

A SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN EDUCATIONAL SETUP FOR THE BETTERMENT IN STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES AND ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

Kanwal Yasmin ¹ , Mehwish Khalid ^{2*} 

¹ Department of Teacher Education, International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI), Pakistan.

² Institute of Social and Cultural Studies, University of Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

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ABSTRACT

Critical pedagogy (CP) is crucial in Pakistan as it links classroom teaching to the larger socio-cultural context. It promotes critical consciousness among students, empowering them to challenge oppressive societal norms and widely accepted dogmas. Although some schools and educational systems exhibit a solid understanding and practice of critical pedagogy, its full implementation and broader application remain aspirations yet to be realized. In this study, the researchers apply Paulo Freire's framework to discuss critical pedagogy within the Pakistani context. They observed ten second language teachers over six months across various regions of Pakistan to examine their teaching practices. The findings indicate that, despite its potential, critical pedagogy is significantly under-researched and infrequently practiced in the country. As a result, the researchers aim to investigate the power structures inherent in Pakistan's sociopolitical landscape and their influence on pedagogical conditions. Through this exploration, they intend to develop guidelines and recommendations to enhance the application of critical pedagogy in language classrooms throughout Pakistan.

Keywords: Critical pedagogy, Pakistan, English, Language, Teaching, Critical thinking.

*Corresponding Author. mehwish.khalid@gcwus.edu.pk

INTRODUCTION

The instruction must actively deal with the social, political, cultural, and economic realities of existence, according to proponents of critical pedagogy. In language instruction, literacy is influenced by social institutions and serves as a tool for status quo resistance and reform. They contend that literacy initiatives, especially those in language education, are not neutral or value-

free; rather, they frequently attempt to develop citizens who sustain existing power systems. [1]. Critical pedagogy is closely linked to Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, who built upon the ideologies and critical theories of the Frankfurt School to outline its fundamental principles [2]. Critical pedagogy is not a singular theory but rather a collection of educational responses to

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oppressive, unequal, and silencing social structures. The term "critical" signifies the ability of individuals to analyze, interpret, uncover, and challenge the hidden sociocultural and political processes involved in knowledge production and consumption. It promotes exploration beyond surface meanings, conventional beliefs, prevalent myths, officially sanctioned stereotypes, and initial impressions [3].

In Pakistan, one of the primary objectives of education is to prepare young people for their roles as citizens. To achieve this, the state has introduced programs like citizenship education, alongside subjects such as Pakistan Studies, Ethics, Social Studies, and Civics. However, each political transition has resulted in new educational policies that redirect citizenship education to promote the prevailing government's ideology and political system. Historically, there has been a strong reliance on a transmission-oriented approach to fulfill the goals of citizenship education. Nonetheless, critical pedagogy remains minimally represented in both policy documents and classroom practices [4]. While citizenship education has the potential to cultivate critical awareness of societal roles among students, much of it continues to be ideologically driven and nationalistic within the Pakistani context. Critical pedagogy emphasizes social justice and change through education, positing that educational systems reflect the societal structures in which they operate and can be transformed through concerted effort. Given that many social systems are laden with value-driven agendas and ideological frameworks, it is anticipated that biases, official declarations, and inherited clichés will be transmitted to students through curricula, teaching practices, and assessment methods [5, 6].

Policy decisions made by dominant groups and social actors reflect their preferences and are implemented in society. The education

system serves as a powerful means for this implementation, allowing privileged discourses and narratives to become 'naturalized' within social cognition, thereby creating and perpetuating ideologies. On the other hand, minority groups are frequently hushed and oppressed. A more equitable approach seeks to promote a just social order in which people have influence over their political, economic, and cultural destinies. Education can be used as a tool to further political agendas and ideological stances. Only when the excluded and downtrodden are given the freedom to alter their situation on their own initiative will this change take place. Critical pedagogy aims to link classroom experiences to broader societal contexts, asserting that "what happens in the classroom should end up making a difference outside the classroom". In the context of second language teaching, this means "connecting the word with the world." It involves viewing language as ideology rather than just a system, and broadening the educational environment to include the social, cultural, and political dynamics of language use [7-10].

