Critical Pedagogy in English Language Teaching

Dila BOZKURT[1] & Ece ZEHİR TOPKAYA[2]

MA, Freelance English Language Teacher, Çanakkale, TURKEY
dilabozkurt23@outlook.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7928-2001

[2]Prof. Dr., Izmir Democracy University, Izmir, TURKEY
ece.topkaya@idu.edu.tr
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5364-7551

Abstract

This article explores the integration of critical pedagogy into English Language Teaching (ELT) as a transformative approach that challenges traditional language teaching methods. Language education is deeply intertwined with power dynamics, social hierarchies, and the dissemination of dominant cultural values. By incorporating personal, socio-historical, and political contexts into language learning, critical pedagogy empowers students to critically analyze and engage with the English language and its implications. This article provides an overview of critical pedagogy, its theoretical foundations rooted in critical theory, its core principles, and its relevance to ELT, highlighting the need to address social and political complexities in language education. Furthermore, the article discusses practical ways to integrate critical pedagogy in ELT, such as problem-posing, using critical content and materials, and developing critical tasks. Overall, integrating critical pedagogy in ELT aims to create inclusive learning environments that foster linguistic proficiency, intercultural competence, and active participation in the socio-political sphere.

Keywords: Critical pedagogy, critical language teaching, critical consciousness, problem-posing education

İngilizce Eğitimi ve Eleştirel Pedagoji

Özet

Bu makale, eleştirel pedagojinin İngilizce eğitiminde dönüştürücü bir yaklaşım olarak kullanılmasını incelemektedir. Dil eğitimi, güç dinamikleri, sosyal hiyerarşiler ve baskın kültürel değerlerle derinden iç içedir. Dil eğitiminde eleştirel pedagoji, kişisel, sosyo-tarihsel ve politik bağlamları dil öğrenimine dahil ederek öğrencilerin İngilizceyle eleştirel olarak etkileşimde bulunmalarını ve dili analiz etmelerini sağlamayı amaçlar. Bu makale, eleştirel pedagojinin genel bir bakışını, tarihi olarak eleştirel pedagojinin teorik temellerini, temel prensiplerini ve İngilizce eğitimiyle olan ilişkisini sosyal ve politik bağlamlarıyla beraber sunmayı hedeflemiştir. Ayrıca, bu makale eleştirel pedagojiyi İngilizce eğitimine entegre etmenin problem kurma-çözme becerileri, eleştirel içerik ve materyaller kullanımı ve eleştirel görevler geliştirme gibi çeşitli pratik yollarını tartışmaktadır. Genel olarak, eleştirel pedagojiyi İngilizce eğitimine entegre etmek, dil becerilerini geliştiren, kültürler arası yetkinliği teşvik eden ve sosyo-politik alanda aktif katılımı sağlayan kapsayıcı öğrenme ortamları yaratmayı hedefler.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Eleştirel pedagoji, eleştirel dil eğitimi, eleştirel İngilizce eğitimi, eleştirel bilinç

1. Introduction

Critical pedagogy has emerged as a transformative approach in education that challenges traditional language teaching methods and aims to address the social, cultural, and political complexities of teaching. Since language education is not a neutral endeavor but is deeply entwined with power dynamics, social hierarchies, and the

dissemination of dominant cultural values, critical pedagogy offers a framework that integrates personal, socio-historical, and political contexts into language learning, empowering students to critically analyze and engage with the English language and its implications. Critical pedagogy in English Language Teaching (ELT) seeks to create inclusive learning environments that foster linguistic proficiency, intercultural competence, and active participation in the socio-political sphere by emphasizing the importance of social justice, critical consciousness, and the exploration of diverse voices.

2. Integrating Critical Pedagogy in English Language Teaching

Over time, various methods for teaching second languages, such as the Audio Lingual Method, Communicative Language Teaching, and Content-based Language Teaching, have been developed to enhance the language learning process. These approaches, formulated through statistical analyses derived from cognitive research conducted by publishing networks and academic institutions, have been incorporated into teacher education programs. Consequently, many educators perceive these methods as the most effective means of language instruction in their classrooms. However, research suggests that these methods fall short in addressing the social and political complexities of language learning and fail to cater to the diverse needs of learning environments (Zehir Topkaya & Demir 2022). Declaring any single method or approach as the definitive solution for language instruction is challenging, given the multifaceted nature of language teaching involving social, cultural, and historical dimensions. Nonetheless, alternative approaches like critical pedagogies are worth considering, as they integrate learning with personal, socio-historical, and political contexts (Okazaki, 2005).

