cecilia felt a little more comfortable living in the U.S. Her concept of an educated person also changed. She saw an educated person as not only someone who is capable of writing and reading but in her own words, “understand things”. This statement can also be interpreted as Cecilia’s idea of understanding the world. If this is true, we can detect (even slightly) a change in the way she sees the world. Cecilia, in the first stages of the tutoring period, was capable of detecting social problems, but she saw herself incapable of solving them. In the later stages, she was capable of detecting and suggesting a way of solving them, that is, talking about such problems.
Maria's responses:

Maria, who seemed empowered and able to discuss and articulate her thoughts more clearly than the other participants, did not change significantly her concepts of literacy. But, according to her answers, it seems she broadened her view of literacy. That is, she started with the concept that literacy would enable her to communicate with people in the United States and by the end of the course her concept of literacy was a way “to get information about the world”. Maria was rather radical when she commented on the way people behave in the U.S. This explains why she did not feel comfortable living in this country. During my long conversations with Maria, she demonstrated a desire to make the American government see that its actions in her country are far from being considered right. She never demonstrated a desire to change the community she was living in (the U.S.) but she was highly convinced that she could do something to change her country’s social and economical situation. The fact that she did not adjust to the North-American culture no doubt contributed to her inability to see herself as an agent of social transformation in such a society. Literacy for Maria, at the beginning of the tutoring period, was based on the ability to read and write (that is, was related to schooling). At a later stage, Maria included in her view of literacy the idea that literacy can also be related to the capacity that one has to interpret the world. She considered life experience as a form of literacy as well. She mentioned, during our informal conversations, that there are hundreds of people who do not know how to read and write but know how to perfectly articulate a political thought or argument.
Maria was able to articulate her thoughts, but at the beginning of the tutoring period was not able to articulate ideas that she could use to solve the problems that were so apparent to her. In other words, Maria was able to point out a problem and talk about it at the beginning of the tutoring period but was not capable of seeing herself acting to change that problem. At the end of the tutoring period, Maria could see people solving the problem with violence if everybody worked towards peace. Although her response was very general, she, at least, was able to think about a solution what she was not able to do at the beginning of the tutoring period.

**Esperanza’s responses:**

Like Cecilia’s, Esperanza’s view of literacy changed considerably. While she initially related writing and reading to communication, by the end of the tutoring period she believed these two abilities would help her to understand the world. Esperanza, like Cecilia, does not feel part of the American society. According to her, Mexican people living in this country are victims of discrimination. Esperanza, understandably, could not feel part of such a society that discriminates against her and her people. While talking to Esperanza informally about an international picnic she would attend with her husband, who is a graduate student enrolled at Iowa State University, she mentioned that she had decided to go because she wanted to show Americans her culture. According to her, if they knew more about her culture they would, perhaps, be more tolerant. Taking into consideration that Esperanza was a shy and quiet person, her intention to educate Americans can be seen as a
positive step towards action. She refused to be intimidated, and instead, decided to show Americans her way of living. Since discrimination and prejudice can be seen as social problems Esperanza was facing in her community (U.S.), her refusal to be intimidated was positive and it seemed that she was starting to take action to change a situation that affected her life as a foreigner in the U.S.

Yong’s responses:

Yong did not answer the questionnaire at the last class meeting because she stopped attending the classes to take up a new job. However, I would like to consider her responses on the first questionnaire. Yong was the only participant who was an immigrant; the others were in transit in the United States. Yong only saw literacy as means to get citizenship. She said that she felt part of the American society but was not able to point out any social problem in her community. It is understandable that Yong felt this way since the U.S. would be her new home and she did not want to find any problems here. On the other hand, Yong was interested in knowing about the problems with drugs in Colombia and how this affected the United States. But her goal was to learn English only and that was the only thing that concerned her at the time the study was conducted.
Overview of the Tutoring Period

I will now describe each class meeting. The first meeting was an introductory meeting where we spent time getting to know each other. The students also filled out the pre-questionnaire and wrote an essay about themselves.