In Pakistan, the role of language teaching should reflect the sociological landscape, which is evolving towards democratic traditions after a decade. This alignment provides a framework for understanding English language teaching through the lenses of language ideologies and cultural pedagogies. Recognizing language as ideology is particularly important in Pakistan, as it deepens our understanding of how various cultural practices can be integrated into classrooms and how these practices can shape pedagogical methods. Through this perspective, linguistic literacies can be developed more effectively, promoting global cultural awareness. It was argued passionately that learners should be active participants in their education, taking charge of their learning, autonomy, and

emancipation. This transformation empowers them to engage in meaningful actions over time. It urges teachers to employ techniques such as problem posing, solving, and questioning when addressing issues relevant to students' lives. This approach "reaffirms human beings as subjects" and fosters critical thinking about pressing issues, ultimately cultivating critical consciousness. Thus, this pedagogical method not only confronts visible forms of dominance but also serves as an educational response to widespread inequity and social deprivation [11].

It was identified three stages of consciousness development within the framework of critical pedagogy. The first stage, semi-intransitive consciousness, is marked by a limited worldview focused primarily on survival issues. Individuals at this stage often display indifference to challenges beyond their immediate biological needs. The second stage, naïve transitivity, involves oversimplifying problems, relying on polemics instead of dialogue, and showing disinterest in diverse factors. It was warned that it is nearly impossible to fully escape this stage, emphasizing the importance of recognizing its pitfalls. The final stage, critical transitivity, requires learners to conduct thorough analyses of situations, apply analytical rigor, demonstrate insightful understanding, and avoid simplistic arguments.

Advocates of the critical perspective in language teaching, which closely aligns with critical pedagogy and is central to communicative language teaching, argue that many classrooms perpetuate a monolithic discourse. In these settings, educational programs are often organized in either a top-down or bottom-up manner. This monolithic discourse restricts students to a singular, ostensibly legitimate situation where knowledge is transmitted from teachers—viewed as experts—to students, who are treated as passive recipients [12]. As a result,

this dynamic hinders learners from developing critical consciousness and limits their ability to engage with real-world issues using their own original thoughts and critical ideas. Instead, it fosters submission and a culture of silence, effectively marginalizing students' real-life experiences and voices. Second language teaching and learning should prioritize the broader socio-historical and political contexts that shape students' identities and cultural characteristics. However, in Pakistan, it has been observed that second language classrooms often neglect these socio-cultural aspects of learning. The flow of knowledge in these classrooms tends to be one-way, moving exclusively from teachers to students [13].

Instead of fostering critical thinking skills and a strong sense of agency among students, many English Language Teaching (ELT) practitioners concentrate on formal linguistic, cognitive, and asocial elements of language learning. As a result, the focus often remains on the mental processes involved in acquiring English as a foreign or second language through methods like cramming, reproduction, and drilling. However, this does not mean that all ELT settings lack critical pedagogy. There are instances, even in Pakistan, where critical thinking, pragmatic teaching, and autonomous learning are promoted to enhance students' socio-cultural and political awareness. Despite these positive examples, the full realization of critical pedagogy's principles—aimed at emancipation and transformation—remains largely unrealized in many classrooms, particularly in Pakistan.

In a democratic nation like Pakistan, where language education is intended to be a powerful equalizing force, critical pedagogy is particularly valuable. It can foster critical consciousness among students and encourage self-questioning. Rather than nurturing a culture of silence, it empowers students to take control of their lives and helps them

transform power dynamics to challenge oppressive social structures. Moreover, it enables students to identify disparities and underlying power structures, motivating them to act against these issues whenever possible [14, 15].

When Pakistan gained independence on August 14, 1947, it had only one institution of higher education, Punjab University, and about 40 colleges across the country. That same year, the government established the University Grants Commission (UGC), tasked with determining, coordinating, and maintaining standards in higher education. Additionally, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, addressed a National Education Conference attended by key policymakers and academics. Jinnah's vision is reflected in various policy documents, reports, guidelines, and official statements. The Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training serves as the highest educational authority in the Government of Pakistan. Its Vision states: "Developing Pakistan as a progressive and prosperous country by providing equal opportunities to all citizens, enabling them to acquire knowledge through Primary, Secondary, and Higher Education, including Technical and Professional training; creating a knowledge society leading to a knowledge economy". The Mission Statement reads: "Endeavor to create a conducive environment for teaching and learning and to promote affordable quality education in all academic disciplines to ensure holistic growth and sustainable socio-economic development of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan"

