
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Critical Pedagogy in the Foreign Language Classroom: Beyond Utopian Ideals

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| ABSTRACT

The 21st-century English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom is challenged to prepare learners to navigate the complexities of today's increasingly interconnected and chaotic world. Mainstream language teaching approaches, which often reduce language learning to the instrumental acquisition of linguistic skills and competencies, overlook the profound impact of language on forming identities and perpetuating social inequality. Rooted in Paulo Freire's philosophy of education, Critical language pedagogy offers a compelling alternative by recognising the inherently political nature of language learning. This approach challenges mainstream English language teaching models and seeks to intertwine language instruction with broader social and political debates. However, critics argue that critical pedagogy is too theoretical and idealistic for practical application in mainstream EFL settings. This paper counters such critiques by demonstrating the practical relevance and applications of critical pedagogy in EFL education, providing actionable strategies for teachers to integrate these principles into their everyday practice.

| KEYWORDS

EFL, critical pedagogy, critical language pedagogy, practical applications

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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Introduction

The critical examination of the inherent political nature of language teaching is not new. With the rise of post-colonial studies, globalization studies, and critical applied linguistics, scholars have begun to interrogate the historical legacies of colonialism and imperialism and its impact on language, policies, practices, and identities. Language has always been a site of power where different ideologies, interests, and hierarchies intersect (Gounari, 2020). Advocates of critical English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pedagogy have criticized conventional language education, which often treats language as a neutral tool disconnected from social and political contexts. Pennycook (1997), for instance, emphasizes the importance of understanding the use of English within its broader social, cultural, and political contexts and argues for an approach to language teaching that is attentive to the diverse and complex ways in which English interacts with local languages, cultures, and power relations.

The emergence of the critical approach in language education, particularly in EFL, was deeply informed by Critical Pedagogy (CP), a philosophy of education that seeks to empower learners to question and challenge dominant ideologies and to become agents of change in their communities. Rooted in the work of educators such as Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and bell hooks, CP offers a transformative approach to education that goes beyond the mere transmission of knowledge to promote critical consciousness and social justice. Critical Language Pedagogy (CLP), refers to applications of the concepts of critical pedagogy to second language contexts Crookes (2021). It is a key area of critical applied linguistics that challenges the 'limitations of asocial, ahistorical and apolitical modes of inquiry for the highly political domain of second language education' (Pennycook, 1990, p. 25).

Despite the increasing interest in critical pedagogy within the EFL field, the prevailing focus on mainstream educational approaches continues to overshadow the integration of critical pedagogies in language teaching. Schools and language institutes often operate within tight constraints set by educational policies and institutional norms to meet the market-driven demand for quick and efficient language acquisition, focusing on practical communication skills. Overlooking critical pedagogy-based approaches positions teachers as mere adherents to dominant methods and practices and makes the significance of local sociopolitical issues in EFL/ESL invisible (Sharma & Phyak, 2017).

Critical pedagogy, with its emphasis on social justice, power dynamics, and cultural issues, has been criticised for its highly theoretical and idealized nature (Lodge, 2021; McElearney, 2020; McLean, 2020). Integrating CP in teaching might seem unrealistic and utopian (Porto, 2020) especially when juxtaposed against the pragmatic, skills-based focus prevalent in most EFL classrooms. Such a perception can discourage educators from fully integrating critical approaches into their teaching. The present paper endeavours to bridge the gap between theory and practice, offering practical strategies for integrating CLP into everyday EFL teaching. Through this integration, the paper argues, EFL education can be transformed into a powerful catalyst for social awareness, critical thinking, and learner agency.

