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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Tensions and Possibilities: A Qualitative Inquiry into Moroccan ESP Teachers' Understandings of Critical Pedagogy

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| ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores how experienced English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teachers in Moroccan higher education conceptualise and engage with the principles of critical pedagogy. Drawing on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven instructors, each with between seven and twenty-four years of teaching experience, the research investigates participants' understandings of critical pedagogy, the extent to which they incorporate its principles into their practice, and the institutional or ideological barriers they encounter. Grounded in Freirean and post-Freirean frameworks, the thematic analysis reveals a complex interplay between teachers' critical awareness and the constraints of neoliberal educational structures. While some participants expressed deep alignment with dialogic, student-centred, and socially responsive pedagogies, others voiced uncertainty or scepticism about the applicability of critical pedagogy within the skill-oriented, market-driven logic of ESP. The study highlights the need for sustained critical professional development, localised theorisation of critical practice, and structural support to bridge the gap between transformative ideals and institutional realities. It contributes to emerging scholarship advocating for a critical turn in ESP by foregrounding teachers' voices as both agents and critics of pedagogical change.

| KEYWORDS

Critical pedagogy, English for Specific Purposes, teacher beliefs, qualitative research, Moroccan higher education

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### 1. Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has emerged as a dominant strand in English Language Teaching (ELT), especially in tertiary institutions seeking to align education with economic and professional demands. It is widely promoted as a pragmatic and targeted approach to language instruction, emphasizing communicative competence tailored to specialized fields such as business, engineering, or medicine (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). However, the very pragmatism that has made ESP attractive has also rendered it deeply susceptible to the influence of neoliberal discourse. Neoliberalism reconfigures education as a marketplace, students as consumers, and language as a commodifiable skill—a tool for individual advancement rather than collective transformation (Block, Gray, & Holborow, 2012). In such contexts, pedagogy tends to prioritize instrumental outcomes over critical awareness, reducing teaching to a technical exercise in language delivery and employability training.

In Morocco, ESP has expanded rapidly across public and private higher education institutions, in response to state reforms aimed at bridging the gap between academia and the job market (Akhajam, 2019). English is increasingly promoted as a key to scientific research, international mobility, and career success, especially in sectors such as engineering, technology, and business (Elimadi, 2024). Yet, this expansion has been largely governed by instrumentalist ideologies, often privileging technical vocabulary and decontextualized skill acquisition over reflective, culturally responsive, or ethically grounded pedagogy. ESP in

Morocco, particularly in remains marked by insufficient time allocation, underdeveloped curricula, and a notable lack of teacher training in ESP-specific methods (Al Amrani, 2024).

Amid this landscape, critical pedagogy offers a compelling alternative. Grounded in the emancipatory vision of Paulo Freire (1970), and extended by scholars such as Giroux (1988), McLaren (2003), and hooks (1994), critical pedagogy insists that education is never neutral. It views teaching as a political and ethical act aimed at cultivating critical consciousness, dialogic relationships, and transformative social engagement. In the realm of language education, critical pedagogy foregrounds questions of identity, power, and justice, and seeks to reposition students as active agents in their learning, rather than passive recipients of content (Canagarajah, 2005; Pennycook, 2001).

Despite calls to reframe language education as a socially responsive and justice-oriented endeavor (Crookes, 2013; Kumaravadivelu, 2006), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) continues to be shaped by instrumentalist assumptions that prioritize market alignment, efficiency, and performance. In many contexts, including Morocco, ESP is often reduced to a technical exercise aimed at equipping students with job-related vocabulary and functional communicative skills, with little attention to broader questions of power, identity, or ideology (Benesch, 2001; Pennycook, 2001). This depoliticization reflects the broader neoliberal rationality that has infiltrated educational discourse and policy, framing language learning as an individual investment rather than a collective, emancipatory process. As a result, the potential of ESP to function as a critical, transformative space remains largely unrealized. little empirical research has examined how ESP instructors in Morocco actually understand, interpret, or engage with critical pedagogy in practice. Teacher cognition research has consistently shown that educators' beliefs and understandings play a pivotal role in shaping classroom behavior (Borg, 2003), yet this dimension remains largely underexplored in Moroccan ESP.

