

# Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy in English Language Teaching

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**Kim, Hye-Kyung. (2017). Critical thinking and critical pedagogy in English language teaching.** *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*, 25(4). 41-58. This overview paper aims to shed light on the concepts and research areas of critical thinking and critical pedagogy and on the interplay between these two concepts in English language teaching. As critical thinking is widely regarded as a primary goal of schooling, it is important to address its role in critical pedagogy, which emphasizes the importance of helping students develop a critical awareness of the world (Crookes & Lehner, 1998), as well as the importance of both approaches in English language learning. To this end, the differences and relationships between critical thinking and critical pedagogy are discussed, followed by an examination of the literature on critical thinking in ESL/EFL learning and critical ESL/EFL pedagogy. Finally, the future directions of critical thinking and critical pedagogy in English language teaching will be considered in order to look at how language teaching and learning could play an integral role in fostering critical thinking abilities and preparing students for active participation in the global arena.

**Key Words:** critical thinking, critical pedagogy, English language teaching, critical ESL/EFL pedagogy

## 1. Introduction

Developing critical thinking skills along with the four language skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing is crucial for both English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) students. Studies have shown a strong positive relationship between EFL learners' critical thinking and

listening comprehension abilities (Azadi, Zare, & Khorram, 2015; Elekaei, Faramazi, & Tabrizi, 2016; Nour Mohammadi & Zare, 2015; Zare, Behjat, Abdollahimzadeh, & Izadi, 2013) and a positive correlation between critical thinking ability and their speaking proficiency (Lee, 2017). Research has also supported a positive correlation between EFL learners' critical thinking and reading comprehension ability or reading strategies (Hassani, Rahmany, & Babaei, 2013; Hosseini & Elahi, 2011; Kamgar & Jadidi, 2016; Nour Mohammadi, Heidari, & Dehghan Nirya, 2012), and critical thinking has been shown to be important for presenting logical arguments in ESL writing classes (Pally, 1997).

As a primary goal of schooling is to enable students to think critically, teaching critical thinking is an integral part of critical pedagogy, including English language teaching (ELT). ESL and EFL students face a double challenge. Not only must they think critically, but they also must think critically in English. Moreover, critical pedagogical philosophy emphasizes the necessity for ESL and EFL students to develop English communicative abilities and at the same time develop a critical awareness of the world (Crookes & Lehner, 1998), which suggests a close focus on interactions with others and a broad focus on global issues.

In this overview paper, I shed light on the concepts of critical thinking and critical pedagogy and the interplay between them. To this end, I discuss the differences and relationships between critical thinking and critical pedagogy in ELT, and then I examine the literature on critical thinking in ESL/EFL and critical ESL/EFL pedagogy. Finally, I consider the future directions of critical thinking and critical pedagogy in ELT in order to elucidate the role of language teaching and learning in fostering critical thinking abilities.

## 2. Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy

Both critical thinking and critical pedagogy start with the term *critical* but apply it differently. Burbules and Berk (1999) characterize critical thinking "as a valued educational goal: urging teachers to help students become more skeptical toward commonly accepted truisms" (p. 45), which can be applied across a broad range of topics and disciplines. According to Hawkins and

Norton (2009), on the other hand, critical pedagogy refers specifically to “a focus on how dominant ideologies in society drive the construction of understandings and meanings in ways that privilege certain groups of people, while marginalizing others” (p. 31). Given this distinction, critical thinking is linked to critical pedagogy in some ways. In this section, how critical thinking and critical pedagogy are both different and related in ELT will first be further explored, and then critical thinking in ESL/EFL and critical ESL/EFL pedagogy will be examined based on the existing literature.

## 2.1. The Interplay between Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy

More than a century ago, Dewey (1910) defined critical thinking as “an active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it” (p. 6). In Facione’s (1990) later definition, critical thinking is “purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference” (p. 6). Ennis (1993) defines critical thinking as “reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do” (p. 180). More recently, Paul and Elder (2006) explains critical thinking as “self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking” (p. 4). It is common among these definitions that critical thinking is considered a higher-order skill such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation compared to lower-order thinking skills such as knowledge and comprehension.

