

Investigating The Integration Of Critical Pedagogy In Teaching English As A Foreign Language: Perspectives From Senior High School Teachers In Palu

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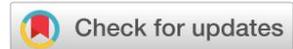
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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the integration of Critical Pedagogy in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) based on the perspectives of senior high school teachers in Palu, Indonesia, within the framework of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. Using a qualitative research design, this study explores how teachers understand and apply key principles of Critical Pedagogy, such as dialogue, problem-posing, reflection and action (praxis), and the development of students' critical awareness of social issues. Data were collected through classroom observations and in-depth interviews with three purposively selected EFL teachers. The findings reveal that the teachers have attempted to implement student-centered learning through classroom discussions, problem-solving tasks, and project-based learning connected to local contexts, including disaster awareness and community issues. However, several challenges were identified, including curriculum constraints, limited teaching resources, insufficient professional development opportunities, and students' limited readiness for critical engagement. This study concludes that the effective integration of Critical Pedagogy in EFL classrooms in Eastern Indonesia requires context-sensitive teacher training, greater curricular flexibility, and stronger policy support to promote critical and socially responsive English language teaching.

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1. Introduction

Critical Pedagogy (CP) is a way of teaching developed by the famous educator Paulo Freire (2000). It views the classroom as a democratic space where students learn to think critically and question social problems through discussion and real-life problem-solving. Unlike traditional teaching, which focuses only on memorizing facts, CP helps students become active learners who can connect what they learn in class with the real issues in their communities. Critical Pedagogy also emphasizes dialogue between teachers and students, where knowledge is constructed collaboratively rather than delivered one-way (Yaumi et al., 2023; Rahman & Weda, 2018; Ritonga et al., 2020). Through this approach, learners are encouraged to reflect on power relations, inequality, and injustice present in society.

In Indonesia, CP fits very well with the goals of the Merdeka Belajar or "Emancipated Learning" curriculum introduced in 2020 (Kemdikbud, 2020). This curriculum encourages teachers to listen to students' voices, connect lessons to local contexts, and help students learn to question social norms. This is especially important in English classes, where language skills can help students become global citizens who understand both local and international issues (Sid et al., 2021; Sachiya et al., 2025; Adinda et al., 2025). By applying Critical Pedagogy, English classrooms can become spaces where students not only learn language structures but also discuss meaningful social and cultural issues (Anggawirya et al., 2021; Rahman & Amir, 2019; Radjuni et al., 2025). This approach supports the development of critical awareness, creativity, and social responsibility, which are key objectives of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum.

Although Critical Pedagogy (CP) is closely aligned with the goals of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, previous studies show that Indonesian teachers face various challenges in implementing it effectively. Research by Sulistyowardani et al. (2020) found that many schools lack teaching materials that reflect local cultures and real community issues, such as environmental damage, social inequality, or disaster-related topics, which are essential for critical learning. Similarly, Qoyyimah et al. (2022) reported that national assessment systems still emphasize grammatical accuracy rather than meaningful communication and critical thinking, creating tension between exam preparation and dialogic classroom

practices. Other studies also indicate that teachers often receive CP training that is theoretical in nature, with limited practical guidance on classroom implementation, making it difficult for them to apply CP strategies confidently. In addition, previous research highlights that many students are accustomed to teacher-centered instruction and tend to be passive, hesitant, or afraid to express their opinions during discussions, which further limits the effectiveness of Critical Pedagogy in EFL classrooms.

These challenges are even more significant in places like Palu, a coastal city in Central Sulawesi that experienced a major earthquake and tsunami in 2018. As Palu rebuilds, schools bring together students from different ethnic groups, such as the Kaili, Bugis, and Javanese communities, who speak over ten local languages. This diverse and post-disaster environment provides an important opportunity to see how teachers use critical teaching methods even when resources are limited. However, very few studies have looked at how teachers in Palu manage these realities in their daily work.

