

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>

**Developing English Language Proficiency through Critical
Pedagogy at Undergraduate Level**



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Abstract

In Pakistan English language has been used as a second language and it is also given the status of official language of Pakistan since 1947. It is also used as a medium of instructions in educational institutes. In Pakistan, ESL classrooms are providing chances to the students to learn and use English language in different domains of their lives. This quantitative study aims to examine the effectiveness of critical pedagogical practices to enhance English proficiency of students in ESL context at undergraduate level in Pakistan. A questionnaire with close-ended questions was developed in order to elicit responses of university students. The obtained data were computed through the postulates of (Kincheloe, 2008). A significant portion of students expressed dissatisfaction with their courses in terms of fostering critical thinking skills, encouraging active participation, and providing materials that resonate with diverse cultural backgrounds. Many respondents stated that their English courses did not effectively encourage independent thinking, critical reflection on societal issues, or the exploration of different perspectives.

Keywords: Critical pedagogy, ESL context, English proficiency, democratic environment

Introduction

In order to enable the students to achieve English language proficiency different teaching methods are used at educational institutes. Teaching is regarded as a link between society and the learners. It is a process that makes the students to regulate practically and participate in their society. In ESL classrooms a teaching method should be adopted that facilitates the students in their learning process and also enables them to communicate in English language by improving their speaking skills. In ESL classrooms different methods and techniques are used in order to meet the requirements of successful language teaching. Different methods and techniques are used particularly in ESL classrooms for the development of student's language skills such as speaking skills, listening skills and writing skills (Diaorova, 2020). A lot of approaches are needed to facilitate the students so that they can fulfill the target in the ESL classroom. The study is designed to investigate the application of Critical pedagogical practices in ESL classrooms based on the principles of Kincheloe's theory of Critical Pedagogy (2008).

The process of selecting a method demands different requirements such as objectives of teaching, characteristics of the students, and teacher's priorities. Teacher's performance and the selection of teaching methods are linked (Faradila, 2022). In ELT different teaching methods are used throughout history these methods have a timeline and historical development. These are the five major methods that are used in English language teaching.

Grammar Translation Method.

Direct Method.

Audio-lingual Method

Communicative Language Teaching.

Task-based Language Teaching

GTM was a dominant method in the 19th century (Burekovic et al., 2023). It was used

to teach classical languages, the main purpose of the use of this method was to make the students capable in reading and writing a foreign or second language. In this method, a second language is learned by memorizing the vocabulary and translation of the target language. The memorization of grammar rules is also a basic requirement of this method (Burekovic et al., 2023). The main focus of this method was on reading and writing skills but other skills such as listening and speaking skills were neglected. This method is considered as a boring method. There is a lack of motivation in it, motivation plays a pivotal role in ELT because motivation is linked with the students' success in their language learning process (Faradila, 2022). GTM is being used in Pakistani schools on a large scale (Durrani, 2016).

In the 20th century the European countries were oppressed by fascism, since there was an absence of social equality because the government was controlling every aspect of their lives (Sharif Uddin, 2019). The excessive use of oppression resulted in the development of a movement which is known as 'Critical Thinking Movement' in education. This movement started in Frankfurt School and it was based on the concerns regarding the education system of Europe (Sharif Uddin, 2019). The theorists who are known as pioneers of Critical Theory Movement wanted to bring a change by helping the oppressed Strata of society by enabling them to participate in social and cultural activities by sharing their opinions and ideas (Sharif Uddin, 2019). Critical pedagogy emerged from the movement of critical thinking. Theorists gave the idea to empower the students by giving them voice through education so that they can challenge their oppressors. Paulo Freire gave the theory of Critical Pedagogy and linked it with education (Sharif Uddin, 2019). He is a well-known personality in the field of education due to his movement of Critical Pedagogy. Through his theory he tried to break the chain of traditional methods of teaching used in Educational Institutes in which students had no voice and they were passive learners. The movement of critical thinking gave birth to the concept of critical pedagogy. This theory was originated initially by these theorists; Khoshnood, Mahmoudi, Herkimer, Gramsci and Andorno. These theorists encouraged people to participate in the change of society with a critical approach. These are the theorists who are known as the pioneers of the theory of critical pedagogy; Darder, Giroux, Gramsci, McLaren and Kincheloe (Kaya & Kaya, 2017). Furthermore, critical pedagogy is considered as a link between words and world (Akbari, 2008). Critical pedagogy is a teaching methodology that deserves a lot of attention from ESL teachers in order to make students active learners and critical thinkers (Kincheloe, 2008).