Critical thinking is considered to include not only cognitive skills but also the attitudes or dispositions involved when using critical thinking skills (Burbules & Berk, 1999; Dewey, 1933; Hahim & Masouleh, 2012). Disposition involves the recognition that a particular skill is needed and the willingness to exert the mental effort needed to apply it (Halpern, 1998, 1999). Earlier, Glaser (1941) recognized that critical thinking involves the following three elements: an attitude of being disposed to consider in a thoughtful way the problems and subjects that come within the range of one’s experiences, knowledge of the methods of logical inquiry and reasoning, and some skill in applying those methods (p. 5).

Because critical thinking is essential in tertiary and perhaps all academic

contexts, language educators should assist their ESL and EFL students to become effective critical thinkers. Going beyond a generic description of a critical thinker who possesses higher-order thinking skills (Kek & Huijser, 2011b), Paul and Elder (2006) pointed out that critical thinkers display several specific characteristics. They are by nature skeptical and approach texts with the same skepticism with which they approach spoken remarks. They are active, not passive. They ask questions and analyze. They consciously apply tactics and strategies to uncover meaning or confirm their understanding. They do not take an egocentric view of the world, and they are open to new ideas and perspectives. They are willing to challenge their own beliefs and investigate competing evidence.

While it is commonly assumed that dispositions cannot be explicitly taught (Fahim & Masouleh, 2012), language teachers, teacher educators, and researchers do seek ways to teach critical thinking skills. Kek and Huijser (2011b) found that problem-based learning is a powerful approach to improving critical thinking skills. In another study, Kek and Huijser (2011a) also reported that a student-focused teaching approach that includes deep learning and self-directed learning promotes the development of critical thinking skills. They emphasize that to improve critical thinking in higher education, students need to be taught in a learning environment where they can hone their skills by addressing unstructured problems, cultivate a critical attitude, and understand the nature of critical thinking.

For language teachers working in higher education, Golding (2011) suggested pedagogical strategies for helping students develop their critical thinking. First, teachers should employ thought-encouraging questions such as “What is an example of that?” and “How do you know?” to elicit students’ evidence-based reasoning to support their ideas. Secondly, teachers should create an educational environment conducive to critical thinking where students regularly ask and respond to such questions in lectures, tutorials, laboratories, and assignments. With such questioning, teachers’ aim should be to encourage independent thinking rather than to lead students to predictable outcomes and answers or established knowledge. Lastly, teachers should encourage students to participate in a critical community created by the consistent use of thought-encouraging questions and discussion involving

multiple viewpoints. Golding (2011) emphasizes that students should ask and answer these questions themselves while the teacher plays the role of facilitator to encourage thinking, as shown in the following example (Golding, 2011, p. 367):

- Student 1 Racism is treating Chinese or Indigenous people badly.  
 Student 2 Yeah, but everyone is treated badly.  
 Student 3 What do you mean by that?  
 Student 1 Well, not all bad treatment of Chinese or Indigenous people is racism if everyone is treated the same. I reckon racism is about treating one race differently.  
 Teacher What does everyone think? Is racism about bad treatment, different treatment or something else?  
 Student 4 It's both—racism is treating one race differently and badly compared to another.  
 Student 5 Why do you think that?  
 Student 4 Well, it has to be different treatment or it's equality, not racism, and it has to be bad treatment or it would be helpful, not racism.  
 Teacher Can you give me some examples of things that would count as racist under this definition, and some things that would not count as racist?

In this approach students address a variety of questions about substantial issues such as racism, and at the same time teachers scaffold students to think for themselves, asking thought-encouraging questions but not trying to lead students to a particular answer.

Critical pedagogy, on the other hand, is an approach to language teaching and learning informed by critical theory that, as Pennycook (1990) explains, “seeks to understand and critique the historical and sociopolitical context of schooling and to develop pedagogical practices that aim not only to change the nature of schooling, but also the wider society” (p. 24). Giroux (1991, 1997), Delpit (1988), hooks (1994), McLaren (1995, 1997), Ladson-Billings (1995), and many other critical theorists have implied that there are three tenets

inherent in critical pedagogy. Those tenets are relevance to the individual's culture or lived experience; development of voice through a critical perspective on one's world and society, which takes place in dialogue with others; and transformation of the society toward equality for all citizens through active participation in democratic imperatives (Riasati & Mollaei, 2012).