In response to these gaps, this qualitative study investigates how experienced Moroccan ESP teachers conceptualize critical pedagogy and assess their own readiness to implement it in their classrooms. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with instructors working in diverse higher education institutions, the study explores the epistemological, ideological, and contextual factors that shape their pedagogical orientations. This research seeks to contribute to a growing body of work that seeks to reimagine ESP not merely as a site of skills acquisition but as a transformative space for critical literacy, democratic engagement, and pedagogical justice.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 English for Specific Purposes and Needs Analysis

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is widely regarded as a learner-centered approach to English Language Teaching, tailored to meet the specific needs of students preparing for academic or professional domains. From its early formulation in the 1960s, ESP has been associated with the teaching of English in discipline-specific or occupation-oriented contexts—such as English for Engineering, Medicine, Law, or Business—where language instruction is shaped by the communicative demands of the target field (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998).

Central to ESP practice is Needs Analysis (NA), the process through which teachers and course designers identify learners' target language requirements and learning preferences. Traditional models of NA distinguish between *target needs* (what learners need to do with English in the target context) and *learning needs* (how learners can best acquire those abilities). These models have informed curriculum design, material selection, and assessment in ESP contexts globally, where practicality and relevance are often prioritized.

In Moroccan higher education, Needs Analysis is routinely cited in curriculum policy as a guiding principle for ESP instruction. However, empirical studies reveal a significant gap between theory and practice. Teachers frequently report challenges in conducting effective Needs Analyses due to time constraints, lack of training, administrative pressures, or a mismatch between their own disciplinary knowledge and students' specializations (Idrissi & El Kandoussi, 2025; Elouardaoui, 2024). As a result, many ESP classes rely on generic Business English textbooks, outdated syllabi, or improvised materials, often disconnected from learners' actual professional trajectories (Elimadi, 2024).

Moreover, conventional NA in ESP tends to treat learner needs as fixed, measurable, and apolitical—usually defined in terms of market expectations and institutional objectives. This limits the scope of pedagogical inquiry and marginalizes questions of identity, ideology, and social relevance in the language classroom.

### 2.2 Critical Needs Analysis

In response to the instrumentalism of mainstream ESP, scholars have called for a Critical Needs Analysis (CNA) that reframes learner needs as socially constructed, historically situated, and ideologically contested (Benesch, 2001; Basturkmen, 2010). CNA extends the traditional concept of Needs Analysis by interrogating whose needs are being addressed, who defines them, and in what socio-political context. Rather than viewing needs as neutral or self-evident, CNA recognizes that they are shaped by power relations—between institutions and students, global and local norms, and dominant and marginalized knowledges.

Benesch (2001), a foundational voice in this area, argues that conventional NA procedures tend to legitimize institutional expectations without questioning their implications for student agency or equity. CNA, by contrast, encourages teachers to involve learners as co-constructors of curriculum and to problematize the very assumptions underpinning professional language use. This includes examining how language is implicated in hierarchies of gender, class, race, and global capital, especially in postcolonial or Global South contexts.

In Morocco, such a reorientation is both urgent and underdeveloped. While recent research has begun to advocate for more reflective, inclusive, and justice-oriented approaches to ESP (Bekkaoui & Dahbi, 2020; El Arbaoui, 2021), there is still limited institutional recognition of CNA as a valid pedagogical strategy. Teachers face structural constraints, including overcrowded classes, lack of autonomy, and the dominance of centralized syllabi, which limit their ability to negotiate content or critically engage students' experiences and voices.