The generative words included in the table next page were the words that were generated during each one a half hour class meeting, which lasted for one hour and a half. These generative words were selected by the students during our discussions during the class meetings. Each student and I bought pictures to the meeting. We first discussed the pictures orally without using of any kind of text and then I invited the students, at the end of each class meeting, to write sentences using the generative words that had emerged from our discussions. The students called these words: “key words”. I will continue calling them “generative words” because, unlike “key words”, generative words refer to the idea that a word can be unfolded into other words the same way that a theme can be unfolded into many other themes (Freire, 1970). We also started each class with a review of the previous meeting. I invited my students, whenever possible, to connect what was being learned during a particular meeting with what had been learned in a previous class, for instance, connecting how the social problems in Colombia can affect U.S. society. The students also wrote three essays during the first, third, and sixth meetings respectively. I used these essays to assess their writing skills and also to assess the degree of social involvement they expressed in their writings.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meeting Number</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Pictures (text)</th>
<th>Generative Themes</th>
<th>Generative Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Meeting</td>
<td>Class</td>
<td>no pictures</td>
<td>getting to know each other</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Meeting</td>
<td>teacher</td>
<td>pictures from Rio de Janeiro-Brazil: -beautiful beaches -a slum</td>
<td>poverty; exploitation in Brazil and other countries</td>
<td>slum exploitation cable car sewage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Meeting</td>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>pictures from Colombia: natural places in Colombia</td>
<td>problems with drugs in Colombia, and how they affect the U.S.</td>
<td>cartel drug dealers addicted to joint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth Meeting</td>
<td>Cecilia</td>
<td>pictures from Argentina: Cecilia's native home state</td>
<td>problems with the Argentinean economy: Is there a way to solve them?</td>
<td>frost greenhouse inflation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth Meeting</td>
<td>Yong</td>
<td>Yong brings tea instead of pictures</td>
<td>Discussion on drinking tea in Korea</td>
<td>brewing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth Meeting</td>
<td>Esperanza</td>
<td>pictures from Mexico: famous monument in Mexico</td>
<td>Discussion and comparison of the Mexican and American culture</td>
<td>stereotypes day dreaming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh Meeting</td>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>pictures from Miami: places Maria had visited</td>
<td>Cubans living in Miami: the Communist system; Mexican Americans</td>
<td>system immigrants dictatorship dream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eighth Meeting</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>no pictures grammar teaching</td>
<td>text about AIDS discrimination Virus, health and caring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ninth Meeting</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>pictures of an agricultural state in Brazil</td>
<td>Iowa versus state in Brazil; crop production</td>
<td>crops shortage feed/fed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenth Meeting</td>
<td>all</td>
<td>no pictures: class evaluation interviews</td>
<td>discussing the tutoring period</td>
<td>evaluation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During the second meeting, I took some pictures of Brazil to the classroom, and we talked about them. The students were talkative and comfortable with the themes that came up (see table 3 for themes). Cecilia mentioned that in her country there was poverty and exploitation as well and that this was hard to change. Maria mentioned that such a situation could be changed with education. According to Maria, education was the key for everything. Examples of sentences constructed by the students during this meeting: “There is slums in Brazil and in Colombia, it is sad” (Maria’s sentence), “the government don’t want to show the slums” (Esperanza’s sentence).

During the third meeting we talked about the drug problem in Colombia and in the U.S. and economic problems in Argentina. Maria’s pictures generated an interesting theme where she declared that the problem with drugs in her country was a social problem. “They make more money selling drugs to other Colombian and other countries than work 40 hours week”, she said. Maria tried to connect the problems of drugs in Colombia to the problem with drugs in the U.S. She mentioned that the problem with drugs in this country was not a social problem. When I asked her why, she did not know what to say and just replied with “I don’t know why”. The generative themes created during the third class meeting made the students think about the problem with drugs locally and globally. They were, however, not able to come up with solutions for such a problem. The students, at this stage, were problematizing their reality. Graman (1988) states that “through engaging in problematizing reality learners must identify problems and come to recognize and
understand the significance of those problems in relation to their own lives and lives of others” (p.436).

At the end of the class period the students wrote essays about social problems and their perception of a perfect world. These themes arose from our discussion about the Colombian society.

The generative theme created by Cecilia’s pictures, during the fourth meeting, led us to talk about economic problems in Argentina. Maria mentioned that “there was no way to solve them”. Maria had a good understanding of her reality, although she was not able to act upon it. In order for people to develop critical consciousness, Graman (1988) states that they need “to function not as servants but as active decision makers” (p.441). Maria was not making decisions because she did not have the necessary critical consciousness. After our discussion, the students wrote sentences using the generative words that arose from the theme discussed in class that day. The following are some sentences formulated by Esperanza, Maria, and Cecilia respectively: “Argentina have high inflation”, There is greenhouses there”, “Frost is not good for Argentina”, “We cannot do anything about inflation”. These sentences show that the students were using the generative themes to create their own sentences. They were connecting the world to the word.

