



Vol. 4 No. 3 (March) (2026)

Freire's Critical Pedagogy And English Language Teaching: Rethinking *Pedagogy Of The Oppressed* Through An Applied Linguistics Perspective In Elt Classroom

Aniza Ghakhar,

Lecturer English, Govt Arts and Commerce College Larkana, Pakistan.

ghakharaniza3@gmail.com

Kainat

Research Scholar MPhil English (Linguistics), City University of Science and Information Technology Peshawar, Pakistan, kainat6062@gmail.com

Muhammad Ihtisham (Corresponding Author)

MPhil English (Linguistics), National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan, Email: muhammadihtisham909@gmail.com

Laiba Shakeel

MS English (Linguistics), Bahria University Karachi campus, laibashakil25@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The present paper critically analyzes Paulo Freire's pedagogical work, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and this work is looked at from the applied linguistics perspective to examine its theoretical and pedagogical implications for English Language Teaching (ELT). Instead of seeing critical pedagogy as a stand-alone teaching approach, the paper posits that it is an educational philosophy that shifts the perspective of language teaching to issues of power, identity, social justice, and learner agency. Using Freire's ideas of the banking model of education, problem-posing pedagogy, conscientização (critical consciousness) and praxis, the study combines the significant work of the above authors in order to illustrate the contributions of critical pedagogy to the current discourse in applied linguistics and in ELT. The paper reflects on implications of this framework for classroom practice with a particular focus on learner identity, multilingualism, teacher positionality, curriculum, and the ideological aspects of language teaching material. It also covers the limitations imposed on the application of Freirean pedagogies in situations of examination-driven and institutionally-regulated learning. Lastly, feminist and intersectional critiques of the framework, and the difficulties of applying it to a theory for second-language learning in the present-day second-language classroom, are discussed. The study suggests that Freire's critical pedagogy is still relevant as a theoretical framework for ELT as a socially and politically responsive discipline that fosters critical literacy, learner empowerment, and educational equity, and notes the importance of adaptation and empirical study to the contexts.

Keywords: Paulo Freire, critical pedagogy, English Language Teaching (ELT), applied linguistics, problem-posing education, conscientização, praxis, learner identity.

INTRODUCTION

Grammar translation, audio-lingual, communicative, task-based, and other methods that



Vol. 4 No. 3 (March) (2026)

aid in language acquisition have long been the subject of methodological debate in English Language Teaching (ELT). But the question is still separate from the problem. Who are we teaching the language to, and why? Critical pedagogy raises another concern in order to address the latter: language instruction is inherently politicised since it incorporates power dynamics and social injustices, making it inextricably linked to politics (Pennycook, 1994). Paulo Freire is one of the key theorists in critical pedagogy. One of the most significant books ever written on education in the 20th century, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was first published in 1968 and translated into English in 1970. It offers both a critique of the current educational systems and an example of a different approach (Freire, 1970). By considering the additional work of Giroux (1988), Pennycook (1994, 2001), Norton (2000), Canagarajah (1999), Kumaravadivelu (2003), Fairclough (1995), Apple (1979), and Weiler (1991), this essay aims to analyse Freire's work on critical pedagogy and its potential impact on ELT.

But this investigation's significance for ELT extends beyond the past. The English language classroom continues to be a place where issues of power and identity emerge, whether intentionally or unintentionally on the part of the teachers themselves. This is because the English language continues to be the means by which educational, employment, and mobility opportunities are distributed unevenly throughout the world. A critical examination of Freire's theories gives ELT practitioners an analytical tool that enables them to bring these concerns to light rather than keeping them hidden in terms of the resources and techniques employed as well as the activities that take place in the classroom. This paper uses Freire's theories as a theoretical tool to examine contemporary ELT methods.