Nonetheless, studies suggest a growing awareness among educators of the limitations of traditional NA, especially in relation to learner motivation, cultural relevance, and ethical responsiveness (Akhajam, 2019; Elimadi, 2024). Some instructors have informally adapted classroom practices to allow space for discussion, dialogue, or learner-led projects, even within otherwise rigid ESP programs. These micro-level innovations reflect the latent potential for CNA to be enacted, if not fully institutionalized. Critical Needs Analysis thus provides a theoretical and methodological bridge between ESP's pragmatic origins and a more socially grounded vision of language education. It aligns with broader efforts to decolonize ELT, amplify learner voice, and transform the classroom into a site of reflection, resistance, and renewal.

### **2.3 Critical Pedagogy in Language Education**

Critical pedagogy, rooted in the emancipatory philosophy of Paulo Freire (1970), positions education as a political and ethical act aimed at fostering critical consciousness (*conscientização*), empowering marginalized voices, and transforming oppressive structures. Unlike traditional pedagogies that treat knowledge as neutral and transferable, critical pedagogy views teaching as a dialogic process in which learners and teachers co-construct meaning by interrogating social realities. Education, from this perspective, is never value-free; it either reinforces or challenges dominant ideologies (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 2003). In the field of language education, critical pedagogy has gained traction as a response to the increasing commodification of language learning and the decontextualization of curricula. Scholars such as Pennycook (2001), Canagarajah (2005), and Norton & Toohey (2004) argue that language is not simply a tool for communication, but a site where identities are negotiated and power relations enacted. Consequently, language teaching should not be confined to structural forms or communicative routines but should engage learners in exploring how language shapes—and is shaped by—hegemonic discourses, cultural hierarchies, and socio-political realities.

A critical approach to language pedagogy thus entails more than fostering critical thinking skills or encouraging classroom participation. It involves reorienting the goals of education to include the development of agency, ethical engagement, and political literacy. This means enabling students to read both the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987), to question dominant narratives, and to act upon their conditions. In practice, this may include integrating real-world social issues into classroom discussions, encouraging students to reflect on their lived experiences, and fostering collective inquiry into the ideological dimensions of language use.

Despite its theoretical appeal, the implementation of critical pedagogy in language classrooms remains contested. Several scholars have warned against the dangers of reducing critical pedagogy to a set of techniques or misinterpreting it as a generic call for classroom interactivity or critical thinking (Akbari, 2008). True critical pedagogy demands a sustained engagement with the structural and ideological conditions of education, and a willingness to disrupt traditional teacher-student hierarchies. Moreover, the application of critical pedagogy in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) presents additional complexities, as ESP has historically been defined by functionalist and instrumentalist goals that prioritize communicative efficiency over ideological engagement (Benesch, 2001; Pennycook, 1997).

In response to this tension, Benesch (2001, 2009) advocates for a critical ESP that challenges the assumption that workplace or academic communication is ideologically neutral. Instead, she calls for needs analysis and curriculum design that recognize the social, political, and emotional dimensions of learners' experiences. Similarly, Crookes (2013) and Kumaravadivelu (2006) propose pedagogical frameworks that resist technocratic views of language teaching and embrace a more holistic, justice-oriented vision. These approaches highlight the importance of contextualizing ESP instruction within broader struggles for equity, representation, and linguistic democracy.

However, in many settings—including Morocco—critical pedagogy in ESP remains under-theorized and under-implemented. As several Moroccan scholars have recently argued, there is an urgent need to reclaim the ESP classroom as a site not only of technical instruction but of ethical and intellectual engagement (Bekkaoui & Dahbi, 2020; Akhajam, 2019). This reorientation demands a deeper understanding of how teachers conceptualize their role—not merely as language instructors, but as transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 1988) capable of resisting neoliberal and depoliticizing discourses that currently shape ESP education.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive design to investigate how Moroccan ESP instructors conceptualise and respond to the principles of critical pedagogy. Anchored in the epistemological stance of constructivism, the study views meaning as socially constructed through discourse and interaction (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It adopts a multiple-case study approach (Yin, 2014), enabling a detailed, context-sensitive exploration of teachers' pedagogical beliefs and professional experiences across varied institutional settings. The aim is not to generalize findings to a population but to generate rich, situated insights into how teachers understand their roles and pedagogical possibilities in the context of neoliberal ESP education.

