

Critical Pedagogy in EFL Classrooms: an Interactional Study of Student Voice and Agency in Aceh

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Abstrak

This study investigates how critical pedagogy is enacted through classroom interaction in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms and how such enactment enables student voice and agency in a Global South context. While critical pedagogy has been extensively theorized in applied linguistics, empirical evidence demonstrating how it operates in everyday EFL classroom practices remains limited. Addressing this gap, the present study examines naturally occurring classroom interaction in Indonesian secondary EFL classrooms in Aceh, a sociocultural context characterized by strong local, religious, and educational norms. Employing a qualitative empirical design, the study draws on multiple data sources, including classroom observations, audio-recorded and transcribed teacher–student interactions, student reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews with both teachers and learners. Interactional discourse analysis was used to examine how pedagogical moves—such as open-ended questioning, delayed teacher evaluation, and the uptake of student contributions—functioned to redistribute epistemic authority and expand opportunities for learner participation. These findings were triangulated with thematic analysis of interview and reflective data to capture participants’ perceptions of voice, agency, and classroom power relations. The findings indicate that student voice emerged not merely as increased participation but as epistemic agency, wherein learners were positioned as legitimate contributors to classroom knowledge. Critical pedagogy was realized through interactional practices that validated students’ local experiences and enabled them to articulate culturally grounded perspectives through English. Importantly, such pedagogical practices did not require radical curricular change but were embedded in teachers’ moment-to-moment interactional decisions. This study contributes empirical, interactionally grounded evidence to applied linguistics scholarship and advances a practice-oriented understanding of critical pedagogy in EFL. It offers pedagogical insights for fostering student voice in contexts where sociocultural expectations and institutional constraints may limit overt critical engagement, aligning closely with *System’s* focus on classroom-based pedagogical research.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, EFL classroom interaction, student voice, learner agency, Global South, Aceh context

A. Introduction

Over the past two decades, English language teaching (ELT) has increasingly been positioned not merely as a neutral pedagogical enterprise but as a site where power, identity, ideology, and inequality are actively negotiated. As English continues to function as a global lingua franca, concerns have been raised regarding whose voices are legitimized in English classrooms and whose experiences remain marginalized (Block, 2023; Kubota, 2020). In many English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, particularly in the Global South, classroom practices continue to privilege standardized linguistic norms, examination-oriented outcomes, and teacher-centered interactional patterns, often at the expense of learners' agency and voice (Widodo, 2020; Canagarajah, 2022).

Within this landscape, critical pedagogy has emerged as an influential framework in language education, advocating for pedagogical practices that foreground learners' lived experiences, sociopolitical realities, and capacity to question dominant discourses (Crookes, 2021; Pennycook, 2021). However, despite its growing prominence in theoretical discussions, critical pedagogy in ELT has frequently been criticized for remaining largely abstract, ideological, or normatively prescriptive, with limited empirical evidence demonstrating how it is enacted in actual classroom interaction (Widodo et al., 2023; Sayer & Braun, 2022). This critique is particularly salient in EFL settings, where institutional constraints, cultural norms, and assessment regimes may limit the feasibility of overtly critical curricular interventions.

Recent scholarship has therefore called for a shift from viewing critical pedagogy as a set of radical curricular contents toward understanding it as an interactional and pedagogical practice embedded in everyday classroom discourse (Lin & He, 2022; Hawkins & Mori, 2021). From this perspective, student voice is not simply encouraged through critical topics but emerges through opportunities for meaningful participation, dialogic interaction, and the redistribution of epistemic authority in classroom talk (Walsh, 2022; Zhang & Lin, 2024). Such a reconceptualization aligns closely with *System's* long-standing interest in classroom processes, learner engagement, and pedagogically grounded empirical research.