Despite Jinnah's vision and the established policies, the education system in Pakistan remains inadequate, particularly in fostering critical consciousness. While some private institutions and leading public colleges embrace basic principles of critical pedagogy, many teachers adopt authoritative roles, positioning themselves as the ultimate

knowledge holders. Consequently, students often become passive listeners, as traditional lecturing dominates classroom practices. Moreover, it is rare for teachers to encourage students to connect classroom knowledge with broader social and power dynamics.

In English Language Teaching (ELT) in Pakistan, there are two primary sectors: public and private. With one of the lowest literacy rates in the world, Pakistan faces considerable educational challenges. Although the government initiated a nationwide campaign in 1998 to eradicate illiteracy and provide basic education to all children, rapid population growth continues to obstruct educational progress. Additionally, language classrooms often adhere to traditional methods, where second language teachers are viewed as the sole authorities on semantic and grammatical knowledge, typically imparted in a disjointed manner. Critical questioning and peer learning are rarely promoted, particularly in public sector institutions [16-20].

Furthermore, the working conditions for teachers negatively influence classroom practices, pushing them toward a perfunctory and uncritical pedagogy. Teachers are frequently overburdened and lack adequate resources. An average university teacher in Pakistan is primarily focused on the pressing directive. Typically, these educators juggle nine to twelve credit hours per week and are expected to teach for about twenty-two weeks each semester. Most universities in Pakistan primarily function as teaching institutions, even those designated as research universities impose similar burdens on their faculty.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researchers selected two prestigious universities—the Department of English, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan and the Department of English, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad—to investigate these problems and its ramifications. The sole

language university in Pakistan, Department of English, Quaid-I-Azam University, is renowned for its creative and interactive method of teaching languages. The Bachelor of Study (Honors) in English and the Master of Science in English were the two levels that the researchers concentrated on for their investigation. After finishing intermediate school, students can enroll in the four-year BS (Honors) program or the two-year Master of English program. The Higher schooling Commission of Pakistan (HEC) has approved both programs as comparable undergraduate courses that add up to sixteen years of schooling [21]. Similarly, the Department of English, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan is one of the newly established major public universities in Punjab, the largest province in Pakistan. Founded under an act of the provincial assembly to address higher education needs, BZU offers a BS (Honors) in English but does not have a Master's in English program.

The researchers utilized a qualitative inquiry approach for the study, with observation as the primary research method. This technique effectively addressed the "what" and "how" aspects of the investigation. Classroom observations provided the researchers with first-hand insights into pedagogical practices, enabling them to conceptualize and contextualize their research questions more broadly. To support this process, a comprehensive observation sheet was designed and pilot-tested with the help of senior colleagues, ensuring the validity and significance of the observation process. This observation sheet can be found in the appendix [22-25]. The Department of English, Quaid-i-Azam University and the Department of English, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan (BZU), two esteemed Pakistani universities and their regional campuses, served as the study's sites. Before visiting classrooms, the researchers spoke with the English language instructors at these

universities and secured permissions from the appropriate authorities [26]. Over a two-semester period, from October 2023 to June 2024, the researchers observed three English Language Teaching (ELT) classes within the Departments of English at both Department Of English, Quaid-I-Azam University and BZU [27].

The researchers followed a detailed data analysis procedure. The observation sheet was designed, pilot-tested, and administered to participants. As this observation sheet was non-structured, the collected data were primarily qualitative. Consequently, the researchers chose thematic analysis as their data analysis method. This approach allowed for a thorough review of the data to identify themes and emerging patterns. To ensure analytic rigor, the researchers repeatedly reviewed the data, categorizing identified patterns into various groups and codes. Over time, these categories were further refined to a manageable number to maintain analytical focus [28, 29]. The observation sheet consisted of three main sections: classroom dynamics, student behaviors, and teacher activities. The researchers noted that most classes were overly formal, starting and ending punctually. Students were often observed sitting rigidly in rows, facing the teacher and the whiteboard. Although the classroom environment was generally conducive to learning, it was occasionally disrupted by outside noise. Teachers typically entered the classroom, greeted the students, and began their lectures. In many cases, the learning objectives were poorly defined. Knowledge was often conveyed uncritically from teachers to students, and discussions lacked critical depth, focusing mainly on academic and linguistic aspects. Classroom issues rarely connected to broader social structures, making it difficult for students to relate their formal education to their real-life experiences beyond school. As a result, while teachers emphasized the 'what'