Freire (2000) introduced the use of dialogue methods in the classroom to create the connection between students and teachers. Interaction between students and teachers is necessary for a successful and smooth education process. Dialogue method enables the students to think critically and communicate their opinions to others, the absence of dialogue leads to the end of communication and without communication true education is not possible (Freire, 2016). The use of dialogue method demands some prerequisite in the classroom (Freire, 2016). Firstly, teacher and student must have respect, love and understanding for each other, in the absence of these elements there will be no commitment. The teaching process must indicate positivity. Secondly there should be equality between the teacher and students. Nobody should consider himself or herself above the others. Lastly teachers should also give importance to the students they should not be considered empty vessels. Students must be encouraged to engage themselves in dialogue in order to gain more knowledge. Dialogue is

responsible for the increase of student's involvement in the classroom activity which is also responsible for raising the quality of education (Lyle, 2008).

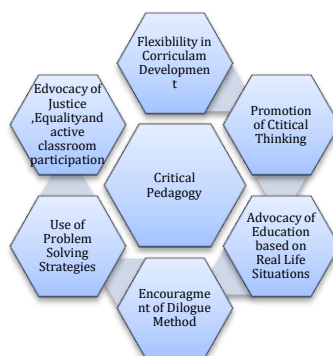
The learning process should be connected with real life situations. According to Freire's point of view traditional methods of ESL learning are nowhere near the real-life situations. Learning process in which there is no real situation, this type of education does not improve student's ability to think critically (Dewey, 1915). Problem posing strategy in ESL teaching is a method in which students are responsible for creating knowledge, teachers are supposed to encourage the students to ask questions and explore the problems instead of getting feedback from their teachers. In this type of learning a teacher can give his students real words in situations in which they have to find problems and then also generate solutions for the problems (Sharif Uddin, 2019).

Critical pedagogy is a theory given by Freire, in this theory Freire has discussed many teaching strategies that could be used in ESL classrooms and these strategies provide opportunities to the ESL learners to interact in their classrooms and due to these interactions, they can gain confidence and become active members of a society. According to Vygotsky's Theory of social construction an individual needs social interaction in order to develop his intellect (Vygotsky, 1978). The theory of critical pedagogy emphasizes democracy and equality in the education system without the concept of inferior and superior. Teachers and students should be equal in the classrooms so that the students can feel more comfortable in asking questions, participating in discussions and indulging in dialogues held within their classrooms. Students who are actively involved in the learning process can also become active participants of democracy (Dewey, 1933).

Theoretical Framework

This research tries to find out whether CPP given by Kincheloe (2008) is helpful for the students in providing effective learning experience in their English Language classroom. Joe Lyons Kincheloe is a well-known researcher at McGill University of Canada. After Paulo Freire who is regarded as the founder on the critical pedagogy, Kincheloe is known of having influenced the development of critical pedagogy over the last two decades. He worked on critical pedagogy to examine the social, political and economic outcomes of the use of critical pedagogy in field of education. He also finds out the factors on which critical pedagogy is based and how it works to solve issues faced by students of contemporary age. The theoretical framework is given in the figure below:

Figure: Theoretical Framework



Kincheloe has discussed multiple issues occurring within the educational system which are creating hurdles in students' learning by hindering them to achieve their desired objectives and goals. In this era a lot of new issues have surfaced in the educational system, such as the issues related to race, gender, equality and many other social dynamics. Kincheloe has tried to address these modern issues surfacing in educational institutes. He has addressed concerns of the modern students they face in their learning field.

In this research the questionnaire is based on the principles of critical pedagogy given by Kincheloe. It is also investigated whether the teachers are using traditional methods of teaching to solve problems or they applying creative strategies according the interest of students and related to modern practices based in Critical Pedagogy. In this research quantitative method of data collection is adopted.