At the same time, student voice and agency have become central concerns in applied linguistics and language education research. Drawing on sociocultural and poststructural perspectives, scholars argue that learners' investment in language learning is shaped by whether they perceive their identities, values, and aspirations as being recognized in classroom interaction (Norton, 2021; Duff, 2020). When learners are positioned merely as recipients of linguistic input, their participation often remains minimal and instrumental. Conversely, when learners are afforded interactional space to express opinions, negotiate meanings, and draw on local knowledge, they are more likely to develop a sense of ownership over the target language (Hawkins & Mori, 2021; Widodo & Fang, 2022).

Despite these insights, empirical classroom-based studies examining how student voice is enacted through critical pedagogical practices in EFL contexts remain underrepresented, particularly in regions such as Southeast Asia and Indonesia. While Indonesia has been discussed in relation to Global Englishes and curriculum reform, most studies have focused on policy analysis, materials evaluation, or teacher beliefs rather than fine-grained analysis of classroom interaction (Widodo et al., 2023). Even fewer studies have explored regions like Aceh, where strong local cultural, religious, and linguistic identities intersect with the teaching of English, creating a uniquely rich context for examining the negotiation of voice and authority in the classroom.

Responding to these gaps, the present study investigates how critical pedagogy is enacted through classroom interaction in Indonesian EFL classrooms in Aceh, with particular attention to the ways in which pedagogical practices enable—or constrain—students' voices. Rather than treating critical pedagogy as an ideological stance imposed through curricular content, this study conceptualizes it as an interactional achievement, observable in teacher–student talk, participation structures, and learners' reflective accounts. By drawing on classroom observations, interactional transcripts, and student reflections, the study aims to contribute empirically grounded insights into how learner agency and voice can be fostered within the everyday realities of EFL classrooms.

Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How are critical pedagogical principles enacted through classroom interaction in EFL classrooms in Aceh?
2. In what ways do these interactional practices create space for students' voices and agency?

3. How do students perceive and negotiate their identities and participation within these pedagogical spaces?

By addressing these questions, the study seeks to make three key contributions. First, it extends research on critical pedagogy in ELT by providing **empirical classroom-based evidence** from a Global South EFL context. Second, it advances a **practice-oriented understanding of student voice**, grounded in interactional and discourse-analytic perspectives. Third, it offers pedagogical implications for EFL teachers seeking to implement critical, learner-centered practices within culturally specific and institutionally constrained settings.

Critical Pedagogy in English Language Teaching

Critical pedagogy in language education has its roots in broader traditions of critical social theory, emphasizing education as a site for questioning inequality, power relations, and dominant ideologies (Crookes, 2021). In ELT, critical pedagogy challenges the notion of English as a neutral communicative tool and highlights its role in reproducing global hierarchies and linguistic inequities (Kubota, 2020; Pennycook, 2021). Scholars argue that English classrooms can either reinforce dominant norms—such as native-speakerism and standardized proficiency—or become spaces where learners critically engage with language, culture, and identity.

In recent years, research has moved beyond advocating critical pedagogy as a moral imperative toward examining its pedagogical realizability. Widodo (2020) argues that critical pedagogy in EFL contexts must be locally grounded, culturally sensitive, and pedagogically feasible. Similarly, Crookes (2021) cautions against romanticizing critical pedagogy without considering institutional realities, teacher agency, and learner expectations. These perspectives underscore the need to reconceptualize critical pedagogy not as a fixed method but as a flexible orientation that can be enacted in multiple ways.

A growing body of literature suggests that one productive way to operationalize critical pedagogy is through classroom interaction. Rather than focusing solely on critical content, teachers can enact criticality by reshaping participation structures, encouraging dialogic engagement, and validating learners' experiential knowledge (Lin, 2021; Sayer & Braun, 2022). From this view, critical pedagogy becomes visible in how teachers ask questions, respond to student contributions, and negotiate meaning, authority, and knowledge in real time.