During our fifth meeting, Yong brought some tea to share with us in class. Yong decided not to bring any pictures (I, under no circumstances, forced the students to bring pictures to the classroom if they did not want to. They were creating their own classrooms, and if they did not feel comfortable with the pictures,
another form of "illustration" could be brought as well). Yong decided to share her experiences through the drinking of tea. She bought us some tea packets and explained to us how the drinking of tea is important in her culture. It is interesting to note that Yong decided to read her world in a rather different way (that was expected since I was working with a non-cohesive group of students). We decided to invite the program coordinator into the class, and we all talked about Korea (Yong's favorite topic) and how people drank tea in this country. The program coordinator mentioned that she was impressed with how our group talked about different topics freely and enthusiastically.

Another important aspect to be considered here is that although Yong thought the topics discussed in class were interesting, she decided not to bring up social and political issues to our discussion when sharing her culture with the group. Yong never included her country in our socio-political discussions in class. She always mentioned that she could not recall her country having social problems. My experience about her culture was not enough to challenge her responses. However, I do not believe that her country is free from such problems. Perhaps in contrast with the other participants, who came from Third World countries, Yong would be less interested in social change due to her country's economic equality relative to other participants' countries.

The students did not create any sentences at this meeting since we spent the whole class engaging in deep dialogue about Korea.
During the sixth meeting, Esperanza's pictures generated discussion and comparison between the Mexican and the American culture. We started our discussion talking about famous places in Mexico, like the Aztec pyramid, and this topic led us to compare monuments between the two countries. One topic led to another till Esperanza expressed her view that North Americans discriminate against her people. We talked about different ways of thinking and how they can affect other people. Esperanza mentioned that some North American people discriminate against others because they are afraid of what they do not know. She also mentioned that, from that point on, she would talk back when she felt discriminated against in this country. Maria pointed out that we need to educate people and show them other ways of thinking and behaving. She argued that this is the only way to abolish discrimination. Cecilia agreed and said she liked to learn about other cultures. I noted that the students were passionate about this topic. That was, perhaps, due to the fact that they all felt discriminated as foreigners living in the U.S. Such a topic seemed to have brought them together as a group. The class period was wrapped up with students writing essays about a dream they had. These themes came up from our discussion about the Mexican and the North American culture.

During the seventh meeting, Maria, who had just returned from vacation in Florida, brought pictures to share with us. She said she was impressed with the beautiful places she had visited, and she described Florida as being a place of many cultures. Maria told us she had fun, but during her trip to the south she
noticed that Florida had a large number of Cubans. Our discussion then centered on immigration and its causes. Esperanza said that the Mexicans come here looking for a better life (which, according to her, sometimes they do not find). Cecilia interrupted Esperanza, saying that the problem with the Cubans was the system of government they adopted in Cuba. The problem, she explained, was the communist regime that oppressed them and made them leave their native country. I decided to function as a monitor only and did not interrupt them. The discussion went on for half an hour or so till Maria openly stated that she thought she was a communist. Maria had a good understanding of politics, and the way she constructed her sentence was interesting. The verb that Maria used to construct her sentence, that is, “to think” can have two explanations: (a) she was not sure if she was or not, (b) she chose it to make her classmates argue about her statement. If she had used “to be” (I am) maybe her classmates would be intimidated and they would stop talking about the topic.

If the latter is true, her strategy was logically and critically constructed. Cecilia was the one to interrupt the discussion rather drastically, requesting that I teach grammar in class. Cecilia’s request can be analyzed as follows: (a) she really wanted to learn grammar and that was the only reason she was there, and (b) she did not want to talk about subjects that were controversial and maybe taboo for her or she hesitated to get into something that she knew little or nothing about. Although I cannot prove that the latter is true, it seems to make sense since the moment the group started discussing a controversial and heated topic, Cecilia asked me to
incorporate grammar in my classes. Through dialogues with the students, I came to realize that they did not want me to abandon the discussions but they wanted a more structured and non-confrontational environment for awhile since they noticed the discussions were starting to get controversial. This period of resistance and denial is expected according to Freire (1970).