of pedagogy, they frequently overlooked the 'why' and 'how.' Additionally, teachers generally refrained from addressing religious and political topics in Pakistani language classrooms [30].

FINDINGS

The data revealed that teachers prioritized content such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and syntax. The students must understand that tenses are the foundation of language; arguably, they are the most important aspect. They cannot effectively use language without a solid grounding in tenses. This emphasis on grammatical accuracy undermines the transformative potential of language learning, which is essential for constructing meaning. Freire refers to this tendency as the 'sonority of words,' suggesting it restricts students' learning experiences to language form rather than the process of meaning construction. The primary goal of any language teaching program should be to facilitate meaning construction, as it offers transformative learning opportunities. Research indicates that individuals learn a second or foreign language most effectively when the content is linked to the socio-cultural norms of society. Additionally, teachers often excluded socio-cultural foreign content, which can restrict students' intercultural imagination and confine them to their own cultural perspectives. Many teachers argued that certain materials were too foreign to explain to students. This is flawed, as it oversimplifies culturally foreign concepts, forcing them into familiar domestic frameworks inappropriately. The politico-religious consultative body with legislative and executive powers. Ignoring or poorly explaining such material neglects its potential to foster new linguistic knowledge and a deeper sense of transcultural solidarity and appreciation. Such omissions contradict the principle of real-life learning, blinding

students to the complexities of social experiences.

Moreover, researchers noted that teachers typically focused on essay writing and similar compositional topics, which formed the basis for student assessments. Many essay topics were recycled each semester, often including clichéd or stereotypical themes. It will either be about your future plans, science vs. religion, the importance of education...or, at best, some quotation. Even quotations are repeated. Additionally, systemic issues related to curricula, textbooks, teaching practices, and testing procedures were evident. Testing often required students to reproduce what they had learned in class and from textbooks. It was common for teachers to emphasize rote learning, enabling students who excelled in this method to achieve good grades. Consequently, deviating from established procedures frequently led to low grades or outright failure. This approach alienates and disempowers learners, as their educational experience revolves around the reproduction of knowledge as presented by teachers or textbooks [31].

The researchers found that pair or group work in classes was infrequent, with only pre-writing activities taking place. Teachers seldom engaged students in interactive tasks that could stimulate discussions on social issues, encourage logical presentations of their worldviews, or prompt consideration of alternative perspectives. The data indicated that many teachers believed students lacked the proficiency necessary to discuss sociocultural issues. One teacher expressed her reluctance to facilitate such discussions. As a result, teachers felt compelled to concentrate solely on language instruction, neglecting the fact that language functions within a societal context and derives meaning from larger social structures [32, 33]. The data revealed that many teachers rarely utilized audiovisual materials, with the whiteboard being the most frequently used

tool. Instances of boredom, lack of motivation, and innovation were also noted. Teachers also employed questioning techniques sparingly, often expecting quick responses from students without allowing sufficient time for critical thinking. The researchers identified a communication gap—a dialogic distance—between teachers and students, which may partly stem from students' lack of linguistic proficiency [34]. Finally, the researchers discovered that most teachers worked two shifts—morning and afternoon—to supplement their income and address financial challenges. Unfortunately, this often came at the expense of their intellectual and professional growth, leaving them little time for research and reflection. This situation also hindered timely feedback on student assignments. Moreover, the absence of in-service training programs created significant methodological challenges. Even when teachers possessed subject knowledge, they struggled to apply it effectively in the classroom and connect it to real-life challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADOPT CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Considering Freire's model of critical pedagogy and insights from the data analysis, the researchers propose five steps for effectively introducing critical pedagogy in Pakistani language classrooms.