In the realm of language teaching, critical pedagogy focuses on instructional practices that encourage the study of language in ways that promote social justice. This entails critiquing societal structures that reflect the interests of minority and marginalized groups, including women, LGBTQIA individuals, ethnic minorities, and the working class (Crookes, 2012). Initially, there was a perception that language and power were unrelated, viewing language and power as distinct entities (Pennycook, 2001). This perspective may hold true if English is seen as a neutral language beneficial for global communication, stemming from Britain's colonization in the 1700s and the United States' economic ascent in the 2000s. English has become the dominant language in various fields, exerting significant influence in communication, science, business, diplomacy, entertainment, and the internet (Shin, 2004; Luke et al., 2007).

Critical pedagogy challenges language educators to go beyond conventional language instruction and examine the underlying biases regarding language, power, and equity that shape language use. It emphasizes the importance of developing critical approaches to understanding and analyzing social and cultural knowledge in language education since prioritizing language, access, and power in English language education, especially for disadvantaged, marginalized, or vulnerable groups, enables the creation of fairer opportunities for participating in current discussions, utilizing pertinent materials, and accessing resources in English (Reagan & Osborn, 2001).

As critical pedagogy has influenced language education, several principles have been adopted. These core values include (1) incorporating content that reflects learners' life experiences and contexts, (2) involving learners in the creation of their own learning materials, (3) fostering a collaborative approach to knowledge construction between teachers and students, (4) encouraging teachers to contribute their ideas, experiences, and opinions to the classroom discourse, (5) prioritizing the role of the teacher as a facilitator who poses thought-provoking questions, (6) recognizing students' autonomy in decision-making, and (7) promoting critical thinking by presenting students with problem-based situations that require analysis, reflection, and action (Crookes, 2012).

Overall, integrating critical pedagogy into language teaching can be viewed as an alternative approach to teaching a second language, as it has the potential to (1) reveal the multiple interpretations and meanings of texts, (2) foster critical consciousness, (3) embrace diverse identities, and (4) empower students to take action and bring about change in their own contexts (Silva et al., 2018). In order to foster critical language teaching, there can be some ways of integrating critical pedagogy in ELT, such as by utilizing problem-posing, critical content and materials, and critical tasks.

2.1. Problem-posing

The development of critical thinking skills in students relies heavily on their ability to ask relevant and thought-provoking questions. Within the framework of critical pedagogy pioneered by Freire, the act of posing questions (problem-posing) holds great significance. In language education, problem posing can be effectively incorporated

without the need for major curriculum changes, as language educators have the flexibility to adapt it according to their specific needs. This approach can be applied to each unit of a coursebook, where lessons revolve around questions, socio-political issues, and language-related concerns. By engaging in these lessons, students can critically analyze language use and attitudes, while achieving communicative and linguistic outcomes (Reagan & Osborn, 2001).

For instance, Freire's problem-posing model outlines a five-phase plan that serves as an instructional guide for problem-posing in various disciplines. The following table presents an overview of these five phases (Nelson & Chen, 2023).

Table 1.

Five-phase plan for problem-posing (Nelson & Chen, 2023)

Phase 1: Listening to student histories and language to identify generative words	Engage in conversations with students and draw upon their prior experiences as their classroom teacher to listen and identify generative words.
Phase 2: Selecting generative words based on phonemic richness and pragmatic tone	Choose generative themes that possess a pragmatic tone and phonemic richness. These themes should involve problem-posing aspects and be grounded in students' experiences in the English classroom.
Phase 3: Creating codification or visual representations of situational problems for culture circles to decode	Develop a series of four codification photographs featuring older students from another class. Each photograph represents a specific problem that can be read and interpreted.
Phase 4: Establishing an agenda, without rigid scheduling, for discussions	Follow an agenda for the critical pedagogy lessons, consistent with the usual literacy program. However, during the critical pedagogy lesson, there is no fixed goal or outcome. Instead, the time is dedicated to dialogue and sharing among all participants.
Phase 5: Integrating L2 language learning at a phoneme or theme level into post-literacy circle activities	After the discussion, students proceed to journal writing time, using a vocabulary list generated from the codification topics. The students themselves supply the vocabulary, and the expectation is that they will write a simple story based on the codification, ideally incorporating problem-posing skills and concluding with a resolution reflecting their own perspectives