Research Paradigm

This research is quantitative in its nature. Quantitative research is known as research that investigates social and human problems, this research is based on the process through which a theory is tested with the help of society, and then the collected data is analyzed to determine whether the predictive information of the given theory is true or not (Creswell, 1994). The data is collected with the help of a Likert scale questionnaire. The questionnaire included closed-ended related to students' attitudes, experiences, and perceived learning strategies. For the data collection questions are asked from students of a private sector university, situated in Lahore. A total of 150 students were chosen to participate in the study, which is considered sufficient for the purposes of statistical analysis and to achieve reliable results. This sample size allows for a balanced representation of the student population while minimizing potential biases.

Data Analysis

Frequency distribution was used to analyze the data. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences SPSS was used to summarize and provide descriptions regarding response patterns obtained through an extensive, study-specific questionnaire. Whether through analysis of the frequency distribution with respect to a particular response category, this will indicate how many times each response category has been selected across the sample, thus providing evidence for identifying trends, similarities and differences in participants' views and experiences. This method would allow an easier general understanding of the extent to which critical pedagogical practices are present in ESL teachers through a structured format that displays data, providing an overview of how many such practices occur or focus on each institution. This approach established groundwork for how critical pedagogy is implemented through an overview of the current rates of adoption in higher education.

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

Table 4.1

My teacher creates a supportive environment for open communication

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	19	12.7
	Disagree	58	38.7
	Neutral	38	25.3
	Agree	26	17.3
	Strongly Agree	9	6.0
	Total	150	100.0

This table presents the student's opinions on whether their teacher is creating a friendly atmosphere for them. Over 51.4% (19 strongly disagreeing and 58 disagree) of students experience the classroom as not a place conducive to communication, which indicates that most students might need a supportive environment to share their thoughts. Further, 25.3% (38 respondents) were in the middle or needed clarification about their possible experiences with open communication in the classroom. On the positive side, it indicates that a smaller section of students, 17.3% (26 respondents), agreed, and 6% (9 respondents) strongly agreed that the classroom can be understood as free enough to talk about issues together. These results are substantial, indicating that students feel we need to improve the classroom environment and perhaps the classroom environment in general.

Table 4.2

The teacher demonstrates respect toward all students

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Disagree	51	34.0
	Neutral	26	17.3
	Agree	44	29.3
	Strongly Agree	29	19.3
	Total	150	100.0

This table shows that students respond to perceptions of whether their teacher treats all students with respect. The statement that 'my teacher treats everyone in the class with respect' shocked as 34% (51 respondents) disagreed, as this implies some students believe their teacher does not treat every student with respect. Also, 17.3% (26 respondents) responded as neutral, which expresses some ambiguity or a mixed response regarding how much the teacher trusted his/her students. Positively, 29.3% (44 respondents) agreed, and 19.3% (29 respondents) strongly agreed, meaning many students feel they know their teacher respects all students. These numbers imply the fact that even if most of these students feel respect from their teacher, a sizeable minority do not feel that respect is on display consistently in class--an area where some classrooms can improve.

Table 4.3

We can approach our teachers for guidance on both academic and personal issues

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	54	36.0
	Disagree	16	10.7
	Neutral	26	17.3
	Agree	29	19.3
	Strongly Agree	25	16.7
	Total	150	100.0

This table reveals students' perceptions of their ability to reach out to teachers for help on academic and personal issues. A substantial 46.7% (54 strongly disagreeing) and 16 (10.7%) Disagreeing also say that they do not feel they can talk to their teachers about these issues at all, indicating a troubling disconnect in terms of supportive communication elsewhere. Also, 17.3% (26 of respondents) were more neutral, suggesting uncertainty or mixed experiences about accessibility for guidance. More positively, 19.3% (29 respondents) agreed, and 16.7% (25 respondents) strongly agreed, which shows that some students feel comfortable contacting their teachers for academic and non-academic reasons. Although some students feel supported and are able to seek help, this may be offset by a more significant number of students who are struggling to access that support, indicating the need for improvement in developing accessible and supportive teacher-student relationships.