Critical Pedagogy: Origin and Key Tenets

Paolo Freire (1921-1997) is considered the founding figure of critical education. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which is the foundational text of critical pedagogy, Freire (2000) exposes the dehumanizing nature of oppression and argues that only through education can individuals challenge and change the oppressive elements of society. Freire's philosophy of education presents an overt critique of the existing modes of education, which reflects and perpetuates societal biases, reinforces dominant cultural discourses, and calls for a pedagogy that empowers and liberates. « The banking » system of education is the metaphor Freire (2000, pp 70-85) uses to critique the traditional view of education by which teaching is reduced to « an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher the depositor (Freire, 2000, p. 72). It is a system that emulates the oppressor/oppressed pattern, a top-down model which views the teacher as the supreme source of knowledge. Freire criticizes the "narration sickness" afflicting traditional education by which the teacher/subject is the narrator and storyteller, whereas the student/object is the passive listener. Such an approach impedes students' critical thinking and creativity and reinforces "attitudes and practices that mirror oppressive society as a whole (p.73). It, therefore, denies the possibility for students to read reality and yearn for change.

To break away from such a hierarchical, authoritarian model, Freire (2000, pp.89-83) highlights the need for an alternative paradigm, a more egalitarian learning and teaching system that places freedom at the heart of education. "Problem-posing" is what Freire proposes to challenge the dichotomous pattern of «banking education» so that students become co-creators of knowledge and active participants in the learning process rather than passive recipients of information. Moreover, students are more engaged in reflecting on their real-life experiences as they "develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (p.83). Inherent to this problem-posing approach is the principle of dialogue which, according to Freire (2000, app. 88, 90), should not be perceived as a simple exchange of information or a discussion that privileges a voice over another. Dialogic education implies a human encounter that is deeply committed to humanity and reality transformation. So, true dialogue is not about arguing and imposing one's ideas and beliefs. It is a commitment founded on love, humility, critical thinking, trust, hope and, more importantly, on "an intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in their vocation to be more fully human" (ibid, p 90). Within the framework of authentic, problem posing-education, dialogue makes it possible for teachers and students to become co-learners and equal participants in the learning process.

In Freirian terms, the ultimate purpose of problem-posing education as the practice of freedom is the development of "conscientização" (conscientization) or critical consciousness: a consciousness-building process through which individuals gain an in-depth understanding of their social reality. Not only does "conscientization" enable people to come to know their oppressed condition, which is often masked with ideology (Takeda, 2022), but it also stimulates intervention for change and action against injustice. It is, therefore, related to a dual process of reflection and action, which Freire calls pedagogical praxis. Praxis, a key principle in Freire's philosophy of education, is a cycle of learning, reflecting and acting. Just as a pedagogy of the oppressed blurs the boundaries between teacher and students, it does blur the boundaries between theory and practice.

Freire's tradition was expanded by scholars such as Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, bell hooks, Michael Apple, Joe Kincheloe, Ira Shor, Antonia Darder, and Ira shot. It was also significantly enriched by the insights of the feminist critique, and postcolonial and critical race theories. Therefore, Critical pedagogy is understood in myriad ways (Trifonas, 2018). It is "as diverse as its many adherents" (McLaren, 2019 : 56), and most recent studies underline the difficulty in defining it in simple terms and prefer to highlight its pluralistic nature. It is referred to as "a big tent" encompassing several theoretical orientations and perspectives ranging from decolonial to Marxist, feminist, post-structuralist, and green pedagogies (Steinberg & Down, 2020:1192).

The word “critical” is not always synonymous with criticism, and it can denote “prodding and probing into something, and in doing so, new ways of seeing, knowing and looking beyond emerge” (Jeyaraj,2019). In a recent interview on critical pedagogies, Suresh Canagarajah, one of the leading figures of critical pedagogy, argues that the term critical might be confusing and suggests using “values-based” rather than “critical” because Suresh Canagarajah, a prominent advocate of critical pedagogy, points out that the term 'critical' can be misleading. He proposes the use of 'values-based' instead of 'critical' to avoid the misconception that being critical implies adhering to a single, orthodox way of thinking or theory as any approach or professional practice grounded in values should be welcomed in educational settings (Porto,2020). Critical Pedagogy is not the same as critical thinking. Although both concepts seem to meet at the core notion of criticality, critical pedagogy goes beyond equipping students with a set of analytical, rational and problem-solving skills to actively engage with the political dimensions of the teaching/ learning act and help students become “epistemically literate” which involves according to Dunne (2015) teaching “students to scrutinize all knowledge claims and avoid the pitfalls of institutionalized or immutable truths” (p.88). Critical thinking is often perceived as an individual endeavour rooted in Western rationalism. Critical Pedagogy, on the other hand, aims at human agency, the capacity of individuals to navigate through limitations and opportunities and to consciously act on them to influence the world (Gounari,2020).