#### 3.2 Participants

Participants were purposefully selected to ensure information-rich, reflective perspectives on the topic (Patton, 2002). The sample consisted of **seven Moroccan ESP instructors** belonging to 4 different institutions:

Participants n	Gender	Teaching Experience	Academic Qualification
P1	Male	7	Master
P2	Female	11	PhD
P3	Male	24	Master
P4	Male	9	PhD
P5	Male	10	master
P6	Female	22	Master
P7	Female	12	PhD

#### 3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected over three months through semi-structured interviews. Interviews ranged from 40 to 50 minutes, allowing for elaboration and narrative depth. An interview protocol was developed to guide the conversations while allowing for emergent themes and participant-led digressions. Key themes included:

- Teachers' definitions and interpretations of critical pedagogy;
- Their perceptions of its relevance to the Moroccan ESP context;
- Institutional or ideological constraints they experience;
- Their self-assessed readiness or capacity to integrate critical pedagogy;
- Reflections on student needs, language ideologies, and curriculum design.

All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. All participants were assured of their anonymity, the confidentiality of data, and their right to

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing for an inductive and iterative interpretation of recurring patterns across the dataset. The analysis followed six key phases:

1. Familiarisation: Repeated reading of transcripts to gain a holistic sense of the data.
2. Initial coding: Segmenting the data using open codes derived from participant language.
3. Generating themes: Grouping related codes into broader thematic categories.
4. Reviewing themes: Refining, collapsing, or reconfiguring themes for coherence.
5. Defining and naming themes: Articulating core meanings and tensions within each theme.
6. Writing up: Integrating thematic findings with relevant theoretical and empirical literature.

NVivo software was used to facilitate coding and ensure traceability of analytic decisions. Reflexive memos were also kept throughout the process to document the researcher's evolving interpretations and to remain critically aware of positionality, especially as an insider to Moroccan ESP education.

### 4. Findings

Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed four central themes concerning how Moroccan ESP instructors understand and respond to the principles of critical pedagogy. These themes reflect conceptual, ideological, and contextual dimensions of their pedagogical cognition:

### **Theme 1 : Perceived Incompatibility Between Critical Pedagogy and ESP/Vocational Contexts**

A recurring theme across the interviews was the belief that critical pedagogy is incompatible with the goals and structure of ESP, particularly in vocationally oriented domains such as Business English, Engineering, or Medical English. Several participants expressed doubts about the feasibility of integrating social justice-oriented teaching into curricula that are tightly aligned with labour market demands and professional communication standards. Here is an extract from participants' responses:

*"I think critical pedagogy is ideologically loaded. It can be used in Letters and human sciences because students have a background in literature and cultural studies. ESP is more focused on building the skills needed for the job market. So, I don't think it fits in the ESP context"* (P5)

*"Critical pedagogy sounds interesting, but ESP is practical. It's about helping students succeed in their professions. They need specific skills, not ideological discussions"*. (P7)

For many, critical pedagogy was viewed as too abstract, too political, or not practically useful in contexts where the primary expectation is to produce job-ready graduates equipped with field-specific linguistic competence.