Table 4.4

Teachers are open to modifying teaching strategies based on student feedback

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	28	18.7
	Disagree	63	42.0
	Neutral	18	12.0
	Agree	25	16.7
	Strongly Agree	16	10.7
	Total	150	100.0

This table shows the Data regarding students who believe teachers are willing to adapt teaching strategies based on what is working or not working for students. Respondents were again very unlikely to agree that teachers would adjust their methods if students expressed preferences for one pedagogical approach over another, with 60.7% (28 strongly disagreeing and 63 disagreeing) of respondents feeling optimistic about the willingness of faculty to adapt or accommodate instruction in line with student feedback strongly suggesting noted inflexibilities or inability/inclination engage with interests of students. The remaining 12% (18 respondents) were neutral, indicating clouds of indecision or inclusion of varied experiences with teacher openness to feedback. Positively, 16.7% (25) agreed, and 10.7% (16) strongly agreed, suggesting that a small percentage of students believe their teachers are willing to modify their teaching styles when provided with input from students. The results imply that although a minority of students perceived their feedback was valued, other students expressed little or no evidence in support for this claim, indicating an

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

opportunity to strengthen the teacher-student feedback loop and help ideology to adjust it better aligned with students.

Table 4.5

My relationship with the teacher positively impacts my learning

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	41	27.3
	Disagree	46	30.7
	Neutral	10	6.7
	Agree	44	29.3
	Strongly Agree	9	6.0
	Total	150	100.0

This table reflects the data regarding student views on the influence of their relationship with teachers upon learning. In this case, a total of 58% (41 and then 46) do not feel that their relationship with the teacher supports their learning, so many students do not have a supportive connection to a teacher as it relates to their learning. Moreover, 6.7% (10 respondents) were neutral, which means it was a complicated matter for some of them. Positively, 29.3% (44 respondents) and 6% (9 respondents) strongly agree that seeing the teachers as a positive in their learning experience Helped them learn better. Three initial conclusions can be drawn from these results: firstly, more students felt that their teacher-student relationship helped rather than did not help them learn; secondly, more students felt that their teacher-student relationship had little or no impact on their learning; and thirdly that the importance of a positive relationship between student and teacher should or could lead to improved learning outcomes.

Table 4.6

I feel more confident in using English outside the classroom

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Disagree	72	48.0
	Neutral	37	24.7
	Agree	25	16.7
	Strongly Agree	16	10.7
	Total	150	100.0

This table shows students' confidence in using English outside of classrooms. The Table reveals that an overwhelming number of 72.7% (where 72 disagree and 37 neutral) respondents either are unsure or lack the confidence to use English outside the classroom, thus signaling a disconnect in what takes place within the walls of their classrooms as opposed to real-life settings. Of this, 48% (72 respondents) disagreed with the statement, indicating that they feel unprepared or unwilling to use English in a setting that is not academic. In contrast, only 16.7% (25 respondents) agreed. In comparison, another 10.7% (16 respondents) strongly agreed with the statement that they do not carry on with speaking English through outside activities, indicating that a lesser fraction of students seem to have confidence in using English in their everyday lives beyond the classroom.

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

Table 4.7

I have developed critical thinking skills through this course

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	69	46.0
	Disagree	18	12.0
	Neutral	38	25.3
	Agree	16	10.7
	Strongly Agree	9	6.0
	Total	150	100.0

This table represents students' perceptions of whether they have gained critical thinking skills based on course development. Perhaps most concerning is that 58% (69 students strongly disagreeing and 18 disagreeing) feel that the course does not foster critical thinking skills which suggests that a large proportion of students perceived little contribution toward developing their ability to think critically by taking the course. Also, 25.3% (38 respondents) were neutral which means they agree with it neither way or at all on mixed views on the subject matter. In the affirmative, 10.7% (16 respondents) agreed, and 6% (9 respondents) strongly agreed, which means a slight minority of students have gained critical thinking skills from taking this course. While some students do feel that their critical thinking abilities have improved, these results indicate that most continue to believe that this course has not adequately supported the development of greater critical thinking capacity and thus speculate future opportunities for a stronger emphasis on critical thinking in this curriculum.