Researchers tend to focus more on the underlying principles and tenets of CP instead of attempting to define it in simple terms, especially since the field of critical education is broad and constantly evolving. Kincheloe (2008, p.10), for instance, elaborate on its main underlying principles by pinpointing that CP is :

- Grounded on a social and educational vision of justice and equality
- Constructed on the belief that education is inherently political
- Dedicated to the alleviation of human suffering
- Concerned that schools don't hurt students—good schools don't blame students for their failures or strip students of the knowledge they bring to the classroom
- Enacted through the use of generative themes to read the word and the world and the process of problem posing—generative themes involve the educational use of issues that are central to students 'lives as a grounding for the curriculum
- Centred on the notion that teachers should be researchers—here teachers learn to produce and teach students to produce their knowledges
- Grounded on the notion that teachers become researchers of their students—as researchers, teachers study their students, their backgrounds, and the forces that shape them
- Interested in maintaining a delicate balance between social change and cultivating the intellect—this requires a rigorous pedagogy that accomplishes both goals
- Concerned with “the margins” of society, the experiences and needs of individuals faced with oppression and subjugation
- Constructed on the awareness that science can be used as a force to regulate and control
- Dedicated to understanding the context in which educational activity takes place
- Committed to resisting the harmful effects of dominant power
- Attuned to the importance of complexity—understands complexity theory—in constructing a rigorous and transformative education
- Focused on understanding the profound impact of neo-colonial structures in shaping education and knowledge.

In the same vein, Seal & Smith (2021) came up with a model which pertinently summarizes the principles of critical pedagogy using a diagram that shows how the principles, aims and approaches of critical pedagogy “stem from, and nestle within, each other”:

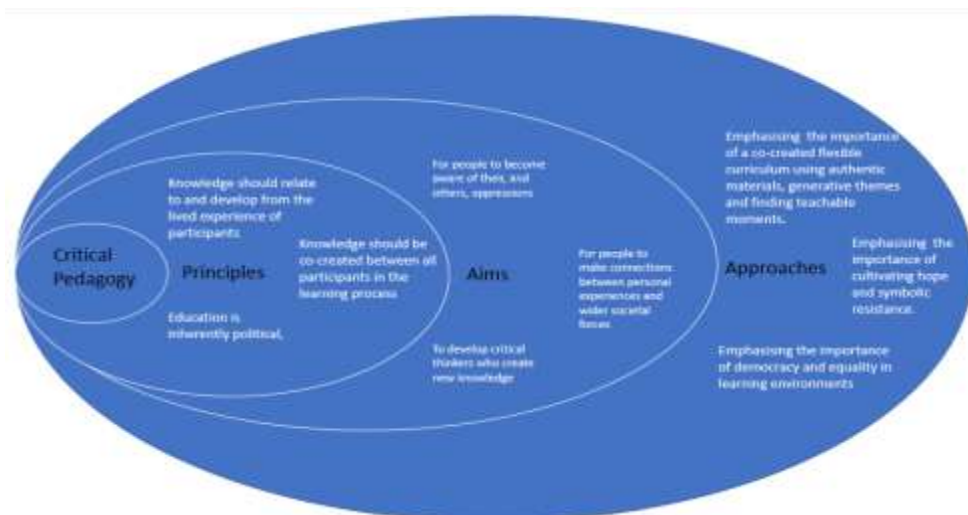


Figure 3. The principles, aims and approaches of critical pedagogy (Seal & Smith, 2021: 17).