The paper is organised into five sections. An overview of the literature on critical pedagogy and its acceptability in the fields of TESOL and applied linguistics is given in the first section. The theoretical framework put out by Freire is discussed in the second section, which distinguishes between the two models he presents and the one he criticises. With an emphasis on learner identity, multilingualism, and structural elements of the language classroom, the third section addresses the practical consequences of the theoretical framework. A critical evaluation of the framework is given in the fourth part.

Literature Review

The literature field of critical pedagogy in language instruction can be broadly categorised into four areas of concern: The foundational theory of critical pedagogy is the first of these issues; the application of critical pedagogy to applied linguistics and English language teaching (ELT) is the second; the relationship between critical pedagogy and theories of learner identity and multilingualism is the third; and the criticism of critical pedagogy in the final two decades of the 20th century is the fourth.

Foundations of Critical Pedagogy

The critical pedagogy tradition is still based on Freire's groundbreaking work, the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), whose defining metaphor—the banking model of education—becomes a standard point of reference in educational literature. Giroux (1988) builds on this literature by introducing a new concept of the transformative intellectual. Giroux argues that critical pedagogy necessitates the conscious embrace of the position rather than its disregard, and that teachers inevitably become cultural and political actors regardless of whether they acknowledge their position as such. However, Apple (1979), who comes from a sociological perspective rather than being firmly rooted in the Freirean tradition, complements the previously mentioned literature by demonstrating that curriculum itself is anything but an unbiased selection of knowledge and always represents the interests of some social group.



Vol. 4 No. 3 (March) (2026)

Critical Pedagogy in Applied Linguistics and ELT

Pennycook (1994) is the first sustained attempt in applied linguistics to apply critical theory to English language instruction. He argues that teaching English without taking into account its colonial past could perpetuate the colonial dominance relationship between language and culture. The more recent method developed by Pennycook (2001) builds on this argument to create a general framework of critical applied linguistics, which holds that critical literacy—that is, the capacity to understand a text's ideology in addition to its literal reading—should be a fundamental component of language proficiency. Fairclough (1995) contributes a complementary methodological resource in critical discourse analysis, demonstrating empirically that the lexical and grammatical choices embedded in language teaching materials are never ideologically neutral but consistently favour particular cultural worldviews. Kumaravadivelu (2003) synthesises much of this literature into a “post-method” framework for language teaching, arguing that critical pedagogy is incompatible with the search for a single correct method and instead requires teachers to continuously interrogate the social and political particulars of their own teaching context. Taken together, this body of literature establishes that critical pedagogy's uptake in ELT has proceeded less as a single unified programme than as a set of overlapping theoretical interventions, each addressing a different dimension of language teaching's political character.

Identity, Investment, and Multilingualism

A second strand of literature addresses the implications of critical pedagogy for how learner identity and multilingualism are understood in the language classroom. Norton (2000) introduces the concept of investment to describe how a learner's commitment to acquiring a second language is bound up with the construction and negotiation of social identity, arguing that learners are more willing to invest in language learning when their identities are affirmed by the classroom environment and more likely to disengage when those identities are threatened or devalued. Canagarajah (1999) claims that this literature is expanded by examining how multilingual students use their multilingual abilities to creatively use multiple languages at once, arguing that such practices show acts of linguistic agency that oppose rather than submit to English's dominance. Together, these works of literature aim to challenge the monolingual emphasis of ELT methodologies, which have seen students' mother languages as obstacles, by proposing that multilingualism be considered as a resource.

Critiques and Debates

A critique of the shortcomings of Freirean and critical pedagogies in general is the final thread in the literature. According to Weiler (1991), Freire's binary of oppressor and oppressed is inadequate in terms of gender relations from a feminist standpoint, and race intersect with class as independent sites of power, and that a critical pedagogy attentive only to class risks reproducing the very exclusions it seeks to challenge. Other academics, including those mentioned above, have been inspired by this criticism to develop more complex theories regarding the ways in which various forms of social power operate in language schools. When considered collectively, this body of literature shows that while the original Freirean theoretical perspective and its early application in the ELT context (Pennycook, 1994; Giroux, 1988) served as the foundation for the theoretical direction of the field, the subsequent body of literature (Norton, 2000; Canagarajah, 1999; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Fairclough, 1995; Weiler, 1991) was primarily focused on enhancing, expanding, and occasionally challenging this original theory. In order to establish a theory of Freire's approach and its consequences, the current paper considers



Vol. 4 No. 3 (March) (2026)

this complete corpus of writings.