The major goal of critical pedagogy is to emancipate oppressed or marginalized people and educate all people regardless of their gender, class, race, etc. (Freire, 1970). Brazilian educator and theorist Freire (1970) distinguished banking education from problem-posing education. According to the banking model, which is the traditional view of education, teachers know everything and students know nothing. Teachers deposit knowledge in students and never ask or allow them to question that knowledge. The teacher thinks, and students don't. The teacher chooses the content, and students comply with it. The teacher is authority, and students are obedient to authority. Students receive, memorize, and repeat. They are not asked to relate this knowledge to current problems and injustices with the aim of improving their society. Thus, teachers are active while students are expected to passively accept that all power and authority are held by the teacher, and they have no agency in their own learning. Critical pedagogy rejects all these dichotomies. Instead, teachers should be concerned about social justice and give students the opportunity to critically reflect and act on their position within society (Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011).

As an alternative to the banking model, Freire (1970) suggested a problem-posing model of education in which literacy becomes immediately relevant and engaging by focusing on problematic issues in learners' lives. Problem-posing education involves exposing social realities and striving for the emergence of critical consciousness and critical intervention in real issues as students take the necessary actions to improve their life conditions. In this model, students have the right and even the responsibility to ask questions. In this process of problem-posing, the teacher listens to students and then selects the most appropriate topics and materials for discussion, which the teacher guides by asking inductive questions (Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011). In this way, critical thinking is linked to critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogues view education systems as political (Freire, 1970;

Giroux, 1997; Shor, 1992) as all decisions concerning the curriculum, educational materials, staff, and sanctioned language are political (Degener, 2001). They claim that rather than simply reflect current political agendas, higher education should engage in political education. Such education, according to Giroux (1997), involves “teaching students to take risk, challenge those with power, honor critical traditions, and be reflective about how authority is used in the classroom” (p. 265).

According to critical pedagogy, the goal of the curriculum should be to foster students’ acquisition of the strategies and skills they need to become social critics who are able to make decisions which affect their social, economic, and political realities (Giroux & McLaren, 1992). The lesson plan should include authentic materials such as popular magazines, TV, commercials, and films which represent the culture and can serve as the basis for critical reflection. Critically analyzing such authentic materials can help students relate their knowledge to existing problems in society and be ready to take necessary actions to make the society a better place in which to live (Crookes, 2013).

In critical pedagogy, teachers play a role of transformative intellectuals who have the knowledge and skills to expose and critique existing inequalities in society (Giroux, 1991; Kim, 2016, 2017). Teachers should empower their students by raising their awareness of inequitable schooling that reproduces the inequalities of the status quo (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1992). Classrooms should be experiential spaces in which students are encouraged to be active agents in their own education and develop a critical consciousness. As Freire (1998) insisted, a strong critical consciousness enables students to evaluate the fairness and authority within their living and educational situations.

As Freire (1970) also pointed out, critical consciousness is brought about “not through intellectual effort alone but through praxis—through the authentic union of action and reflection” (p. 48). Praxis for Freire is a combination of reflective interpretation and active change to create not only a better learning environment but also a better world (Keessing-Styles, 2003). It is a dynamic process that takes place in dialogue, an essential component of critical education (Freire, 1998). “Without dialogue,” Freire (1970) argued, “there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education” (p. 73). In a dialogic classroom, the teacher listens to students, learns about the

problems that are important within their communities, and asks questions which help students understand those problems from multiple perspectives and then find ways to take political actions to solve them (Degener, 2001).

To sum up, critical thinking, as Banegas and Villacañas de Castro (2016) describe, is “the practice of socially situated reflection and evaluation” that involves considering an issue from multiple perspectives (p. 455). Critical pedagogy encompasses and goes beyond this practice in that it aims to “work towards the creation of possibilities for action, not just thought” (p. 456).

## 2.2. Empirical Research in Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy

### 2.2.1. Critical Thinking in ESL and EFL

Critical thinking is regarded as a vital skill for success at all levels of education in the global arena. All students face challenges in this field, but ESL and EFL students face a double challenge in that they not only must think critically, but think critically in another language. Research suggests that operating in a second language negatively affects most complex cognitive functions (Floyd, 2011; Kirby, Woodhouse, & Ma, 1996; Koda, 2005; Luk & Lin, 2015). Kirby et al. (1996) showed that less fluent second language learners tended to learn subject content by rote because they lacked the linguistic resources in English to use deep-learning processes. Koda (2005) pointed out that ESL learners lack the ability to employ higher-order strategies such as discourse processing in English as they typically have limited knowledge of the second language and are influenced by both their first and second languages. Floyd (2011) found that second language fluency level is one of the most important factors in English learners’ critical thinking performances, and Luk and Lin (2015) found a significant contrast between ESL students’ elaborated discourse in their first language and restricted discourse in English when they are involved in higher-order cognitive activities, even in the case of advanced learners.