Critical Language Pedagogy

The term Critical Language Pedagogy (CLP) refers to applications of critical pedagogy to second language contexts (Crookes, 2021a). It is a perspective on language education that is grounded in the values of social justice (Crookes, 2021b) as it seeks to challenge inequalities and power dynamics within the language teaching and learning process. CLP is concerned not just with how languages are taught but also with why they are taught in certain ways and the implications of these methods for social equity and justice. CLP defies the systemic, functional approach to language teaching, favouring the view of language as a tool for critical thinking and cultural understanding instead. It calls for an ethical stance that connects the classroom to real-life issues, experiences and struggles, challenging “the tendency to deal with language learning as a predominantly psycholinguistic phenomenon isolated from its social, cultural and educational contexts” (Pennycook, 2017: 299). The transformative potential of critical language teaching lies in its ability to integrate language learning with critical thinking, social justice, and empowerment. Critical pedagogy enables language learners to discover the different meanings texts can convey, foster critical consciousness, acknowledges and celebrates diverse voices, and motivate learners to act towards social change (Silva et al., 2018).

The existing body of literature offers limited insight into how CLP can be implemented. However, a few works (Pennycook, 1994; Crookes, 2013; Piosang, 2017; Crookes, 2021) have focused on the features of CLP, which might guide teaching practice and enable teachers to adapt them to fit their teaching contexts. Piosang (2017) for instance, sketches out six key principles that should guide critical teaching practice: (1) Critical language pedagogy is a political process; (2) Critical language pedagogy is student-centred; (3) Critical language pedagogy makes classes as democratic public spheres, (4) Critical language pedagogy is highly dialogical, (5) Critical language pedagogy employs emancipatory authority, (6) Critical language pedagogy is aimed at social transformation. Although these principles cover different aspects of critical-pedagogy-informed curriculum design including objectives, content, teaching strategies, student & teacher roles and evaluation, they do not deliver the details of practice (Crookes, 2021) because critical pedagogy is neither a method nor a theory, but an attitude to teaching (Siqueira, 2021).

Critical EFL Pedagogy: From Theory to Practice

The heterogeneity found in EFL classrooms mirrors the broader societal systems, presenting a setting where power relations, cultural dominance, and language come together to create intricate educational scenarios. By employing the principles of Critical Pedagogy, teachers can guide students through these complexities to encourage a form of learning that enhances critical analysis, societal engagement, and individual empowerment. It is important to translate the values of critical pedagogy into concrete classroom practices and reflect on how the EFL classroom can be a space for empowerment and freedom in terms of teacher-student relationship, pedagogical engagement, curriculum design and classroom environment.

Critical Needs Analysis

Needs analysis, a key component of EFL/ESL instruction, is usually carried out based on predetermined curricular goals or external standards, aiming to address pragmatic, immediate language needs of learners to help them function effectively in specific roles or professions. CLP calls into question the pragmatic approach to needs analysis in its tendency to focus on the functional purposes of language learning and neglect the deeper, intrinsic values of language as a means of personal expression, cultural identity, and social empowerment. Benesch (1993) asserts that all forms of EFL instruction are inherently ideological, regardless of whether

educators are aware of the political implications of their teaching practices. Teachers' pedagogical choices either encourage or discourage students from critically engaging with their education and the broader societal context. Traditional needs analysis identifies and targets the gaps between students' current abilities and the demands of the academic or professional environments. It tends to treat language learning as a technical task and focuses on adapting learners to pre-existing academic and linguistic requirements without questioning the underlying assumptions or power structures of these educational settings.

Critical needs analysis is advocated to expand the scope of needs assessment beyond the simple identification of linguistic competencies and academic requirements. It involves a deeper engagement with the learners' backgrounds and the power dynamics at play within educational settings. It starts with gathering comprehensive data through various means such as surveys, interviews, and observations, aimed not only at understanding learners' linguistic abilities but also their personal experiences, cultural identities, and social challenges. This information is then analyzed to uncover how different factors such as race, gender, and social class influence learning motivations and outcomes, ensuring the curriculum is responsive to these diverse needs. Besides language learning needs, critical needs analysis could account for the "unfavorable social, institutional, and classroom conditions" (Benesch, 2001:108).