During this meeting, the students wrote the generative words on the board and we formulated sentences orally. They said they felt like speaking rather than writing that day. I considered this a form of literacy (i.e. critical literacy) since the students were engaged in reading their worlds (even though such reading was given orally).

To sustain cooperation and interest level in the classroom, I chose to use grammar as our "picture" during the eight meeting. Since our class was constructed around generative themes, I did not teach grammar just by giving them sentences to work with. Instead, I chose a text about AIDS. Although I tried to the best of my ability to keep the curriculum student-centered, I complied with their request for me to choose a topic for discussion. Since bringing the students' worlds and experiences into the classroom is the main thrust of a Freirean-based curriculum and bringing grammar into the classroom was what they needed and wanted at that particular time, I do not think I went against the idea of theory and practice that Freire discussed in his works. In my opinion, if grammar can be taught to help students read the world critically and understand a given message, then it should necessarily become part of the curriculum.
Going back to the class period, the text was interesting and the students spent more time talking about it than about grammar. They felt that the biggest problem with AIDS is discrimination. Maria said that people who have AIDS need love and compassion, not discrimination. The students talked about the issue for almost the entire class period. I pointed out to them that while they were talking I was taking note of their grammar problems and that I would like to finish our meeting by putting some of their sentences on the board for us to analyze. After I wrote their sentences on the board, we discussed how we should fix them. The students approved my method of teaching grammar through discussion and analysis.

During the ninth meeting, it was my turn again to bring pictures. I took some pictures of my home state in Brazil and we compared them to Iowa. From the pictures Cecilia was curious to know why Brazil was so poor, even when the land looked so fertile. We discussed food shortage in developing countries and in the U.S. Esperanza commented that the wealthy nations should help the poor ones. During this meeting I was able to detect some signs of critical awareness among the students. For example, Cecilia mentioned that the poor nations should stand up against the rich nations. Although her thought was not well articulated, she was able to expose her argument. Maria added that in order for the poor nations to stand up against the rich nations, the people need to be educated. Maria always pushed for the idea that education is the key, so that is why many governments do not invest money in it. Esperanza agreed and stated that, perhaps, that was the reason that the U.S did not offer enough ESL programs for the Mexicans. It was interesting to
note that the students were starting to articulate their own thoughts through our discussions in class.

We evaluated the tutoring period during the last day of classes, that is, during the tenth meeting. We discussed why it is always important to evaluate everything we do. I mentioned that such an evaluation was important to me because I wanted to see if I was connecting my theory to practice (I gave details about this information while describing the results during my interview).

Writing Ability Assessment

I analyzed my students' essays according to the degree of 'social involvement' that surfaced in each essay. By social involvement I mean the students’ ability to analyze themselves and their interaction with other people in society.

The following are topics of each essay, which arose from our discussions in the first, third, and sixth class meetings.

(1) First: Write a paragraph or two talking about yourself.
(2) Second: Describe any social problem you see or describe a perfect world.
(3) Third: Describe a dream you have.

I have retained the students’ language, including errors. Each essay has no more than two paragraphs.
Cecilia’s essays:

Talking about herself:
I’m elementary teacher. I can teach children mostly 7-9 years old. I really enjoy with them. Although the salary is not so good, I love my job because I love children. I’m planning to have my own children. I like to make a garden. I hope any time I live in a big house and then make a big garden with a lot of plants and flowers.

A perfect world:
Only you can imagine or you can with it. First of all, because the world, there are a lot of good people but in another hand also the world has a bad people. I love one world without war, without hunger. In my opinion, every one needs to compromise with yourself, works so hard and try to improve the world.

A dream:
I dream to live in a big house with a backyard, where I put a lot of kind of plants, flowers, vegetables garden, etc. I dream that this house is in the ocean cost with a quiet neighborhood. But, for get this kind of dream, I need to work with some important job, like business. I like to work just part time without boss and the rest of the time I’d like to enjoy with my family, travel, meet with friends, make a party in my home, etc. The reason that I’d like a big house is because I’d like a big family and I enjoy with a lot of people visit me.