*"I don't see how talking about inequality or power can help students write better reports or pass job interviews. In Business English, for instance, we might discuss business ethics but we generally stick to what's relevant."* (P4)

*"ESP is based on needs analysis. It is practical by default. I don't think there is a room for discussing issues like power relations, sexism or racism. Of course, these issues might emerge in class discussions, but I don't think they should be explicitly part of the syllabus, otherwise we won't be teaching ESP"* (P1)

### **Theme 2: Confusion between Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy**

When asked to define critical pedagogy many participants equated *critical pedagogy* with *critical thinking*. While all teachers interviewed valued the development of analytical skills in learners, few articulated an understanding of critical pedagogy as an emancipatory, socially grounded framework. Most responses framed criticality as a cognitive skill useful for interpreting texts or forming arguments, rather than as a tool for interrogating social inequities or dominant ideologies. Here is what some participants said:

*"I encourage students to be critical when they read articles... to question the data, the sources. But I wouldn't say I teach them about politics or power structures. But I design activities that involve higher-order thinking."* (P3) .

*"Critical thinking and critical pedagogy are more or less the same, and I believe ESP teachers should integrate them in their teaching practice to enable students to navigate the demands of today's challenges"* (P6).

*"Although the word pedagogy is broader, but critical thinking and critical pedagogy are two faces for the same coin. I might say, critical pedagogy is about how you teach them"*(P3).

Only two participants referred to critical pedagogy in terms consistent with Freirean thought, and both noted that they became familiar with the concept through independent reading or academic discussion.

### **Theme 3 : Technocratic Perceptions of the Teacher's Role**

Participants articulated divergent understandings of their role in the ESP classroom, reflecting a spectrum of pedagogical orientations. Some conceptualised themselves primarily as "facilitators of language skills" or "providers of tools for employment," echoing technocratic discourses aligned with neoliberal imperatives. Their focus rested on preparing students for specific communicative tasks in professional contexts, often with an explicit detachment from broader social or political concerns. As one participant explained:

*"My job is to equip students with the language skills they need to communicate competently in professional situations. I prepare them for interviews and to write emails and reports. If they want to discuss societal issues, maybe they can do that in other classes."* (P2)

Others adopted a more relational stance, emphasising empathy, student motivation, and classroom enjoyment. However, even these perspectives were frequently framed within pragmatic goals rather than critical engagement. For instance, Participant 7 noted:

*"I try to make my classes enjoyable and help students feel confident using English, especially for presentations and business tasks. Of course, I care about their opinions, but my main focus is on practical outcomes—they need to be ready for the market."*(P7)

### **Theme 4: Perceived Institutional and Structural Difficulties**

A recurring difficulty identified by participants was the demanding nature of implementing critical language pedagogy, particularly in terms of time, preparation, and material development. Several instructors emphasized that CLP is not something

that can be “added on” to an existing syllabus without significant effort. It requires carefully selected texts, open-ended task design, and a readiness to facilitate complex discussions that may diverge from traditional lesson plans. This was perceived as a substantial additional burden, especially for teachers managing multiple workloads across institutions. One of the interviewed participants stated that:

*“Critical language pedagogy requires a lot of preparation in terms of designing and adapting materials and finding resources, and this is quite tiring and time-consuming» (P5)*

Another significant obstacle reported by participants was the students’ unfamiliarity with the principles and practices of critical pedagogy, which posed challenges to its implementation in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts. As a result of their prior exposure to traditional, exam-oriented instruction, many students are more accustomed to rote learning, teacher-led lectures, and narrowly defined outcomes than to dialogic learning, reflexive inquiry, or engagement with ideologically sensitive topics. As one participant observed:

*“Students expect a passive model and expect the teacher to take the lead. When challenged through nontraditional modes of learning they might get confused or disengaged» (P6)*

Another teacher emphasized the tension between the participatory ethos of critical pedagogy and students’ ingrained expectations shaped by high-stakes assessment cultures:

*“ incorporating an approach that advocates students active participation and involvement in the design and facilitation of the course might be compromised by the learners unreadiness for such methods.from my experience students are are more and more concerned about what to deliver the day of the exam”(P1)*

## 5. Discussion:

### 5.1 Reframing ESP: The Tension Between Critical Pedagogy and Market-Driven Instruction

The perception that critical pedagogy is incompatible with English for Specific Purposes (ESP) emerged as a dominant theme across participants’ narratives. Most teachers positioned ESP as inherently pragmatic, functional, and professionally oriented, thereby resisting the integration of critical, ideological, or socially responsive elements into their instructional practice. This dichotomization reflects what Pennycook (2001) terms “vulgar pragmatism”, a reductive orientation in language teaching that foregrounds immediate communicative utility and workplace relevance at the expense of social critique and reflexivity. From this perspective, the ESP classroom is viewed as a neutral training ground for professional communication, not as a space for questioning the socio-political structures within which that communication takes place.