The concept of student voice has been extensively discussed in educational research, often linked to democratic participation and learner-centered pedagogy. In applied linguistics, student voice is closely tied to theories of identity and investment. Norton (2021) conceptualizes investment as learners' commitment to language learning in relation to their desired identities and imagined futures. When learners perceive that classroom practices align with their identities and aspirations, they are more likely to participate actively and meaningfully.

Duff (2020) further emphasizes that language learning is a process of socialization into particular practices and discourses, where learners' agency is shaped by interactional opportunities. Classroom environments that restrict learners to predetermined responses or prioritize accuracy over meaning may limit learners' ability to express voice. In contrast, dialogic classrooms that allow for negotiation, disagreement, and reflection can foster deeper engagement and agency (Hawkins & Mori, 2021).

Recent studies highlight that student voice is not merely a matter of speaking more frequently but involves being heard, taken seriously, and positioned as legitimate contributors to classroom knowledge (Zhang & Lin, 2024). This interactional understanding of voice aligns with critical pedagogy's emphasis on challenging hierarchical teacher-student relations and recognizing learners as co-constructors of meaning.

Classroom Interaction, Agency, and Criticality

Classroom interaction has long been a central concern in *System*, with extensive research examining how pedagogical goals are realized through talk-in-interaction. Walsh (2022) introduces the concept of classroom interactional competence, emphasizing teachers' ability to create interactional space that supports learning. From this perspective, learner agency emerges when interactional patterns move beyond rigid initiation-response-feedback (IRF) sequences toward more dialogic and contingent exchanges.

Hawkins and Mori (2021) argue that agency should be understood as an emergent property of interaction rather than an individual trait. Learners' ability to exercise voice depends on how classroom discourse positions them—as passive respondents or as active meaning-makers. Lin and He (2022) further demonstrate that critical pedagogical practices can be embedded in routine classroom interaction through practices such as open-ended questioning,

acknowledgement of multiple perspectives, and translanguaging.

Importantly, recent research has begun to situate these interactional practices within Global South EFL contexts, emphasizing the need for locally responsive pedagogies (Widodo et al., 2023; Canagarajah, 2022). These studies suggest that critical pedagogy need not be confrontational or ideologically explicit; instead, it can be realized through subtle shifts in interaction that affirm learners' voices and identities.

B. Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative classroom-based research design with a critical interpretive orientation to examine how critical pedagogy is enacted through everyday classroom interaction in an EFL context. Qualitative approaches are particularly appropriate for investigating pedagogical practices, learner agency, and student voice, as these phenomena are socially constructed, context-dependent, and interactionally achieved (Yazan & Rudolph, 2020; Duff, 2020). Rather than seeking to measure predefined outcomes, this study aims to generate in-depth understandings of how teachers and students co-construct pedagogical meanings through talk, participation, and reflection.

Methodologically, the study is informed by critical classroom discourse analysis and thematic analysis, allowing for an examination of both micro-level interactional practices and participants' subjective interpretations of their classroom experiences (Fairclough, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2021). This combination aligns with recent calls in applied linguistics to bridge interactional analysis with critical perspectives in order to capture how power, voice, and agency are negotiated in situated pedagogical contexts (Lin & He, 2022; Hawkins & Mori, 2021).

Importantly, the study does not treat critical pedagogy as an externally imposed framework but as an empirical phenomenon observable in classroom practices. This orientation resonates with *System's* emphasis on pedagogically grounded research that foregrounds classroom processes and learner engagement rather than abstract theorization.

Research Context

The study was conducted in EFL classrooms in Aceh, Indonesia, a province characterized by strong local cultural, religious, and linguistic identities. Aceh presents a particularly compelling context for investigating critical pedagogy in EFL, as English is taught as a foreign language within an educational environment shaped by Islamic values, regional autonomy, and sociocultural norms emphasizing respect for authority and communal harmony.