Given that linguistic proficiency affects the critical thinking performance of ESL and EFL learners, researchers have recently addressed the relationship between their critical thinking ability and the four language skills. Several studies have shown a strong positive relationship between critical thinking



performance and listening comprehension (Elekaei, Faramazi, & Tabrizi, 2016; Nour Mohammadi & Zare, 2015; Zare, Behjat, Abdollahimzadeh, & Izadi, 2013) and listening strategies (Azadi, Zare, & Khorram, 2015). In a study on Korean university students in an EFL context, Lee (2017) found that their critical thinking ability was closely related to their speaking proficiency. Several studies reveal a positive correlation between EFL learners' critical thinking ability and their reading comprehension and strategies (Hassani, Rahmany, & Babaei, 2013; Hosseini & Elahi, 2011; Kamgar & Jadidi, 2016; Nour Mohammadi, Heidari, & Dehghan Niry, 2012). Pally (1997) found a positive relationship between critical thinking skills and writing abilities of ESL learners when they present an argument for sustained content study.

It is not surprising that ESL and EFL students display evidence of critical thinking more elaborately in their first language than in their second or foreign language (Luk & Lin, 2015) as they can draw on the rich cognitive and linguistic resources of their first language in comparison to the more limited resources of their second language. Therefore, ESL and EFL teachers need to be cognizant of the importance of language resources in students' critical thinking and help students use their first language proficiency to support their ability to demonstrate critical thinking in their second or foreign language.

### 2.2.2. Critical ESL and EFL Pedagogy

Crookes and Lehner (1998) proposed several principles of critical ESL and EFL pedagogy, one of which is to help students problematize their own learning situation so that they can perceive, reflect, and act on it. Thus, the organization of the curriculum should recognize the class as a social entity and resource, and the content of the curriculum should be derived from the life situation of the learners and delivered through dialogue among students with the guidance of the teacher who, as a learner among learners, contributes to the dialogical process by continuously questioning and raising problems. Students should possess the right and power to make decisions and produce some of their own learning materials.

In ESL contexts, which often involve racial and language minorities, both language learning and language teaching are considered to be political processes (Norton & Toohey, 2004). Studies on ESL learner identity show that

ESL learners often face hardships living in a new country, where they lack the linguistic, communicative, and social competencies they possessed in their native settings (Ibrahim, 1999; McKay & Wong, 1996; Miller, 2003; Norton, 1995, 1997, 2000; Rymes & Pash, 2001). Huh (2014) explored the relationship between Korean ESL students' academic and economic privileges and their critical literacy practices and found that although students explicitly mentioned and critiqued current beliefs about poverty, they accepted the dominant belief system. Thus, ESL teachers should try to connect language learning and teaching to the objectives of educating students to understand why things are the way they are and how they got to be that way (Morgan, 1998).

On the other hand, much less research has addressed critical EFL pedagogy which has often been regarded as culturally inappropriate in teacher-centered classrooms, especially in East Asian contexts (Crookes, 2010). Nevertheless, Sung (2004) demonstrated the practicality of critical pedagogy in a tertiary EFL context employing a multimedia-assisted and inquiry-based approach. His study revealed that Korean university students could learn more than linguistic and technological skills by problematizing given information and knowledge and engaging in critical investigation of topics related to their own interests and needs. Kim (2004) also presented the possibility of critical reading practice in an EFL context. Her study showed that Korean university students could, through critical analysis and the raising of questions, challenge the dominant views and hegemonic power presented in a reading text; they came to understand that language use reflects unequal social power operating within institutions and discourses. Similarly, Shin and Crookes (2005) found that Korean high school students were receptive to materials featuring critical topics and were able to handle critical dialogue in English that included non-authoritarian interactions with teachers.

In a recent study, Suh and Huh (2014) reported that Korean university students could become more active English readers by resisting the reading text, sharing multiple perspectives on the text, and critically analyzing textual features. Huh and Suh (2015) also showed that Korean elementary school students could engage in critical literacy practices to confront, analyze, and challenge dominant cultural representations and ideologies in graphic novels. In a similar vein, Kim (2015) implemented critical EFL pedagogy in a Korean

university setting, employing critical dialogue, knowledge negotiation, and collaborative learning as strategies to make a critical pedagogy approach manageable while also reducing resistance to it.