Critical pedagogy, as advocated by Freire, places a significant emphasis on the role of problem-posing as a foundational element for asking meaningful questions. This approach can be seamlessly integrated into language education without necessitating major curricular revisions, providing language educators with flexibility in its application. Problem posing in language education can be employed across various units in a coursebook, involving the construction of lessons around questions, socio-political issues, and language-related concerns. These lessons are designed to help students critically analyze language usage and attitudes while incorporating communicative and/or linguistic outcomes (Reagan & Osborn, 2001).

In the context of learning language from a critical perspective, critical literacy goes beyond merely critiquing ideologies (Luke et al., 2007). Beyond the ability to communicate in the language, learners are encouraged to consider what messages they convey (Ghahremani-Ghajar & Mirhosseini, 2005). Thus, another approach to infusing critical teaching into a language classroom involves leveraging critical literacy, grounded in the belief that any text holds ideological, political, and moral significance. Given that language classrooms frequently utilize texts as materials, critical literacy focuses on how readers interpret texts within broader social and political contexts and how these interpretations impact social life. In contrast to traditional education approaches or the banking approach described by Freire, critical literacy prompts students to read with a questioning attitude, posing queries

like 'What is the underlying purpose of this text?', 'What perspectives are expressed?', and 'Who benefits from the ideas presented?'. This aligns closely with problem posing, as both methodologies support the development of critical thinking skills regarding social realities often concealed by societal norms. This process raises awareness of individuals' positions within these realities and their capacity to effect change, taking into account the interests of diverse social backgrounds. Despite the tendency of mainstream English Language Teaching (ELT) to concentrate primarily on cognitive and linguistic aspects, neglecting critical dimensions, it is strongly recommended that ELT fulfills its political, social, and cultural responsibilities through the incorporation of critical pedagogy and critical literacy. Various strategies, including discussions and reflective journal writing, can be employed to encourage critical analysis skills, resulting in a notable increase in students' approach to societal issues more critically (Abednia & Izadinia, 2012).

2.2. Critical Content and Material

Critical pedagogy can potentially enhance any educational system's objectives by instigating transformations that promote students' awareness of their immediate surroundings and existence. It establishes a connection between the broader societal context and the microcosm of the classroom, ultimately aiming to bring about societal change (Akbari, 2008). To achieve this, it is crucial to critically examine and reshape the curriculum, syllabus, classroom instruction, content, and materials.

Coursebooks play a significant role in language classrooms as the primary source of input and material. They can be seen as tools that perpetuate and validate specific portrayals of the world, thus serving as artifacts for the reproduction of particular ideologies (Gray, 2010). As acknowledged by many scholars (e.g., Arıkan, 2005; Shah, 2012), coursebooks have the capacity to influence and transform students' perspectives and beliefs on various topics through the visual and textual content they contain. Whether subtly, unconsciously, subliminally, or overtly, these coursebooks are believed to present reality from a particular standpoint guided by a specific ideology, offering new insights and perspectives. Thus, they are intricately intertwined with issues of power, identity, and engagement, as they may either marginalize certain groups through omission or stereotypes or contribute to learners' perceptions of diverse identities and future possibilities through empowering, optimistic, and fair discourse. Consequently, it is essential to examine the role of coursebooks as interested products in terms of how they represent particular races, cultures, languages, and so on in order to make informed assessments regarding the investment of specific groups.

As observed, the importance of creating targeted critical materials for language classrooms arises from the inadequacy of conventional textbooks in promoting an education rooted in social justice. These materials aim to foster the growth of proactive individuals who, when possible, question the reasons behind the insufficient material, psychological, social, and spiritual conditions that afflict numerous individuals, potentially including themselves (Crookes, 2013).

As a foreign language specialist who was among the first to structure Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy for foreign language teaching in 1978, Crawford's adaptation highlighted the significance of learners creating their learning materials (Crookes, 2013). In order to foster critical pedagogy, active engagement from both students and the teacher is essential. Additionally, it is crucial that the content of the lesson holds significance for both parties involved. By providing meaningful and engaging content, language learners can participate in discussions on critical issues while also enhancing their language skills. This ensures that language courses effectively achieve their objectives of language development and the cultivation of critical consciousness. Ultimately, as students find their voice and challenge injustices in their self-interest, they not only enhance their oral competence but also become proactive agents of social change (Okazaki, 2005).