Analyzing Cecilia’s essays, we notice that she significantly improved her notion of social involvement. She writes about a big house but does not mention having anybody visiting her in the first essay. On the other hand, in her last essay she still writes about the house of her dreams but in addition she mentions that she would love “to meet with friends”. She sees herself socializing more with people. Since the Freirean approach is highly connected to the notion of community and people working together, this might be a sign that Cecilia changed her perceptions after being exposed to such an approach and now desires to increase her social interactions. In the second essay, Cecilia points out that in order to have a better world, we need to have commitment. Cecilia uses a rich vocabulary (such as backyard, neighborhood, ocean coast, and etc.) and her fluency improved compared to her last essay. Even though structural problems are present in her last essay, she was able to articulate her thoughts more easily.
Maria’s essays:

Talking about yourself
I’m Maria, I am pre school teacher, I am from Colombia. I married and I have two boys. My older son is 17 years old and younger son is two and a half years old. I came her one year and 7 months. Now, I’m working at ISU at patology laboratory. One year ago, I was very worry to be here because Ames is cold town and I could not understand the language. Now my life is more quiet, less stressed and I am studying English so much because I like to learn about the different cultures and the way.

Social problem perceived:
Colombia is a country that for his location has a variety climes, you can find there higts mountains, beautifulls beaches, bigs forests. For this reason, it is good to grow up drugs, such as cocaine, that is a ilegal business people like to do because represent lot of money now. Many years ago the native people used this drug how part their medicine especially to cure skin illness and they mastigated the leaves to do hard works.

A dream:
I have many dreams. I would like to study master degree in education in my country. I hope I can do that when I come back. Another dream is: I like to travel so much but I like to now my country’s forests. My big dream are my sons, I like that they grow up very well and they study so much and they learn for their life. I want they will be a good persons who work for our country and their own.

Maria’s first essay reveals her desire to interact with people and know other cultures. Maria always added some political issues to her writings. In her second essay, she brings up the problem with drugs in her country and mentions that in the past, the natives used cocaine as a medical treatment for some illnesses. She has always maintained that problems with drugs in her native country need to be understood historically. In her last essay, she mentions that she would like to see her sons working for their country. Maria, once again, connects her personal life to the society she lives in. Maria always appeared as a critical person in class, and her essays did not contradict it. I noted, analyzing her essays, that her fluency and vocabulary were richer in the first essay than in the other two. Perhaps for Maria, it was easier to talk about herself because she already had a certain degree of self-awareness.
Esperanza’s essays:

Talking about herself:
I’m Esperanza and I have two children. We came here because my husband studies a Doctor grade, I hope 3 years the finish studies. My son Jose to go to Elementary school and he learns English very much. I going to call English at the church but I need to have more class for week. We live in Schilletter Village. There is outside my apartment is very space.

Social problem perceived:
The high levels of drug consumption is a big problem in the United States. However other countries are involved in this problem, since a major proportion of that drug is produced in Latin American countries such as Colombia, Mexico, and Argentina so that a solution to that problem can be accomplished only with a multicultural agreement.

A dream:
My dreams are to travel with my family to different parts of the world. And come back of my counry for continue work in my profession. What my children grow well. I want to have a house very big with garden. In my permanency in USA, lem English for used in my Mexico in my work.

Esperanza’s second essays came as a surprise to me. Her thoughts were well articulated and her essay demonstrated that her knowledge of the target language grammar was very high. It is important to note that she, unlike the other participants, was attending other English classes during the week. This could explain her rapid improvement. Another possibility was that Esperanza was familiar with the topic, but I do not have the data necessary to assess the improvement in Esperanza’s second essay. I would like, however, to consider the content of the second essay because it was more sophisticated than the others. She talked about a “multicultural agreement”, and this should be accounted for. Esperanza expressed a better understanding of the world in her second essay than she did in the data I gathered about her in the questionnaires, observation of classes, and interview.
Face to Face Interview

The purpose of the interview with each student was to evaluate the tutoring period. As a teacher-researcher employing a dialogical approach, it was very important to get some feedback from students as well. The interviews were carried out in an informal way in order to encourage students to make suggestions and find out if their goals were achieved during the tutoring period. Our conversations flowed easily, and all the participants seemed to feel to suggest changes and to compliment what they thought was being done properly. The students' main suggestion was that the classes be continued during the next semester (fall' 98). They approved of the approach I was using and agreed that the pictures were an interesting way to help them talk. Two of them, Cecilia and Esperanza, suggested I teach grammar in class, and Maria requested that I should, occasionally, lecture about any topic I felt appropriate. Maria also asked me for advice regarding one problem she was having with one of her teachers. She said she did not know how to handle the problem because she felt that her voice was being silenced in this other class. Maria explained to me that one of her teachers usually joked about her country and her people and she would not tolerate that any longer.