Problem-posing is essential as it challenges individuals, while problem-solving often brings comfort. In language teaching, it is vital for both teachers and students to analyze the causes and possible solutions to current socio-cultural challenges. Anyon encourages consideration of questions such as: What is the problem? Who is affected? Who makes the decisions? What formal and informal powers do they hold? Whose interests are being served, and whose are impacted? Engaging with these questions aligns directly with critical pedagogy. Another technique is to promote critical dialogue among students

and between students and their own reflections. This dialogue can occur in either one extended session or multiple brief discussions. Such interactions help second language learners become familiar with one another, facilitating knowledge acquisition and identity negotiation. Dialogue is crucial as it "creates and re-creates multiple understandings" and "changes us or our context". This technique encourages students to interrogate the real world, allowing them to step outside their experiences and construct knowledge about broader issues. Engaging in critical dialogue empowers students to question their surroundings, share knowledge, and develop critical consciousness.

The next step is to encourage second language learners to think creatively and act innovatively through personal narratives, which prompt learners to share and discuss their subjective experiences. Students should be encouraged to express their personal narratives in both writing and speaking. Additionally, second language teachers should share their own narratives in a way that resonates with their students. This approach cultivates a wealth of stories and discussions, enhancing intimacy within the classroom. These personal narratives are fundamental to the educational experience. They complement critical literacy and play a vital role in creating meaning alongside comprehensible input. By tapping into learners' personal narratives, second language teachers can foster coherent and logical meaning, allowing students to investigate and empathize with one another [35]. Personal narratives are crucial in critical pedagogy, fostering critical consciousness in students while laying the groundwork for cognitive engagement and identity development. To cultivate critical consciousness in second language students, teachers must first understand their personal literacies and narratives, becoming learners

themselves and "identifying with the students". Educational institutions should function as two-way "learning institutions," where teachers also learn from their students. When teachers and students share personal literacies, opportunities for personal transformation arise. In addition to narratives and dialogues, a fourth technique that second language teachers in Pakistan can utilize is positionality. Each student has a unique positionality, often shaped by their background experiences. Students position themselves relative to others in various ways to interpret the world. Second language teachers, sharing the same societal context as their students, are typically aware of their students' perspectives and ideas. By contextualizing both their own lives and those of their learners within the second language teaching and learning experience, teachers can move beyond the "banking model of education" and embrace the principles of critical pedagogy.

Moreover, teachers must have a strong belief in second language learners and their creative potential. To foster this belief, they should cultivate collaborative relationships with their students. At the same time, students need to step outside their own positionalities and adopt diverse perspectives to transform their views and align with a more critical standpoint. When teachers and students collaborate, their positionalities are more likely to align, fostering critical engagement. Consequently, teachers should be seen as problem posers and, in Giroux's terms, as transformative intellectuals, equipped not only with knowledge but also with the skills to evaluate and challenge existing social inequities [36, 37]. Additionally, second language teachers must confront hegemonic doctrines and disparities in the classroom, recognizing that any struggle involves the presence of repressive forces. They should engage students in sociocultural discussions and educate them about the use of social

media platforms like Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. This engagement can empower students to contribute to social networking, critically analyze prevailing narratives, and examine representations for biases. It can also help them disengage from long-term conditioning influenced by various socializing discourses and the power dynamics inherent within them [38].

CONCLUSION

Critical pedagogy aims to connect the word with the world, serving the oppressed and marginalized by providing individuals with dignity, voice, and respect. This approach embodies the true spirit of a democratic society and is essential for Pakistan—a nation facing significant challenges yet brimming with potential. With a population of 200 million, a growing middle class, one of the highest youth demographics, a vibrant media landscape, an emerging corporate culture, and a strategically important location, Pakistan is poised for transformation.

Given the context of Pakistani classrooms, researchers have highlighted the importance of critical pedagogy and proposed steps for its implementation. They have also examined the roles of teachers and students in relation to teaching methodologies, content, and assessment practices. Without the decentralization of authority and the empowerment of students, second language classrooms in Pakistan are likely to remain unresponsive to psycho-cultural needs and indifferent to sociopolitical realities. To effect change, democratic behaviors must be established in the classroom, where learners' life experiences are affirmed and legitimized through a scholarship that is both liberating and enlightening.

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