Several participants invoked the perceived incompatibility between the “ideological” nature of critical pedagogy and the technical goals of ESP. The belief that critical pedagogy is only suitable for humanities disciplines (e.g., literature or cultural studies) but not for professional domains like business or engineering reproduces a disciplinary hierarchy that marginalizes ethics, politics, and identity from vocational education. This reflects the broader neoliberal logic in higher education, which instrumentalizes language learning for economic mobility and constrains pedagogical experimentation to what is measurable, marketable, and institutionally sanctioned (Block, Gray, & Holborow, 2012).

Yet such framings overlook the alternative vision offered by what Pennycook (2001) terms *critical pragmatism*, a perspective that retains the practical goals of ESP but reframes them through a socially situated and ethically attuned lens. Critical pragmatism challenges the false binary between critical pedagogy and communicative competence by emphasizing that professional language use is never ideologically neutral. As Benesch (2001) has argued, even seemingly technical genres like business reports or job interviews are embedded in discourses of power, gender, and social hierarchy. To teach these genres uncritically is to tacitly reproduce the inequalities they encode.

Participants’ reluctance to integrate critical topics such as inequality, sexism, or racism into the ESP classroom suggests a narrow interpretation of professionalism as apolitical and culturally sanitized. This interpretation resonates with Canagarajah’s (2006) critique of “safe talk” in academic and vocational English, where contentious issues are excluded from syllabi to maintain an illusion of neutrality. Such exclusions not only limit students’ critical literacy but also alienate those whose lived experiences of marginalization are erased or silenced in the name of institutional propriety.

From the standpoint of critical pedagogy, the function of ESP should be reimagined not as a retreat from politics but as a platform for engaging learners in the sociohistorical contexts of their future professional practices. As Crookes (2013) notes, ESP can and should be a site of “conscientization” (Freire, 1970), where learners develop the capacity to reflect on and act upon the conditions that shape their professional and linguistic realities. Critical engagement with topics such as workplace discrimination, linguistic hegemony, and gendered professional norms is not a distraction from vocational goals—it is a deepening of them.

Participants’ concerns about student receptivity and institutional expectations point to the structural tensions that inhibit pedagogical innovation. As Giroux (1988) argues in his conception of teachers as *transformative intellectuals*, educators must negotiate between institutional demands and ethical commitments. The perception of incompatibility, then, is not inherent to

ESP but is produced by the constraints of what Luke (2004) calls "audit culture," which privileges measurable outcomes over transformative aims.

Thus, this study underscores the urgent need to move beyond vulgar pragmatism and reclaim a critical pragmatism that affirms the dual goals of linguistic competence and critical awareness. Rather than abandoning ESP's applied mission, critical pedagogy invites its recontextualization: to teach for the world not only as it is, but as it might become.

### **5.2 Teachers as Technicians or Transformative Intellectuals?**

A key theme that emerged from the interviews was the technocratic perception of the ESP teacher's role. In such a framing, teaching is construed as a technical activity: the teacher becomes a mere facilitator of predetermined skills meant to prepare students for the labor market. This instrumentalist orientation detaches pedagogy from questions of power, identity, or ideology. As several participants in this study noted, their responsibility was understood as delivering job-relevant language instruction, often explicitly excluding broader sociopolitical content: "If they want to discuss societal issues, maybe they can do that in other classes" (P2).