Maria's ability to discuss a personal problem exemplifies the comfort level that emerges in a Freirean-base approach. Students are able to talk about and consequently, seek solutions for their problems. Analyzing their personal realities and act upon changing them is one step forward to deal with more complex social related issues. Self-harmony is needed in order for somebody to perceive social
problems and act to change them if desired. All the participants responded that the classes helped them to improve their English skills. And also, Esperanza and Maria mentioned that they were very comfortable in my class and that was the main reason they thought the goals were achieved.

Also, I thought a written evaluation of the tutoring period necessary soon after the oral interviews for one specific reason: The participants would, perhaps, feel more comfortable writing about it without revealing their names. Their responses were as follows:

I feel very comfortable in your class because you make the class happy and funny with a lot of information and different techniques. I like very much when they discuss very important topics like violence, racism, etc. Also, it is very good approach to describe some pictures, it’s very interesting. I learning about grammar and written. Everything was very helpful for me. Thank you.

I think the most I liked in your class was that I can speak without afraid. My problem I think is my pronunciation and you helped me so much. I liked the pictures description because it helped us to speak. I like that you made us to write so much. Thanks you for help us.

In the second response, the participant mentioned that she was able to talk without fear and that made her perceive that her pronunciation had improved. An interesting point to note was that she was able to see that her goal had been achieved.

Esperanza preferred to answer my questions orally and did not request anonymity. She said she was comfortable talking to me, and she wanted to improve her speaking skills too. She said she did not feel like writing that day. I will briefly summarize her responses. Esperanza said she was happy she had taken this class and she suggested that I continue with the classes. She also mentioned that she was not afraid of making mistakes now, and that I had made her feel more self-
confident. She said she liked the approach I used. Although she had no knowledge about Freire's philosophy, she was able to perceive that such an approach was connected with the idea of giving the students more power in the classroom.

At the time I conducted the interviews, Yong had already dropped the class due to a job position she accepted.

**Summary of Results**

Now I would like to go back to the questions this study addressed and briefly discuss what was learned from these results. The first question I asked was if the pictures used would generate meaningful discussion in my classes. The use of pictures to generate discussion in class is not only employed in a Freirean-inspired curriculum. The key of using pictures in a Freirean-inspired approach is that the pictures need to express the students' worlds and serve as a means to generate discussion about these worlds. In this sense, I believe that the pictures were meaningful in that they helped my students to generate themes to be discussed in class. They were meaningful because they represented their worlds.

The second question I asked was related to the limitation of such an approach applied to this group of students. The major limitations I found were related to community research that I should have done before starting the tutoring period, the difficulty choosing a society to talk about since we all came from different backgrounds, and the amount of time spent with the group.
The third question I addressed is related to the students' response to the approach. My findings suggest me that their reaction to the Freirean approach was positive. They all said they were not afraid to speak or make mistakes in my class. This comfortable level the students reached is found in a Freirean-inspired approach. Thus I believe the approach used made the students feel they were part of the learning/research process and this, consequently, made them have good reaction towards it.

The fourth question I addressed was if the Freirean approach would help the students to increase their critical and self-awareness. The participants, perhaps, were moving along this road. The time spent with the group only allows me to suggest that this approach helped the students to start problematizing (Graman, 1988) their worlds and, at some level, seeing themselves able to change such problems.

In the next chapter, I reflect upon my results and present suggestion for future research in the area of ESL and critical pedagogy/literacy.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the possibility of applying Freire's method to the teaching of ESL literacy with a non-cohesive group of students. I have discussed my results in chapter four and here I reflect upon them.

Reflections

The notion that Freire's method cannot be transplanted but re-invented is true in every sense. My subjects' cultural background differed from each other, and they were very different from the one that Freire worked with in Brazil in the early 1960s. I had to re-invent his ideas to my context in order to work with such an approach.