Table 4.8

My understanding of social issues has improved because of my English classes

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	47	31.3
	Disagree	44	29.3
	Neutral	25	16.7
	Agree	25	16.7
	Strongly Agree	9	6.0
	Total	150	100.0

This table indicates the influence of English classes on students' understanding of social issues. Altogether, 60.6 per cent (47 strongly disagreeing and 44 disagreeing) of respondents replied that English classes did not strengthen their grasp of issues of society, meaning many students do not feel correlations between the content of the course and social awareness. Also, 16.7% (25 respondents) were neutral — neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the statement. However, 16.7% (25 respondents) and 6% (9 respondents) strongly agreed that their English classes provide an understanding of social issues. At least statistically, students can say that this thought is true for them, too. Thus, while some of the students in the sample had a sense that they were more aware of social issues due to the course, many did not feel that this was an advantage of taking these types of classes, pointing to another area for improvement: integration of issues over time in class.

Table 4.9

I feel more engaged and motivated to learn English

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	34	22.7
	Disagree	37	24.7
	Neutral	63	42.0
	Agree	9	6.0
	Strongly Agree	7	4.7
	Total	150	100.0

This table shows how well the students were engaged when learning English. This indicates that almost half of the students who responded did not find the course engaging or motivating, 34 responding strongly disagreeing and 37 just disagreeing, leading to a combined total of 47.4%. The second largest section consisted of 42% (63 respondents) who responded as neutral, which suggests that many students waver or are wondering whether they are engaged. More positively, just 6% (9 respondents) agreed, and 4.7% (7 respondents) strongly agreed, so few felt inspired to learn English. This indicates that although the students are not motivated or engaged overall, there is a certain threshold which, if crossed, can make the learning more enriching and inspiring for students so that they can also contribute to their own English language studies.

Table 4.10

I believe my English course has prepared me to participate actively in society

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	28	18.7
	Disagree	44	29.3
	Neutral	8	5.3
	Agree	34	22.7
	Strongly Agree	36	24.0
	Total	150	100.0

This table indicates students' perceptions of how their English course has prepared them to be active participants in society. 48% (28 strongly disagreeing and 44 disagreeing) of respondents believe they were not well prepared to take an active role in society by taking the course, meaning that a large part of the students does think the course did not help him/her acquire skills that allow him/her to be an active member of society. In contrast, 5.3% (8 respondents) identified as neutral - an unwillingness or inability to take sides on the issue. The more optimistic perspective is those who agreed (22.7, 34) and strongly agreed (24, 36), indicating that nearly a quarter of students feel prepared to engage with societal activities relevant to their course appropriately. Results show that most students feel under-prepared for societal engagement, but also reveal there is a significant group who find the course to be helpful practice regarding engaging with society, thus providing information on which needs improvements (in this case, societal engagement of the course) and what not.

The survey results across the tables reveal students' varying perceptions of their English language courses, particularly in relation to critical pedagogical practices, engagement, and real-world applicability. Furthermore, the data suggests that a substantial number of students felt disengaged and unmotivated, with a large proportion perceiving the course as ineffective in preparing them for active societal participation. On the positive side, some students acknowledged that the course contributed to developing certain skills, such as self-expression and the ability to reflect on personal biases. However, the overall sentiment indicates a significant gap between the students' needs and the course's ability to meet them in terms of fostering critical engagement, promoting cultural inclusivity, and preparing students for real-world participation.

Conclusion

The findings of the study show that small group of students feel their English language courses offer valuable learning experiences, the majority appears to be dissatisfied with their language acquisition process. The lack of emphasis on engaging students in critical thinking, societal issues, encouraging independent thoughts, and promoting cultural inclusivity points to a need for curriculum adjustments. To enhance the learning experience, it is essential to incorporate more inclusive, participatory, and critical pedagogical approaches that actively involve students in their learning processes. Providing opportunities for students to connect course content with real-life scenarios, challenge assumptions, and explore diverse perspectives will better equip them to engage with both the academic content and the broader society. Teachers should consider incorporating more flexible, student-centered approaches and offer regular feedback to foster motivation and improve student engagement. Ultimately, these changes could significantly enhance students' learning experiences, better preparing them for both academic and societal participation.

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