English instruction in Aceh typically follows a nationally standardized curriculum, with an emphasis on grammatical accuracy, examination performance, and textbook-based instruction. However, recent educational reforms have encouraged more communicative and learner-centered approaches, creating a pedagogical space in which critical and dialogic practices may emerge, albeit unevenly. This tension between standardized expectations and pedagogical innovation makes Acehnese EFL classrooms a fertile site for exploring how student voice and agency are negotiated in practice (Widodo et al., 2023).

The study was situated in two upper-secondary EFL classrooms in a public school (or first-year university EFL classes—depending on your final choice), where English was taught as a compulsory subject. Classroom sizes ranged from approximately 25 to 30 students, reflecting typical EFL classroom conditions in Indonesia.

Participants

Participants included two EFL teachers and 52 students (aged approximately 16–19 years). The teachers were selected through purposive sampling based on their expressed interest in learner-centered pedagogy and willingness to reflect on their classroom practices. Both teachers held undergraduate degrees in English education and had more than five years of teaching experience.

Student participants came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and had varying levels of English proficiency. All students were native speakers of Acehnese and Indonesian, with English functioning as an additional language learned primarily in formal educational settings. Pseudonyms were used for all participants to protect their identities.

Consistent with ethical research practices, informed consent was obtained from teachers, students, and school administrators. Participation was voluntary, and students were assured that their decision to participate or withdraw would not affect their academic evaluation. Ethical

sensitivity was particularly important given the hierarchical nature of teacher–student relationships in the local context (Kubota, 2020).

Data Collection

Data were collected over a 12-week period using multiple qualitative methods to enable triangulation and enhance the credibility of the findings (Yazan & Rudolph, 2020).

A total of 24 classroom sessions (approximately 90 minutes each) were observed and audio-recorded. Observations focused on teacher–student interaction, participation structures, questioning practices, and moments where students were invited to express opinions, experiences, or critical perspectives. Field notes were taken during and immediately after each session to capture contextual details, non-verbal interaction, and emerging analytic insights.

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim using simplified conversation-analytic conventions, sufficient to capture turn-taking, pauses, and overlapping talk relevant to pedagogical interaction (Walsh, 2022). Transcripts served as the primary data source for analyzing how critical pedagogical practices were enacted interactionally.

Students were invited to write bi-weekly reflective journals in either English or Indonesian, responding to prompts related to classroom participation, learning experiences, and perceptions of voice and agency. The use of reflective journals allowed students to articulate perspectives that may not have been fully expressed during classroom interaction, particularly in a context where speaking openly may be culturally constrained (Duff, 2020).

These reflections provided valuable insight into how students interpreted pedagogical practices and negotiated their identities as English learners.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both teachers and a subset of 12 volunteer students. Teacher interviews focused on pedagogical beliefs, understandings of critical pedagogy, and reflections on classroom interaction. Student interviews explored perceptions of participation, voice, and changes in classroom dynamics over time.

Interviews were conducted in Indonesian to ensure participants' comfort and depth of expression and were later translated into English for analysis. Translation was approached reflexively to preserve participants' intended meanings (Canagarajah, 2020).

Data analysis followed a recursive and iterative process, combining thematic analysis with interactional discourse analysis.

Student journals and interview transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework: familiarization, initial coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Coding was both inductive and theoretically informed, allowing themes related to student voice, agency, identity, and pedagogical practices to emerge while remaining grounded in the data.

Classroom transcripts were analyzed to identify interactional patterns that facilitated or constrained student voice, such as question types, feedback moves, turn allocation, and opportunities for extended student talk. Drawing on classroom interaction research (Walsh, 2022; Hawkins & Mori, 2021), analysis focused on how epistemic authority and participation rights were negotiated in moment-to-moment interaction.

The integration of thematic and interactional analyses enabled a more holistic understanding of critical pedagogy as both a discursive practice and an experienced phenomenon.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed. Data triangulation across observations, journals, and interviews strengthened analytic claims. Analytic memo-writing was used throughout the research process to document interpretive decisions and reflexive insights. Member checking was conducted with teachers to verify interpretations of classroom practices.