Community research is a fundamental step for any Freirean-inspired program. I was unable, however, to follow such a step since I had no control over the range of my students' cultural background. Even if I had, should I have researched the U.S. or the community they were coming from? So, I invited my students to bring their worlds to the classroom through their personal pictures. Instead of presenting them the pictures we would work with, they brought their pictures and we, as a group, discussed our worlds. Such a "re-invention" worked well considering the non-cohesive group participating in such a study.

Another important question to consider is that of dialogue. Freire's students were actively engaged in dialogues about their society. Since my students came
from different societies, we did not have a common society that could fit us all. At
the beginning, I thought we could talk about the U.S. society, but then I realized that
for them to talk about such a society was rather difficult since they did not feel
completely part of it. The students, not feeling part of the U.S. society,
predominantly preferred to talk about their own topics. They were concerned with
issues that were related to their countries. Our dialogues had to be constructed
around the society they felt most comfortable with and then try to connect it to the
society they were living in at the moment.

Another point worth discussing here relates to Yong, the immigrant from
Korea. The U.S. was her new home so naturally she was reluctant to find problems
with it. Yong was so interested in becoming a citizen, of being part of such a society
that asking her to analyze her new society, look for problems and solutions would
have been counter-productive. For Yong, the U.S. society was perfect. In other
words, she was not interested in becoming an agent of social transformation in any
aspect. She was satisfied with her life at the moment, so I decided to keep silent.
Forcing her to accept, however, the social problems in this country would certainly
have made her uncomfortable in my class and also would have gone against any
Freirean-inspired class setting which encourages students to control the class
agenda.

My silence was not totally inappropriate, as I now reflect upon it. I would like
to compare it with one experience that Freire had in Guinea-Bissau in the late
1970s. At this time, the government of Guinea-Bissau conducted a literacy
campaign in which Freire became involved. The official language of this country is Portuguese, but the majority of the people spoke a variety of African languages, among them, Creole. Freire's literacy campaign was conducted in Portuguese much against his own wish. But he kept silent for political reasons since he was aware that, at that moment, to change all the Guinea-Bissau's literature into any African language overnight would be impossible. Freire (1987) reflected upon his experience and said "often there are reasons of a political character that require silence from the intellectual, even if this silence is sometimes misinterpreted" (p.112). Freire went on to say that "The so-called failure of our work in Guinea-Bissau was not due to the Freire-method. This failure clearly demonstrated the invariability of using Portuguese as the only vehicle of instruction in the literary campaign. This is a fundamental point" (p.114).

Going back to Yong's problem, I now understand that my silence was also political. As an educator, I need to start addressing my students' needs from where they are and through dialogue understand such needs. I would certainly have initiated a deeper dialogue with Yong about U.S. society if her attention were not so concentrated on her getting the citizenship.

The time we spent together in class was not enough for me to engage in a deeper dialogue with her. A Freirean-inspired class setting has to work with what is meaningful to the students, and for Yong, the citizenship was all that mattered. However, I will not say that the approach I used did not help Yong. I believe that she became more interested in global issues than ever, just by listening to the other
students. For instance, she asked me to bring a world map to class so she could locate her classmates' countries of origin. She mentioned that she was interested in knowing more about each country and the problems they were undergoing.

The amount of time I spent with the students, as said before, should have been longer. When I detected a possible growing in critical awareness, our class periods ended and we did not have the opportunity to engage in dialogues that would have been meaningful to the continuous development of such awareness. While developing his literacy method in Brazil, Freire met his students every weeknight for one hour during a six to eight week period (30 hours approximately). And also, we have to remember that he was working with a cohesive group of students where all spoke the same language and lived within their own culture with their own problems. I spent approximately 15 hours with students who came from different cultural backgrounds and spoke different languages. Above all, they were living in a foreign country. Still, in spite of the different circumstances, after completing this 15-hour course, I noticed that the students were more readily inclined to express their ideas and analyze their worlds, and more comfortable with the idea of thinking of solutions for the problems facing their daily lives.

Apart from the factors mentioned below, the students participating in this study had positive reactions towards such an approach. The pictures helped raise meaningful discussion in the classes because they represented my students' worlds. The students were attracted to this class because they felt they were an integral part of the learning process. Such an approach had, certainly, good effects
on the participants in that they freely expressed their ideas and had the liberty to choose the themes to discuss in the classroom.