2.3. Critical Tasks

According to Ellis (2003, as cited in Silva, 2020), tasks play a crucial role in both second language acquisition research and language pedagogy, and it is essential to have a clear understanding of what a task entails. Tasks are valuable tools for engaging learners in meaningful interactions and creating favorable conditions for language acquisition (Ellis, 2003). According to Ellis (2003), a task needs to (1) focus on pragmatic meaning, (2) involve

processes of language use that are related to the real world, (3) involve one or more linguistic skills, (4) require different cognitive processes, and (5) have a communicative outcome.

Nevertheless, as the definitions of tasks provided by Ellis (2003) do not explicitly acknowledge the significance of critical consciousness, Silva (2020) proposes adding a new element: 6) a task enables the cultivation of critical consciousness through the application of language in meaningful contexts. The promotion of critical tasks empowers English learners to creatively utilize both their native language (L1) and English as a second language (L2) through the use of critical pedagogy. To effectively engage in this pedagogy, students should possess language proficiency, critical awareness, open attitudes, positive learning attitudes, multicompetence, self-motivation, and leadership skills. On the other hand, teachers utilize pedagogical ideas, design materials, and employ strategies that promote critical awareness (Pathomchaiwat, 2021). Using critical and action-based tasks in English language teaching is a powerful approach beyond traditional language instruction. These tasks allow learners with opportunities to engage critically with real-world issues, encouraging them to reflect, analyze, and take action. By integrating critical thinking, problem-solving, and social awareness into language learning, students develop their linguistic competence, their ability to navigate and understand the complexities of the world around them. These tasks promote active learning, collaboration, and the development of essential skills such as communication, empathy, and critical consciousness. As a result, learners become more empowered, socially engaged, and equipped to positively impact society.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, critical pedagogy offers a transformative approach to education beyond the mere transmission of knowledge and linguistic skills. It recognizes the political nature of teaching and learning, emphasizing the holistic development of students as citizens and promoting critical consciousness. By questioning and challenging existing power structures, oppressive ideologies, and inequalities, critical pedagogy aims to create a more equitable and democratic society. In the field of English language teaching, critical pedagogy acknowledges the social and political complexities of language learning. It encourages educators to integrate students' social experiences, cultural backgrounds, and historical contexts into the language classroom. By doing so, English language education can become a platform for empowering students, amplifying marginalized and vulnerable voices, and fostering critical engagement with language, power, and social issues. Ultimately, critical pedagogy in ELT is a catalyst for change, promoting active citizenship and advocacy on behalf of the most vulnerable individuals in classrooms and society at large.

Acknowledgement

Note on Ethical Issues

References

Abednia, A., & Izadinia, M. (2013). "Critical pedagogy in ELT classroom: Exploring contributions of critical literacy to learners' critical consciousness". *Language Awareness,* 22 (4), 338-352. https://doi.org/10.1080/09658416.2012.733400

Aliakbari, M., & Faraji, E. (2011). "Basic principles of critical pedagogy". *2nd International Conference on Humanities, Historical and Social Sciences IPEDR*. October 21-23, Singapore. 78-85.

Arıkan, A. (2005). Age, gender and social class in ELT coursebooks: A critical study. *Hacettepe Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi, 28*(28), 29-38.

Crookes, G. (2012). Critical pedagogy in language teaching. *The encyclopedia of applied linguistics,* 1-9.

Crookes, G. V. (2013). *Critical ELT in action: Foundations, promises, praxis.* Routledge. Dahrendorf, R. (1958). Toward a theory of social conflict". *Journal of conflict Resolution, 2*(2), 170-183. https://doi.org/10.1177/002200275800200204

Dant, T. (2003). *Critical social theory: Culture, society and critique*. Sage.

Darder, A., Baltodano, M. P., & Torres, R. D. (2003). *The critical pedagogy reader.* Psychology Press.

Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford University Press.

Freire, P. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Ghahremani-Ghajar, S. S., & Mirhosseini, S. A. (2005). "English class or speaking about everything class? Dialogue journal writing as a critical EFL literacy practice in an Iranian high school". *Language, culture and curriculum,* 18(3), 286-299.https://doi.org/10.1080/07908310508668748

Gray, J. (2010). The Branding of English and The Culture of the New Capitalism: Representations of the World of Work in English Language Textbooks. *Applied Linguistics, 31*(5), 714-733.