Theoretical Framework: Freire's Core Constructs

Freire's experiences with poverty and illiteracy in the northeastern region of Brazil shaped his ideas about education, which were essential to the formation of his educational philosophy. Freire claimed that traditional education not only failed to address poverty but also made it worse; what disturbed him was not the concept of education but rather the behaviour and mindset of the impoverished. Several philosophical traditions might be linked to Freire's ideas: the Frankfurt School's critical theory, the humanistic philosophies of Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel, which emphasise human dignity and dialogue, which studied reproduction of class domination by means of social institutions; and liberation theology, which presupposed that real faith and education could exist only when suffering was refused (Giroux, 1988).

It is important to note that Freire's theory was not developed within a university college of education, but rather was based on actual experience instructing literate individuals in campaigns, initially in Brazil and later in Chile and other nations following their expulsion due to a military coup in 1964. The point is important for understanding the theory since it identifies the origins of important ideas in Freire's theory, including the banking notion of education, problem-posing education, conscientiare, and praxis. From this perspective of ELT research and teaching practice, it would mean that the work of Freire needs to be seen as a theoretical construct that is constantly put to test in the classroom context – as is the case with the way the work of Freire has been taken up by Giroux (1988), Pennycook (1994), and Kumaravadivelu (2003).

Freire's core conviction that education is essentially a political activity brings these factors together. According to Freire, education never merely maintains or modifies the social structure in an apolitical manner. It is particularly persuasive in ELT, where Pennycook (1994) asserts that the only way to teach English without being political is to disregard the colonial origins of its contemporary globalisation. The political stakes Freire identifies for education in general are, on this account, especially acute for the teaching of English.

The Banking Model and Its Critique

The most widely recognised element of Freire's theory is his metaphor of the “banking” model of education (Freire, 1970). In this model, the teacher acts as a depositor of knowledge and the student as a passive receptacle who receives, memorises, and repeats that knowledge. Knowledge itself is treated as fixed, objective, and pre-formed, while students' own experiences, questions, and interpretive frameworks are discouraged as obstacles to the efficient transfer of information from teacher to learner.

Freire regards the banking model as both pedagogically ineffective and fundamentally dehumanising, because it disregards students' ontological vocation to be conscious, reflective, and creative beings whose essence lies in participating in and transforming the world; the model instead reduces them to objects to be processed and managed within a system that forecloses critical thought. Within ELT, this dynamic manifests in the unquestioned authority of native-speaker norms, prohibitions on learners' use of their first language, uncritical reliance on commercially produced textbooks that present Western cultural norms as universal and natural, and grammar drilling divorced from communicative purpose. Fairclough (1995) demonstrates that ELT materials are never ideologically neutral: the lexical choices, grammatical structures, and cultural representations embedded in textbooks construct particular worldviews that favour certain interests while diminishing the voices and experiences of learners from non-Western backgrounds.

This critique extends beyond materials to curriculum as such. Apple (1979) argues that



Vol. 4 No. 3 (March) (2026)

curriculum is always a selection — a statement about whose culture, whose history, and whose ideals are deemed worthy of formal transmission — and that curricular knowledge cannot be separated from the political economy in which education is embedded. ELT practitioners who do not attend to this dimension of their work may, without intending to, become participants in the broader cultural politics of linguistic imperialism that Pennycook (1994) describes.