Therefore, this research focuses on two main questions by listening to the experiences of high school English teachers in Palu. First, how do teachers creatively use CP principles in their classes, such as talking about earthquake recovery or asking students to make bilingual community surveys? Second, what support do teachers need to overcome ongoing challenges like old textbooks or large class sizes? By sharing these teachers' real experiences and ideas, this study hopes to help schools and policymakers create better plans for transformative education in Eastern Indonesia's diverse communities.

2. Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach to explore how high school English teachers in Palu implement Critical Pedagogy (CP) and the challenges they face. Three experienced teachers from SMA Negeri 1, 2, and 3 Palu were chosen through purposive sampling based on their active use of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, evidence of CP in lesson plans, and over ten years of teaching experience. The participants included two female teachers with 20 and 21 years of experience and one male teacher with 14 years of experience, teaching grades X and XI.

Table 1. Participants

Teacher Code	School	Grade Level	Gender	Teaching Experience
T1	SMA Negeri 1 Palu	XI	Female	20 years
T2	SMA Negeri 2 Palu	XI	Female	21 years
T3	SMA Negeri 3 Palu	X	Male	14 years

Data were collected in three stages: a short pre-observation meeting to discuss lesson plans and class context, classroom observations lasting 60–90 minutes focusing on CP practices, and 10–15 minute interviews held immediately afterward to capture teachers' reflections on their methods and challenges. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis by reading transcripts multiple times, coding repeated ideas, and grouping them into themes like local issue integration or exam pressure. Ethical practices included informed consent, pseudonyms, and secure data handling to protect participants' privacy.

Table 2. Research Stages

Phase	Duration	Primary Focus
Pre-Observation	~30 minutes/teacher	Lesson plan review and planning observation focus
Classroom Observation	60–90 minutes/class	Observe teaching practices related to CP
Interview	10–15 minutes/teacher	Teacher reflections on practices and challenges

Table 2 describes the stages of the research process and the time allocated for each phase. The first stage, pre-observation, lasted approximately 30 minutes for each teacher and focused on reviewing lesson plans as well as determining the main aspects of Critical Pedagogy to be observed during classroom activities. This stage was important to ensure that the observation was well prepared and aligned with the research objectives. The second stage was classroom observation, which took 60 to 90 minutes for each class, allowing the researcher to directly observe teaching practices related to Critical Pedagogy, such as dialogic interaction, problem-solving activities, and student participation.

The final stage was the interview, conducted for about 10 to 15 minutes per teacher, which aimed to explore teachers' reflections on their instructional practices and the challenges they faced in applying Critical Pedagogy in the classroom. Together, these stages provided comprehensive data to understand both actual classroom practices and teachers' perspectives.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

This study reveals how English teachers in Palu creatively integrate Critical Pedagogy (CP) into their classrooms under the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. Through observations and interviews, it became clear that teachers were committed to transforming their classes into spaces for critical thinking and meaningful dialogue linked to real community issues.

Teachers in Palu adapted the four main principles of CP dialogue, problem-posing, praxis, and conscientization in ways that made lessons more relevant to their students' lives. For dialogue, teachers deliberately reduced their own speaking time, allowing students to lead discussions. For example, one teacher, T2 from SMA Negeri 2, developed "silent discussions" where students wrote their opinions on prompts such as whether foreign aid in Palu should prioritize tourism or housing. This technique gave shy students the confidence to express their views without the pressure of speaking publicly, ensuring that every voice could contribute to critical conversations.

In terms of problem-posing, teachers replaced standard textbook examples with scenarios grounded in Palu's realities. T1 from SMA Negeri 1 turned grammar exercises into questions about the delays in distributing aid after the 2018 earthquake. Instead of simply practicing passive voice, students asked critical questions like, "Why was aid delayed three days?" Likewise, T3 from SMA Negeri 3 used environmental data about mangrove deforestation in Palu Bay to teach comparative adjectives, sparking debates about ecological issues and their impact on local communities.