Furthermore, critical needs analysis involves scrutinizing existing educational materials and practices to identify how they might perpetuate systemic inequalities or inhibit critical engagement. The goal is to transform the EFL classroom into a platform where language learning is about acquiring communication skills and empowering learners as agents of change. This shift necessitates the adoption of teaching methods that foster open dialogue and collaboration, allowing students to explore and articulate their views on complex social issues. By prioritizing content that promotes critical thinking and social justice, critical needs analysis aims to equip learners with language proficiency and the skills to navigate and influence their sociopolitical landscapes effectively.

Negotiated Syllabus:

CLP fundamentally redefines the roles of teachers and learners in the educational process, shifting the focus towards a more democratic, inclusive, and socially conscious framework. In this approach, the teacher and students are seen as equal partners in learning, fostering a collaborative environment where knowledge is co-constructed rather than transmitted in one direction. The teacher's role is to impart information and pose challenging problems and scenarios that stimulate critical thinking and active engagement. This approach encourages learners to act on and interact with the subject matter, promoting practical application and experiential learning.

Adopting a CLP framework ensures students' engagement and active participation in the learning process. They collaboratively provide input on the content, topics, and learning objectives of the course through co-constructing a 'negotiated syllabus', a process which Crookes (2013) describes as a listening phase that reflects Freire's notion of 'problem-posing education' in its emphasis on the active role students should play in shaping the content of the instruction. Empirical data from Essabari and Hiba's study corroborate this claim: the negotiated syllabus generated six interrelated outcomes, empowerment through choice, heightened agency and ownership, the development of critical consciousness around social issues such as bullying, sexism, and racism, amplification of student voice, deeper motivation and engagement, and predictable implementation challenges that demanded careful scaffolding (Essabari & Hiba, 2025). A negotiated syllabus in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) involves the participation of students in deciding the course content, goals, and assessment methods, aligning with critical pedagogical approaches that emphasize student agency and power dynamics in the classroom. The process of negotiating syllabus content empowers students by involving them directly in decisions regarding what and how they will learn. This inclusion enhances their motivation and encourages active participation in the learning process. As a result, students are more engaged and take greater ownership of their learning outcomes (Ghozali, Khosiyono, & Abror, 2021).

A negotiated syllabus promotes a sense of autonomy and responsibility by engaging students in the decision-making process regarding their learning. This approach aligns with critical pedagogy's emphasis on empowering students to take control of their educational journeys, fostering an environment where they can act as co-creators of the curriculum rather than passive recipients of predetermined content. This empowerment is crucial for developing critical thinking and self-regulated learning skills. This participatory approach allows students to connect the educational content with their personal, social, and cultural contexts, reflect on their realities and experiences and develop critical consciousness. And, when students have a say in what and how they learn, they demonstrate better attitudes, stronger motivation, higher levels of autonomy and self-efficacy (Pakdaman, Alibakhshi, & Baradaran, 2022).

Critical Content

Incorporating a critical approach in the EFL classroom means actively engaging students in thinking critically about various issues through the lens of the content that both students and teachers contribute. This approach is not just about learning English; it's about using the language as a medium to explore and respond to social, cultural, and political contexts. To foster a more inclusive environment, the selection of materials should reflect a wide range of cultures, experiences, and perspectives. In the critical EFL

classroom, learning materials should be primarily used as tools for interpreting and delving into students' perspectives Crookes & Ziegler (2021). challenge and interrogate social, cultural, and political issues, and foster critical thinking, cultural awareness, and a deeper understanding of power dynamics within the context of language learning and teaching.

Critical content often includes texts, discussions, and media that highlight sociopolitical issues, enabling students to examine and question power dynamics, social inequalities, and cultural biases. The Freirean term 'code' or 'codification' is key to CLP and stands for *"a projective device which allows learners to articulate their own, somewhat unpredictable interpretation of a potentially problematic situation relevant to their life"* (Crookes, 2013:61). a "code" is a kind of stimulus or artefact that can provoke thought, discussion, and analysis. This could be a photo, a story, a news article, or any content depicting a scenario learners can relate to or find significant. The purpose of these codes is to act as a mirror reflecting issues or dynamics that learners might experience in their environments. The codes upon which the critical lesson is built are not presented in a vacuum, but their choice is based on systematic listening, the stage that precedes the development of a problem-posing curriculum. The ultimate goal of listening and code selection is to uncover what Freire (2000) describes as "generative themes." These are the significant contradictions, conflicts, and issues that resonate deeply with the learners' actual experiences. Generative themes are powerful because they tap into the learners' realities, provoke engagement, and stimulate critical thinking and dialogue.