This positioning of the teacher as a technician is symptomatic of what Giroux (1988) critiqued as the reduction of educators to *managers of knowledge* rather than *transformative intellectuals*. The technocratic framing limits the intellectual agency of teachers and narrows the possibilities for reimagining ESP as a critical, reflexive space. While some participants expressed interest in motivating students or creating enjoyable learning environments, even these aspirations were often couched within market-driven imperatives.

To counter this, Giroux (1988) proposes the model of the teacher as a *transformative intellectual*; an educator who critically interrogates dominant ideologies, negotiates meaning in collaboration with students, and views pedagogy as a moral and political project. Such a stance does not discard technical expertise but transcends it by aligning teaching with social justice, equity, and critical consciousness. In this study, however, the majority of instructors had not been exposed to professional development that would support this shift. The absence of critical pedagogy training, combined with institutional expectations favoring linguistic performance and compliance with exam-driven syllabi, reinforced the default role of the teacher as a neutral transmitter of skills.

Ultimately, reimagining the ESP teacher's role requires moving beyond both "vulgar pragmatism" and reductive job-preparation models. It involves a reorientation toward "critical pragmatism" where teachers are empowered as reflective practitioners, capable of interrogating how language instruction both shapes and is shaped by broader sociopolitical structures. Such a transformation, however, necessitates systemic support, curricular flexibility, and a reconceptualization of ESP not as a depoliticized skill-training enterprise but as a critical pedagogical space for reflection, resistance, and reinvention.

### **5.3 Misrecognizing the Political: Conflating Critical Pedagogy with Critical Thinking**

Equating *critical pedagogy* with *critical thinking* reflects what Dunne (2015) identifies as a widespread tendency in teacher education to prioritize cognitive strategies over ideological critique. In his analysis, Dunne contends that "thinking critically" is often framed as a set of discrete mental operations—evaluating evidence, detecting bias, questioning assumptions—without attending to the broader social, political, and historical contexts in which such thinking takes place. This reflects what McLaren (2019) critiques as the "technologization of reason," where criticality is abstracted from praxis and stripped of its emancipatory potential.

Kelly et al. (2020) push this critique further by highlighting how critical thinking, rooted in Western rationalist traditions, often assumes a *solitary, depoliticized model of reflection*. According to their argument, critical thinking occurs "within a subject, in isolation from society," thus failing to challenge the structural conditions that shape knowledge production and learner identity (p. 16). In contrast, critical pedagogy is dialogic, collectivist, and situated within a *social constructivist* paradigm. As McLaren (2019, p. 108) underscores, critical pedagogy "offers students various languages of critique and possibility through which they can understand in a more nuanced and granular way the relationship between their individual subjectivity and the larger society."

This distinction was largely absent from most participants' responses describing critical pedagogy as a methodological toolset rather than a transformative ethos. For example, statements such as "Critical thinking and critical pedagogy are more or less the same" (P6) and "It's about higher-order thinking" (P3) illustrate a procedural rather than philosophical engagement with the term. This aligns with Dunne's observation that the term "critical" is often co-opted into an uncritical, skill-based discourse in teacher education that fails to interrogate systemic inequality.

Moreover, critical pedagogy's "problem-posing" orientation (Freire, 1970; McLaren, 2019) stands in sharp contrast to the solution-oriented frameworks often valorized in ESP and other technocratic educational models. As McLaren (2019) clarifies, critical pedagogy "is not a methodology per se, but a stance—a way of being in the world that privileges social justice,

resistance, and transformation.” Reducing it to a set of heuristics—as many participants did—is indicative of the broader neoliberal rationality that saturates educational discourse, where criticality is depoliticized and instrumentalized.

In sum, this theme reveals an important epistemological gap: while instructors may value cognitive complexity, they often lack the theoretical grounding to distinguish between a politically neutral form of critical thinking and a socially embedded practice of critical pedagogy. Bridging this gap requires not just conceptual clarification, but also structural support for teacher education that explicitly addresses the socio-political foundations of pedagogical work.