Problem-Posing Education: Dialogue, Conscientização, and Praxis

Against the banking model, Freire (1970) proposes problem-posing education, an approach that begins not with the transfer of prefabricated knowledge but with collaborative inquiry into the genuine contradictions and concerns of learners' own lives. The curriculum of a problem-posing classroom is organised around what Freire terms generative themes: the issues, conflicts, and questions that emerge from a specific learning community and that engender authentic curiosity and a genuine desire to understand. From an ELT perspective, such themes might include the experience of linguistic prejudice, the politics of language testing, the challenge of maintaining a home language while acquiring a English-language media portrayals of non-Western cultures and dominant second languages. Both of these concerns can serve as the foundation for language-learning exercises that foster communicative competence and the kind of critical consciousness that Freire claims is the ultimate aim of education.

Dialogue plays a significant role here. According to Freire, dialogue is an ethic and epistemology rather than just a methodology, and it requires the teacher to give up control over the banking system in favour of collaborating with the students on their own research. Kumaravadivelu (2003), in developing a post-method framework for language teaching, identifies this dialogic dismantling of pedagogical authority as among the most demanding consequences of critical pedagogy for ELT, since it requires teachers to relinquish institutional norms and professional habits that consistently reinforce hierarchical relations between teacher and student.

Sustained dialogue, on Freire's account, cultivates conscientização: a critical consciousness that allows learners to perceive the social and political forces shaping their lives as historical constructs, and therefore as structures that can, in principle, be contested and reconstructed. For language learners, conscientização involves understanding not only how to use English but why it carries the power and prestige it does, who benefits from that arrangement, and how English might be taken up as an instrument of critical agency rather than a vehicle of cultural assimilation (Norton, 2000). This critical awareness, coupled with a willingness to act upon it, constitutes what Freire calls praxis — the indissoluble link between reflection and action through which liberatory education finds its purpose.

Discussion: Implications for ELT Practice

Although challenging, putting Freire's theories into practice in ELT settings is a fruitful process. It is important to understand that critical pedagogy is a pedagogical approach based on theoretical ideas rather than a methodology. A Freirean ELT practitioner can use a variety of teaching strategies, such as communicative, task-based, or content-based, while also critically analysing the ideological underpinnings of her lesson plans, fostering dialogue in the classroom, affirming and enhancing her students' multilingual identities, and connecting language instruction to social issues.

Linguistic Identity and Multilingualism

The way learners' linguistic identity and native language are addressed is one of the main practical consequences of Freirean pedagogy in respect to ELT. A common monolingualist philosophy in many ELT situations implies that learners' native tongues are inferior to



Vol. 4 No. 3 (March) (2026)

English and should be overcome. In contrast, the Freirean approach views multilingualism as a benefit for communication and intellect. Multilingual people's translanguaging behaviours are acts of agency that should be encouraged, as Canagarajah (1999) demonstrates. This problem is further highlighted by Norton's (2000) findings about learner identity and investment. Since language learning can be perceived as a risky and challenging endeavour, learners are much more eager to invest in it when their social identities are acknowledged in the classroom, and vice versa—they are far more likely to withdraw in a way that is frequently misinterpreted as a sign of a lack of aptitude or motivation when their identities are questioned or diminished. From the standpoint of critical applied linguistics, Pennycook (2001) expounds on this matter.

Structural Constraints on Practice

A fair evaluation of the Freire methodology must consider its flaws, the majority of which are structural rather than theoretical. This is due to the fact that most English language instructors are forced to employ commercial resources, preset curricula, and class time—all of which are impacted by tests like the TOEFL and IELTS. But in this system, the time it takes for students to acquire critical inquiry abilities comes at a high structural cost. According to Kumaravadivelu's (2003) post-method approach, critical pedagogy in ELT is not an all-or-nothing endeavour but rather a process whereby teachers incorporate critical components into the curriculum through their questioning techniques, allowing room for the learner's voice, and how they contextualise the materials provided to them.