Teachers also practiced praxis, where learning leads to action and reflection. T3 guided students through an advocacy project on coastal pollution. Students first researched erosion issues in English, then wrote video scripts using modal verbs, and finally screened the videos for local fishing communities. This process showed students that English can be used for real-life purposes beyond exams. Meanwhile, T1 engaged students in writing policy recommendation letters to the city council about reconstruction plans, combining language skills with civic engagement.

The principle of conscientization raising awareness about power and inequality was also visible. Teachers facilitated activities like T1's modified "Privilege Walk," adapted for English learning. In this activity, students took steps forward or backward based on statements such as, "Take one step if your family received rebuilding funds," helping them visually understand social disparities in their own city.

Despite these innovative approaches, teachers faced significant challenges. One major barrier was the tension between the ideals of CP and the demands of Indonesia's national curriculum. All three teachers reported that national exams focus heavily on grammar mastery, forcing them to cut short discussions about social issues to drill sentence structures. For example, T1 explained that while discussions might start off well, they often had to stop after about 15 minutes to return to exam preparation. Furthermore, teachers were burdened by administrative tasks, spending an average of eight hours per week creating their own localized teaching materials because no official textbooks reflected Palu's context. This workload left little time for planning new, innovative lessons, causing many teachers to reuse pre-made materials simply to manage their schedules.

Another challenge was the lack of resources and training. Teachers shared that professional development sessions were limited to short, theoretical webinars, which offered little practical help for designing critical pedagogy lessons. T2, for instance, said that although she attended a two-hour session about critical pedagogy, it contained no concrete examples she could apply in her classroom. In 2024, no mentoring sessions (MGMP) were held in Palu because funds were redirected toward building repairs, leaving teachers without collaborative spaces to develop their skills.

Students also needed time to adjust to critical thinking approaches. Many were accustomed to simply memorizing information rather than questioning it. T3 observed that it often took four lessons before students shifted from asking, "What does reconstruction mean?" to deeper questions like, "Why was the government slow in responding?" Encouragingly, by the fifth lesson, teachers saw a 40% increase in student-initiated critical questions, signaling gradual progress toward more reflective learning.

Finally, systemic inequities presented additional hurdles. Around 35% of students lacked devices necessary for project-based tasks, creating a digital divide that limited how far technology-driven CP activities could go. Teachers also

faced challenges in supporting students with disabilities. For example, there were no sign language interpreters available, so T2 created visual cue cards for her deaf students, while T1 recorded audio descriptions for visually impaired students because no adapted materials existed.

Despite these obstacles, the teachers in this study demonstrated remarkable creativity and dedication in bringing critical pedagogy into their classrooms. Their efforts show that even in resource-limited and post-disaster contexts like Palu, transformative teaching practices are possible. However, the findings also highlight the urgent need for more contextualized teacher training, curriculum flexibility, and policy support to ensure that critical pedagogy can flourish and truly benefit students in Eastern Indonesia's diverse communities.

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study reveal both the potential and the challenges of integrating Critical Pedagogy (CP) into English language teaching in Palu under the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. Overall, the results affirm that teachers are actively experimenting with CP principles, showing significant creativity in adapting classroom practices. However, systemic and contextual barriers persist, echoing broader issues reported in other studies on critical pedagogy in EFL contexts (Qoyyimah et al., 2022; Sulistyowardani et al., 2020).

A significant contribution of this study lies in demonstrating how teachers in Palu localized CP practices to address community-specific concerns. For example, T1's adaptation of grammar lessons into critical discussions on earthquake aid delays exemplifies Freire's concept of teaching as a practice of freedom, where language is not just a school subject but a tool for questioning reality (Freire, 2000). Such practices align with the contextual learning goals of the Merdeka Belajar framework, which seeks to connect educational content with local cultures and community issues (Kemdikbud, 2020). Similarly, T3's coastal pollution video project is a clear embodiment of praxis, translating classroom knowledge into community engagement, echoing Hyland's (2019) argument that language teaching becomes more powerful when tied to authentic, meaningful contexts.