Student-centered approaches are well known in the United States but they differ from the Freirean approach in that the latter views education as a tool to transform a society (taking action, one of Freire’s basic principles). My findings suggest that the students, at the end of the tutoring period, seemed to be willing to fight for their rights in this country. Maria, for instance, said she would not tolerate listening to one of her English teachers make jokes about her and her people any longer. Esperanza mentioned she would talk back when people discriminated against her based on her nationality. In a way, these examples suggest that the participants were walking towards a transformation of U.S. society. Standing up for our rights is one of the first steps towards any kind of transformation. With more time, perhaps, we could have engaged in dialogues about discrimination, for instance, what seems to be a topic that my students and I (being a foreigner in this country as well) know so well. Topics like that could have brought us together as a group to fight against social injustices in a country where we are considered “outsiders”.

**Recommendations**

Research by Faigin (1985) and Graman (1988) in Critical Pedagogy and ESL education has focused on the applicability of Freire’s method in the North-American context. They both believe that such a pedagogy is applicable in this country. I
agree with their findings but I believe that we need to be careful not to transplant into the North-American context exactly what Freire has done in Brazil. Rather as Shor (1998) states:

“The political conditions of any specific situation determine success or failure, so whether Paulo's method works or doesn't work is a 'situated' question. Paulo did not propose critical pedagogy or problem-posing dialogue or the generative theme method as methods that would succeed everywhere at every time”.

What needs to be considered in any Freirean-inspired program is that Freire’s educational proposal derives from two nonsimplistic ideas: (a) education is a political act, and (b) education is a series of theories put into practice (Freire in Macedo, 1994). According to Freire, these ideas are universal.

If education is a political act, we will find political issues embedded in our daily teaching as well. Thus, we need to reflect upon our “praxis” (theory and practice put together) and show our students “the other side”. As educators, we do not want to see our world filled with political illiterates, that is, somebody who has “an ingenuous perception of humanity and its relationship with the world” (Freire, 1985).

Critical literacy is not easy to acquire. It requires a great amount of time and dialogue. It requires love and compassion. It requires educators compromised with what Freire called “pedagogy of freedom”. I, like Freire (1970); Shor (1989); Gramam (1988), believe that education is a political act. I, like Pennycook (1999), believe that pedagogy of freedom can help us to tie up SLE "with the most crucial educational, cultural and political issues of our time (Pennycook, 1999)."
My thesis has been an important step in my learning more about critical/Freirean pedagogy and the issues involved in developing, applying, and assessing a curriculum. I hope my work will encourage others to consider the Freirean pedagogy in new contexts, thus enriching our understanding of his philosophy, which I believe, can provide us with powerful tools for a more politically enlightened ESL classroom.
APPENDIX A – CONSENT FORM

Dear Students in the Story County Adult Literacy Program:

As you know, I am a graduate student at Iowa State University. I am particularly interested in the work of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian famous for his innovative approaches to pedagogy. I want to explore the possibility of using this approach with groups of adult students, so I will be using this method in our group and asking for your response to it from time to time. I will under no circumstance use your real names in reporting activities and outcome of our class and you are under no obligation to fill out questionnaires or participate in interviews or other aspect of the study. Your participation is completely voluntary and will not affect your evaluation.

Claudia Borges
Graduate Student
Dept. of English
Iowa State University

I, ________________________________, agree that you, Claudia Borges, may use examples of my work from this class or other responses I may have about the class, but without using my real name. My name will be removed from my work before you allow anyone to see it and my identity will be protected. I understand that I may withdraw from participation at any time and that my evaluation in the course will not be affected.
APPENDIX B – PRE QUESTIONNAIRE

How old are you?

Where do you come from?

Do you know how to read and write in your native language?

Why do you want to learn English?

Why do you think it is important to learn how to write and read?

Do you feel part of the American society?

In your opinion, what is an educated person?

In your opinion, what’s the major social problem(s) present in your community? Do you think you can, somehow, help to solve such a problem? Explain why or why not, please.
APPENDIX C – POST QUESTIONNAIRE

Why do you think it is important to learn how to write and read?

Do you feel part of the American society?

In your opinion, what is an educated person?

In your opinion, what’s the major social problem(s) present in your community? Do you think you can, somehow, help to solve such a problem? Explain why or why not, please.
REFERENCES