Dialogue

Freire's critical pedagogy is founded on the concept of dialogic learning, a dynamic process of inquiry that empowers individuals to recognize and address the conditions of their existence. It is rooted in the belief that education is a liberatory act. Humility, hope, faith, love, and critical thinking are perceived as essential dispositions for effective dialogue in education (Dahlgren, 2022). Dialogic education remains profoundly relevant in EFL pedagogy, emphasizing critical engagement, ethical interaction, and transformative learning experiences. It continues to inspire pedagogical practices that are not only about language acquisition but also about fostering critical awareness and empowerment among learners.

Critical Dialogue extends beyond conventional communication practices to embody a transformative educational process. It dissolves the hierarchical distinction between teacher and student, positioning both as learners and co-contributors to the educational process. This reciprocity encourages students to contribute actively, fostering a more democratic learning space. Critical dialogue involves a problem-posing approach where learning emerges through discussing real-world issues relevant to the learners, encouraging them to think critically and creatively to solve problems. The purpose of dialogue, according to Wallerstein and Auerbach (2004), is conscientization, a process of reflection and action which begins by understanding one's societal position and extends to engaging with broader sociopolitical and cultural contexts.

EFL teachers can transform their classrooms into dynamic spaces where critical dialogue facilitates language learning, critical consciousness, and empowerment. Fostering dialogue involves a variety of interactive and inclusive strategies that transform learning into a dynamic, student-centered experience. Teachers can kick off sessions with thought-provoking discussion prompts related to current events or cultural differences and utilize collaborative activities such as debates, group projects, and role-plays to encourage communication and critical thinking. Students should be encouraged to take turns leading the discussion on a topic of their choice to give them a sense of ownership and boost their confidence. Integrating digital platforms that allow for asynchronous dialogue, such as forums or class blogs, can give quieter students a voice and allow for more thoughtful, reflective responses that contribute to richer in-class discussions.

Translanguaging

Translanguaging as a practice of critical pedagogy in EFL teaching recognizes and incorporates the diverse linguistic repertoires of students into the classroom. It offers a counter-narrative to the English-only approach, which often discourages the use of students' native language, despite the growing theoretical support of the use of L1 in language learning. The monolingual ideology tends to marginalize or suppress the linguistic identity of students who speak languages other than English. Translanguaging democratizes language learning and challenges the supremacy of English, advocating for a more equitable approach to language education. It allows "new configurations of language practices as well as new subjectivities, understandings and social structures" (Hua, Wei, & Lyons, 2017:412).

Incorporating translanguaging into EFL teaching involves a holistic approach that spans instructional strategies, student interactions, assessment practices, classroom culture, and curriculum design. Educators can enhance learning by integrating students' home languages alongside English, using bilingual resources, and facilitating group work where students leverage all their linguistic resources. Assessments can be designed to allow responses in multiple languages, and students might also maintain reflective language journals to foster deeper metalinguistic awareness. The classroom environment should visibly and culturally reflect its multilingual nature, with signs and decorations in various languages, alongside celebrations of different cultures and

traditions. Curriculum design can include thematic units relevant to students' backgrounds and translanguaging projects that require using both English and home languages, encouraging research and presentations that connect with student's personal and cultural identities. These strategies collectively foster a more inclusive, engaging, and effective learning environment that values and utilizes the linguistic diversity of the classroom.

Translanguaging strategically used in the EFL classroom can significantly enhance intercultural learning by creating opportunities for students to share their linguistic and cultural backgrounds with peers, thus broadening everyone's cultural understanding and appreciation. This practice helps dismantle cultural barriers and builds bridges between diverse student populations. When students are encouraged to bring their whole linguistic selves to class, they are more likely to share insights from their cultural perspectives, enriching classroom discussions and collaborative learning experiences.