As pointed out by Crookes (2010), although studies reporting the actual application of critical EFL pedagogy have increased recently, more research is still needed to explore its implementation in various non-Western settings. Increased sensitivity to diversity and to different types of oppression in the globalized world will make critical pedagogy more relevant and possible in a variety of classrooms, including EFL as well as ESL contexts.

### 3. Conclusion and Future Directions

Critical pedagogy seeks to raise awareness of social inequities, foster rejection of discrimination against people, and promote peaceful coexistence. Critical thinking is a fundamental component of critical pedagogy, but whereas the effective use of language in framing perspectives and arguments is more within the purview of critical thinking, critical pedagogy is more concerned with how language can influence personal and social change (Crookes & Lehner, 1998). Thus, as Crookes and Lehner (1998) emphasize, critical pedagogues should help ESL and EFL students simultaneously develop “English communicative abilities and the ability to apply them to developing a critical awareness of the world and the ability to act on it to improve matters” (p. 320).

Both critical thinking and critical pedagogy, however, have limitations. As Burbules and Berk (1999) point out, critical thinking tends to rely on empirical evidence and logical reasoning, excluding other sources of evidence or forms of verification such as experience, emotions, and aesthetic preferences. They also caution that critical pedagogy’s purported reliance on open dialogue could mask a closed conversation that privileges a particular perspective, which could exclude issues and voices that other groups bring to educational encounters. To overcome the limitations of critical thinking and critical pedagogy traditions, they suggest adopting a poststructural viewpoint that respects multiple perspectives to encourage varied interpretations of a given text even if these interpretations conflict with one another.

In addition to poststructural approaches to critical thinking and critical pedagogy, Burbules and Berk (1999) consider it useful to think of criticality as a practice that involves not only critical thinking skills such as logical and analytical skills but also the ability to think from different perspectives or in new ways. They claim that criticality is always social in character because the individual functions in relation to others and because interactions are the source of new ways of thinking and the challenges of alternative views. As a practice, criticality can become not only a way of thinking and an intellectual capacity but also a way of being and relating to others (Burbules & Berk, 1999).

Given the challenges of an increasingly global society, language teachers, teacher educators, and researchers should seriously consider how critical thinking and critical pedagogy can be applied in ELT. To achieve the primary aims of critical pedagogy, social justice and peace, teachers need to be practitioners of critical thinking themselves in their teaching practices. Critical practices do not necessarily entail taking a negative stance towards other people's or one's own assumptions. Instead, they imply approaching issues from multiple perspectives and analyzing and reflecting on them with open-minded attitudes for potential changes or improvements (Na & Kim, 2003).

In reality, however, top-down educational systems, large class sizes, conventional teacher-student relationships, traditionally-defined roles, teacher-centered classrooms, and learners' expectations could make critical pedagogies more difficult to implement in EFL than in ESL contexts (Kim, 2015; Kim & Pollard, 2017). Language teachers working in such educational environments are acutely aware that it is not easy to help students develop the critical awareness that enables them to read the world as well as the word (Freire & Macedo, 1987). As Freire and Macedo (1987) propose, language teachers should help students achieve "a critical reading of reality" (p. 36), which is possible by reading the world within words in order to understand it and transform it. Nevertheless, I strongly believe that critical thinking and critical pedagogy in ELT could play an integral role in helping both ESL and EFL students foster criticality and renounce passivity as they understand that language deals with words and that words trigger reflection and action (Rahimi & Sajed, 2014).

Finally, in order to overcome the difficulties of implementing critical

pedagogies in EFL contexts, it is worth considering a localized, modest version of critical pedagogy (Tinning, 2002) as suggested by Kim and Pollard (2017). That is to say, basic principles of critical pedagogy, which is US-centric, need to be reframed to be compatible with particular contexts in which EFL students, while learning English, can raise their critical awareness of power relations embedded in society. Therefore, language teachers need to pay careful attention to the development of modest critical pedagogies appropriate to their specific EFL contexts, helping their students to become critical thinkers with the awareness that language is not simply a means of communication but plays a significant role in the production, maintenance, and change of social relations of power (Fairclough, 2001).

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