Giroux, H. A. (2003). Critical theory and educational practice. In T. Darder, M. P. Baltodano, & R. D. Torres (Eds.), *The critical pedagogy reader* (pp. 27-56). Psychology Press.

Gruenewald, D. A. (2003). The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place. *Educational Researcher, 32(4), 3–12.*doi:10.3102/0013189x032004003

Guilherme, M. (2007). English as a global language and education for cosmopolitan citizenship. *Language and Intercultural Communication, 7*(1), 72-90. https://doi.org/10.2167/laic184.0

Harrington, A. (2005). *Modern social theory*. Oxford University Press.

Horkheimer, M. (1972). *Critical theory: Selected essays (Vol. 1).* A&C Black.

Khan, C. (2020). Fostering a critical consciousness in ELT: incorporating a women, gender and sexuality course in a bilingual education university program in Bogota, Colombia. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society, 28*(3), 403-420. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2019.1649713

Kumaravadivelu, B. (2006). *Understanding language teaching: From method to postmethod*. Routledge.

Lather, P. (1998). Critical pedagogy and its complicities: A praxis of stuck places. *Educational theory, 48*(4), 487-497.

Luke, A., Luke, C., & Graham, P. (2007). Globalization, corporatism, and critical language education. *International Multilingual Research Journal, 1*(1), 1-13. DOI: 10.1080/19313150709336861

Malott, C. S. (2011). *Critical pedagogy and cognition: An introduction to a postformal educational psychology.* Springer Science & Business Media.

McLaren, P. (1999) Revolutionary pedagogy in post-revolutionary times: rethinking the political economy of critical education, *Educational Theory*, *48*.

Mejía, A. (2004). The problem of knowledge imposition: Paulo Freire and critical systems thinking. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science, 21(1), 63-82.*doi:10.1002/sres.558

Melling, A., & Pilkington, R. (Eds.). (2018). *Paulo Freire and transformative education: Changing lives and transforming communities.* Springer.

Monchinski, T. (2008). Critical pedagogy in the everyday classroom. In *Critical Pedagogy and the Everyday Classroom* (pp. 115-139). Springer.

Nelson, N., & Chen, J. (2023). Freire's problem-posing model: critical pedagogy and young learners. *ELT Journal*, *77*(2), 132-144.

Okazaki, T. (2005). Critical consciousness and critical language teaching. *University of Hawai'I Second Langauge Studies Paper 23*(2). http://hdl.handle.net/10125/40676

Pathomchaiwat, L. (2021). Encouraging Critical Pedagogy in Thai ELT Classrooms. *Journal of Man and Society Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, 6*(2), 151-170.

Pennycook, A. (1995). English in the world/The world in English. In *Power and inequality in language education.* Cambridge University Press.

Pennycook, A. (2001). *Critical applied linguistics: A critical introduction.* Routledge. Reagan, T. G., & Osborn, T. A. (2001). *The foreign language educator in society: Toward a critical pedagogy*. Routledge.

Reagan, T. G., & Osborn, T. A. (2001). *The foreign language educator in society: Toward a critical pedagogy*. Routledge: UK.

Shah, S. F. (2012). Gender inclusion: A neglected aspect of the English textbooks in Pakistan. *International Journal of Social Sciences & Education, 3*(1).

Shin, J. K. (2004). The use of Freirian pedagogy in teaching English as an international language: Raising the critical consciousness of EFL teachers in Korea. *LLC Review, 4*(1), 64-82.

Silva, L. D., Farias, P. F., & D'Ely, R. C. S. F. (2018). Doing Critical English Language Teaching: Designing critical tasks to promote critical media literacy. *Revista A Cor das Letras, Feira de Santana*, *18*, 99-121.

Silva, L. D. (2020). Critical tasks in action: the role of the teacher in the implementation of tasks designed from a critical perspective. *Ilha do Desterro*, *73*, 109-127.

Zehir Topkaya, E. & Demir, B. (2022). Critical Digital Literacy. In S. Kazazoğlu (Ed), *Critical Reading and Writing in the 21st Century*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. ISBN: 978-1-5275-8385-6