Teacher Positionality and Professional Development

This material also has implications for how instructors are positioned and prepared. According to Giroux's (1988) description of the teacher as a transformative intellectual, critical pedagogy necessitates a continuous reflective engagement with the teacher's own position within the institutional and cultural hierarchies of ELT, including the frequently unequal status accorded to native-speaker and non-native-speaker teachers within the profession. This has consequences for teacher preparation, implying that critical pedagogy should be taught outside of ELT courses. programmes but as a disposition cultivated through sustained practice in reflecting on the political dimensions of one's own teaching decisions.

Limitations and Critical Evaluation

However, Weiler (1991) asserts that Freire's theory is subject to feminist criticism because it solely emphasises the binary contrast between the oppressor and the oppressed. To put it another way, it does not view the intersections of class, gender, and race as power dynamic

As a result, critical pedagogy in ELT became conscious of the reality that students from seemingly comparable class backgrounds are enrolled in various educational systems and social structures. The overextension of critical theory is a further, related concern. Some teachers invoke Freirean language to justify pedagogical choices that align only loosely with his actual arguments, a pattern most critics of the tradition acknowledge. If critical pedagogy is to remain faithful to what Freire termed a pedagogy of the oppressed, it must remain genuinely responsive to the disruptive and transformative energies students themselves bring into the classroom, and it must be willing to reflect on its own internal contradictions with the dialogic humility it asks of teachers. Approached in this spirit, Freirean pedagogy functions less as a fixed programme than as a standing invitation to interrogate the purposes served by any given pedagogical choice.

A further limitation concerns the transferability of a framework developed for adult literacy education in a specific mid-twentieth-century Latin American context to the highly varied settings in which English is taught today, from well-resourced private language



Vol. 4 No. 3 (March) (2026)

schools to under-resourced public universities. Freire's own writing offers little direct guidance on second- or foreign-language pedagogy, since his concern was with literacy in learners' first language; applying his framework to ELT therefore necessarily involves a degree of extrapolation, and scholars such as Pennycook (2001) and Kumaravadivelu (2003) have needed to do considerable theoretical work to bridge that gap. This does not invalidate the application, but it does mean that claims about what a "Freirean ELT classroom" looks like should be held with some caution, since they are reconstructions rather than direct transpositions of Freire's own model.

Finally, as a conceptual and literature-based paper, this study is itself limited by its reliance on published theoretical and critical scholarship rather than original classroom data. The implications discussed above are therefore best understood as propositions for practice and further empirical inquiry rather than as findings established through direct observation of ELT classrooms. Future research applying the theoretical framework outlined here to specific instructional contexts would help to test and refine the claims made in this paper.

Conclusion

More than fifty years after its publication, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* remains one of the most significant texts available to English language teachers who wish to engage with the social and political dimensions of their discipline. Freire's problem-posing model offers an alternative to what he characterises as the dehumanising logic of the banking model, a critique that maps onto rote learning, cultural imperialism, and native-speakerism within English as a Foreign Language teaching. Against this, Freire insists on the equal importance of reflection and action, captured in his concept of praxis, and challenges language teachers to ask the most basic questions about their own practice: why, for whom, and to what end.

Freire's legacy in language education is visible in a substantial body of subsequent scholarship: Giroux's account of teachers as transformative intellectuals, Pennycook's critical applied linguistics, Norton's theory of identity and investment, Canagarajah's account of translingual practice, Kumaravadivelu's post-method framework, and Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, alongside Weiler's feminist critique of the tradition's original terms. These traditions pose innovative and rigorous, practice-based questions that continue to challenge conventional ELT practice, underscoring that teaching and learning in the classroom carry real consequences for the students who take part in them. As English continues to function as a language of global opportunity within a world marked by enduring linguistic and cultural inequality, Freire's question — in whose interest is this education conducted, and could it serve different, more just interests? — retains its urgency. Answering it, in the spirit Freire himself modelled, requires a critical teaching of English that does not shy away from provisional, uncertain, and genuinely risky commitments.

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Vol. 4 No. 3 (March) (2026)

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