#### **5.4 Structural Silences: Institutional and Pedagogical Constraints**

In addition to epistemological and ideological tensions, participants consistently identified practical and structural difficulties as significant impediments to the implementation of Critical Language Pedagogy (CLP) in Moroccan ESP classrooms. A recurring theme was the substantial preparatory workload required to design, adapt, and deliver critically oriented lessons. As teachers noted, CLP is not an add-on but a pedagogical orientation that necessitates rethinking the entire instructional process—from text selection and task design to classroom interaction and assessment. This reflects what Giroux (1988) describes as a shift from teaching as technical delivery to teaching as intellectual labor and ethical engagement.

This perception aligns with findings from Crookes (2013), who observes that implementing Freirean praxis in language education involves considerable investment in curriculum development, dialogic facilitation, and culturally relevant materials. Teachers working under high teaching loads, limited resources, and institutional rigidity often lack the time, autonomy, and support needed to sustain such innovation.

Moreover, participants pointed to students’ lack of familiarity with dialogic, participatory learning models, which further complicated attempts to implement CLP. Rooted in traditional, exam-oriented schooling, Moroccan students are often socialized into a passive learning stance, expecting the teacher to lead and provide “correct” answers. This mirrors observations in Freire’s (1970) critique of the “banking model of education,” where students are treated as empty vessels rather than co-creators of knowledge. As a teacher observed:

*“Students expect a passive model and expect the teacher to take the lead. When challenged through nontraditional modes of learning, they might get confused or disengaged”* (P6).

Such student expectations are reinforced by what Ball (2003) terms the “terrors of performativity”—the dominance of accountability regimes that reduce learning to measurable outputs, especially in exam-driven contexts. One participant articulated this tension, noting that participatory approaches often conflict with students’ preoccupation with exam outcomes:

*“Incorporating an approach that advocates students’ active participation and involvement in the design and facilitation of the course might be compromised by the learners’ unreadiness for such methods. From my experience, students are more and more concerned about what to deliver the day of the exam”* (P1).

These reflections underscore the interplay between pedagogical aspiration and institutional constraint, a theme echoed in Benesch’s (2001) argument that ESP instruction often fails to challenge dominant discourses because of the structural pressures placed on both teachers and students. Without systemic changes to teacher training, curriculum design, and assessment practices, attempts to implement CLP remain marginal, easily overridden by institutional demands for efficiency, employability, and depoliticized content delivery.

What emerges, then, is not a rejection of CLP per se, but an articulation of the conditions under which it becomes unsustainable. Teachers do not necessarily oppose critical pedagogy on ideological grounds; rather, they are overwhelmed by the material, temporal, and structural realities of their teaching environments—realities that reproduce the very technocratic logic CLP seeks to resist.

#### **Conclusion**

This study set out to explore how experienced Moroccan ESP instructors conceptualize critical pedagogy and assess their readiness to implement it within the constraints of their professional contexts. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and grounded in a thematic analysis, the research reveals a persistent tension between the transformative ethos of critical pedagogy and the technocratic, market-oriented logics that continue to shape ESP instruction in Morocco. The findings underscore the need to reframe ESP not merely as a site of skills transmission but as a potential space for critical literacy, ethical inquiry, and democratic engagement. This reimagining requires a shift from vulgar pragmatism to critical pragmatism—a stance that preserves ESP’s practical goals while situating them within broader social, political, and ideological contexts (Pennycook, 2001; Benesch, 2001).

In addressing this conceptual and practical gap, the study contributes to emerging scholarship that calls for a critical turn in ESP—one that resists the depoliticizing tendencies of neoliberalism and instead affirms the role of the teacher as an intellectual, the learner as an agent, and the classroom as a site of transformation. Future research should further investigate how such a

critical reorientation can be operationalized at the levels of policy, curriculum, and institutional culture, particularly in contexts like Morocco where the expansion of ESP remains both a challenge and an opportunity.

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