Participatory Modes of Assessment

Traditional forms of assessment often conflict with the foundational principles of Critical Pedagogy, which emphasizes empowering students and valuing their experiences. The focus of traditional assessment on standardized, quantifiable outcomes reflects a one-size-fits-all approach that fails to capture the full scope of students' understanding and individual perspectives. Student's voices can often be marginalized in assessment (Chase, 2019) because traditional methods of evaluation do not allow for personal expression or the inclusion of diverse cultural and experiential backgrounds. Critical Pedagogy challenges the traditional power dynamics in assessment by integrating a critical perspective into the evaluation process, focusing not just on what students know, but how they think and engage with content.

Authenticity is a fundamental characteristic of critical pedagogy (Serrano et. al, 2017). Critical EFL pedagogy should seek to create a learning environment where language learners can directly engage with content that mirrors the complexities of their lived experiences. Therefore, critical assessment often involves tasks that encourage students to apply their linguistic skills to solve problems, reflect on societal issues, and participate in meaningful dialogues that resonate with their own lives and the broader community. This approach enhances language acquisition and cultivates critical thinking and social awareness; this approach encourages students to draw upon their personal knowledge, perspectives, and voices in analysing and addressing real-world problems. Assessing students critically means incorporating opportunities for students to reflect on their learning journey, assess their progress, and identify areas for growth. Instead of standardized, teacher-centred testing, teacher could opt for the use of narrative grading, portfolio assessments, group projects and performances, individual exhibitions, and essay examinations (Crookes, 2013:68).

Critical assessment is participatory. It allows students to engage in creating and negotiating the assessment criteria actively. Self-assessment and peer-assessment are alternative forms of evaluation that shift power relations within the classroom, allowing EFL students to exercise their voice and agency. Engaging EFL learners in the assessment process aids in the development of critical thinking skills. As students evaluate and reflect on their peers' work, they engage in higher-order thinking that challenges them to apply, analyze, and synthesize information. This is particularly effective in an EFL context, where critical thinking skills are essential for language development and academic success. Feedback becomes a tool for growth and understanding rather than just a measure of performance. By integrating self-assessment and peer-assessment into EFL teaching practices, educators can transform assessment into a collaborative and transformative educational experience that benefits both student learning and interpersonal development.

Conclusion

Critical Language Pedagogy is not only relevant but essential in modern EFL classrooms. It offers a powerful framework for integrating language learning with critical inquiry, enabling students to master the English language skills and engage deeply with the cultural, social, and political contexts of language use. The practical strategies outlined in this paper for implementing Critical Pedagogy in EFL teaching are not only transformative and empowering, but they also embody the best teaching practices that EFL specialists and professionals consistently advocate for. CLP is deeply learner-centred, placing students' needs, experiences, and voices at the forefront of the educational process. By promoting an environment where students actively participate in shaping their learning journey, these methods foster a sense of ownership and autonomy among learners, which is crucial for their engagement and motivation. The communicative nature of these practices ensures that language learning transcends the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary to include real-world applications. Moreover, the critical EFL classroom supports collaborative learning as the focus of CLP encourages students to work together and learn from each other, effectively breaking down the traditional teacher-student hierarchies. However, embracing these transformative practices is not without its challenges. The shift to a critical pedagogical approach often encounters resistance due to institutional constraints and the prevailing market-driven model of education, which prioritizes quick, measurable outcomes over deeper, more critical engagement with language and culture. Overcoming these barriers requires a change in teaching methods and a broader institutional commitment to valuing educational outcomes, including critical consciousness and social empowerment.

Critical pedagogy often faces critique for its ostensibly utopian vision. Yet, there is nothing more pertinent than utopian thinking in addressing the unprecedented crises humanity is currently facing. It fuels hope and creates possibilities for a better future. Justice-oriented pedagogies encourage concrete utopia (McLaren, 2021), which inspires individuals and communities to imagine feasible alternatives and equips them with the critical tools necessary to transform these visions into reality. Critical pedagogy can transform the EFL classroom into a dynamic space of 'concrete utopia', where language serves as a tool for empowerment and critical consciousness.

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