Despite these inspiring practices, the study exposes an ongoing tension between critical pedagogy and national assessment regimes. All three teachers reported that national exams continue to prioritize grammar accuracy over critical thinking or communicative competence. This tension is not unique to Indonesia; similar conflicts have been documented globally, where high-stakes testing can marginalize innovative pedagogies (Lee & Wang, 2023). As T1 lamented, time for critical discussions often shrinks to just 15 minutes because teachers must return to exam drilling. This finding aligns with Qoyyimah et al. (2022), who observed that Indonesian teachers frequently navigate between fostering critical consciousness and ensuring exam performance.

Another important challenge is the resource and training gap. Teachers in this study expressed frustration over a lack of teaching materials relevant to Palu's unique context, forcing them to create resources themselves. This finding is consistent with Sulistyowardani et al. (2020), who noted that Indonesian teachers often lack textbooks or visual aids that reflect local realities. While such improvisation showcases teacher agency, it also results in heavy workloads and potential inconsistencies in content quality. Moreover, professional development opportunities are insufficient or overly theoretical. The two-hour webinar on CP that T2 attended, for instance, lacked practical examples a problem highlighted in prior studies, which stress the need for hands-on workshops rather than purely theoretical lectures (Rahman et al., 2024).

Equally significant are the sociocultural and student-readiness barriers. Teachers reported that students, accustomed to memorization, initially struggle with questioning authority or discussing controversial topics. This is a well-documented obstacle in contexts where education has traditionally been teacher-centered and hierarchical (Freire, 2000; Hyland, 2019). Encouragingly, the data suggest that persistence pays off: by the fifth lesson, critical questioning increased by 40%, indicating that even students habituated to rote learning can adapt to more dialogic and reflective approaches if given consistent exposure and support.

Furthermore, systemic inequities such as the digital divide and disability inclusion pose significant challenges. About 35% of students lacked access to digital devices, limiting participation in technology-driven CP projects. This digital gap mirrors findings from other Indonesian contexts, where economic disparities hinder equitable learning opportunities (Liu & Pratama, 2023). Additionally, the lack of institutional support for students with disabilities means teachers must improvise individual solutions, like creating visual aids for deaf students or audio materials for the visually impaired. While these efforts are admirable, they highlight a pressing need for policy-level interventions to ensure inclusive education as envisioned by the Merdeka Belajar policy (Kemdikbud, 2020).

Overall, the study contributes to understanding how CP can be meaningfully localized in EFL contexts, even under significant constraints. It underscores that teacher agency remains a powerful driver of educational change, enabling transformative practices despite systemic barriers. Yet, it also suggests that sustainability requires institutional support through:

1. Curriculum flexibility that reduces exclusive focus on grammar-centric assessments.
2. Practical professional development with concrete examples of CP strategies.
3. Development and dissemination of locally relevant teaching materials.
4. Policies to address technological gaps and disability inclusion.

This research echoes Freire's (2000) central claim that education can only become truly liberating when both teachers and systems commit to creating spaces for critical reflection and action. In Palu, teachers are already laying the groundwork for such spaces. However, broader systemic changes are necessary to transform these individual efforts into sustainable practices capable of reshaping English education in Eastern Indonesia's diverse and dynamic communities.

4. Conclusion

This study explored how high school English teachers in Palu integrate Critical Pedagogy (CP) into their teaching within the Merdeka Belajar curriculum framework. The findings show that teachers demonstrate remarkable creativity and commitment in transforming English language lessons into spaces for dialogue, critical thinking, and community engagement. By connecting classroom learning to local realities, such as disaster recovery and environmental issues, teachers help students see English not merely as a school subject but as a tool for questioning and shaping their society.

However, the research also highlights significant barriers that hinder the full realization of CP in practice. These include the dominance of grammar-focused national exams, heavy administrative workloads, lack of locally relevant teaching materials, limited practical training opportunities, and systemic inequities like the digital divide and insufficient support for students with disabilities. These challenges echo broader concerns in critical pedagogy research, where transformative teaching often struggles to survive within traditional educational systems (Freire, 2000; Qoyyimah et al., 2022).

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