

Critical Pedagogy and the Confusion of Purpose in EFL Classrooms

In recent years, the term *critical pedagogy* has become a fashionable buzzword in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. Enthusiastic scholars, often trained in Western universities, argue that teachers should turn their classrooms into spaces of social transformation where learners question power, resist oppression, and reconstruct society through language learning. These ideas sound noble in theory. But in practice, critical pedagogy has created more confusion than progress in EFL contexts, undermining educational focus, professional neutrality, and even students' right to effective language instruction.

EFL classrooms were once designed with a clear purpose: to equip learners with communicative competence in English so they could access opportunities in academia, business, and global communication. Now, under the influence of critical pedagogy, that purpose has been diluted. Instead of teaching grammar, pronunciation, and discourse skills, many teachers are told to “raise awareness,” “decolonize minds,” or “problematize power structures.” The result is a classroom that looks more like a political workshop than a learning environment. Students who signed up to learn English end up debating imperialism, patriarchy, and globalization—often in a language they can barely use confidently.

The EFL environment, particularly in many non-Western societies, is not a neutral space for ideological experimentation. It is embedded in local traditions, political sensitivities, and educational hierarchies that teachers must navigate carefully. When instructors attempt to apply critical pedagogy mechanically, they often face resistance not only from administrators but also from students who find overt political discussions uncomfortable or irrelevant. Many learners simply want to master English as a practical skill, not as a tool for political activism. Turning every lesson into a critique of capitalism or colonialism alienates these students and distracts from their linguistic goals.

Proponents of critical pedagogy often accuse such pragmatic perspectives of being “apolitical.” But neutrality in education is not the same as complicity; it is professionalism. Teachers are educators, not revolutionaries. Their responsibility is to create conditions where students can learn efficiently and confidently—not to impose their own ideological agendas. The growing pressure on EFL teachers to “empower learners” and “challenge the status quo” has burdened them with unrealistic expectations and ethical dilemmas they never trained for. Should a language teacher in a conservative country really be expected to lead discussions on feminism or economic inequality simply because a textbook author believes it is “critical”?

Furthermore, the vocabulary of critical pedagogy is often inaccessible to the very communities it claims to serve. Terms like *hegemony*, *social justice*, and *critical consciousness* circulate easily in academic journals but make little sense in the everyday realities of overcrowded classrooms, exam-oriented systems, and underpaid teachers. The assumption that teachers can—or should—turn their lessons into sites of ideological struggle reveals how detached much of this discourse is from the lived experience of educators. The gap between theory and practice has never been wider.

Critical pedagogy also fosters a culture of moral superiority. Teachers who embrace it are celebrated as “progressive” and “enlightened,” while those who focus on linguistic accuracy and practical outcomes are dismissed as “traditional” or “unreflective.” This binary creates an unnecessary in-group/out-group division within the EFL profession. On one side are the so-called critical teachers—usually urban, globally connected, and fluent in the jargon of social theory. On the other are the ordinary practitioners working within local constraints, who are now made to feel intellectually inferior for simply doing their jobs well. The discourse of liberation thus becomes another mechanism of exclusion.

Ironically, in its zeal to make education political, critical pedagogy often silences diversity of opinion. Teachers who question its assumptions are accused of lacking social awareness or empathy. In this sense, critical pedagogy replaces one form of dogmatism with another. It claims to liberate, but it also

dictates what counts as liberation. It claims to give voice to the marginalized, but it dismisses those whose priorities—such as economic advancement or linguistic mastery—don't fit the ideological script.

A more responsible approach to EFL teaching would acknowledge that language education has social dimensions without reducing it to politics. Teachers can promote respect, curiosity, and intercultural understanding through literature, discussion, and collaboration—without turning every exercise into an act of resistance. Empowerment need not mean confrontation; awareness need not mean activism. Students benefit more from mastering communicative skills that allow them to engage critically *on their own terms* than from being recruited into someone else's intellectual crusade.

Critical pedagogy undoubtedly raises important questions about inequality and power in education, but its uncritical application in EFL contexts has blurred the line between teaching and indoctrination. Before asking teachers to transform society, we should first ensure they have the resources, training, and institutional support to do their basic jobs effectively. Perhaps genuine empowerment begins with competence, professionalism, and humility.

In the end, EFL teachers must decide whether they are language educators or social engineers. The former build bridges across cultures; the latter risk turning classrooms into battlegrounds of ideology. Critical pedagogy may inspire conference papers and academic debates, but in the day-to-day reality of language teaching, it has too often become a distraction—an imported ideal that overlooks the very people it claims to serve.