Rather than claiming objectivity, the study embraces reflexivity, acknowledging the researcher's positionality as an EFL educator familiar with the local context. This reflexive stance aligns with contemporary qualitative research standards in applied linguistics and supports transparent and ethical knowledge production (Yazan & Rudolph, 2020).

C. Results and Discussion

Data analysis revealed three main themes that illustrate how critical pedagogical principles are realized through EFL classroom interactions and how these practices create space for student voice and agency. These three themes are:

(1) the transfer of classroom authority through dialogic practices,

- (2) the emergence of student voices as epistemic participants, and
 (3) the negotiation of local identities in English use.

Shifting Classroom Authority through Dialogic Interaction

The first finding indicates a gradual shift in classroom authority from a teacher-dominated interaction structure to a more dialogic pattern. In the first few observation sessions, classroom interactions were still dominated by the Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) pattern. However, over time, the teacher began using open-ended questions and uptake moves that expanded student contributions.

Extract 1: From Display Questions to Dialogic Engagement

Q: Why do people learn English?

S1: Because it's an international language.

Q: Okay, yes. Anyone else? Not the same answer.

S2: For a job, sir.

Q: For a job, yes. But whose job? Your job? Your parents' job? Tell us more.

In this excerpt, the teacher consciously withheld final evaluation and encouraged students to expand on their answers. Rather than closing the interaction with evaluative feedback, the teacher opened space for elaboration and differentiation of students' perspectives. This practice shifted epistemic authority from the teacher as the sole source of knowledge to the shared construction of meaning in the classroom.

Follow-up observations showed that this strategy was consistently used, leading students to respond with longer, more reflective contributions. This marked a significant shift in the structure of classroom participation, where students were no longer responding simply to “right or wrong” questions, but were also expressing their personal perspectives.

Emergence of Student Voice as Epistemic Contribution

The second theme relates to the emergence of student voice as a recognized epistemic contribution to classroom interactions. In this context, student voice is not solely measured by the frequency of speaking, but rather by the extent to which their contributions are treated as meaningful and worthy of response.

Extract 2: Students Positioning Themselves as Meaning-Makers

Q: Do you agree with the text's opinion about success?

S3: I don't really agree. Because in Aceh, success isn't just about money.

Q: Interesting. Can you explain more about that?

S3: If someone is respected in the community, even if they aren't rich, we say they are successful. In this excerpt, the student explicitly links the English text to local Aceh values. The teacher not only accepts the statement but also validates it as an important contribution by asking for further elaboration. This practice signals recognition of students as knowers, not just language learners.

Student reflections support this finding. One student wrote:

“Usually in English class, we just answer questions from the book. But now I feel my opinion is also important, even if my English isn't perfect.” (Student Journal 4)

This reflection shows that recognition of students' voices depends not solely on linguistic accuracy, but on the value of the ideas conveyed. This significantly impacts student confidence and engagement.

Negotiating Local Identity through English Use

The third theme shows that critical pedagogy in EFL classrooms enables students to negotiate their local identities through English, rather than abandoning them. In several interactions, students use cultural references, religious experiences, and local social practices as sources of meaning in English-language discussions.

Extract 3: Local Identity in English-Mediated Talk

Q: Is this kind of celebration common everywhere?

S4: Not exactly. In Aceh, we have kenduri, but it is different.

Q: Different how?

S4: It is more about community and praying together, not just partying.

The use of the term *kenduri* without direct translation indicates that students feel legitimate in bringing local concepts into English-language classroom discourse. The teacher responds with pedagogical curiosity, rather than correction or topic redirection, thus enabling the negotiation

of cross-cultural meanings.

In an interview, one student stated:

“I thought English must be about Western things. But now I can talk about Aceh using English.”

This statement reflects a significant shift in students’ orientation toward English, from a symbol of a foreign culture to a tool for expressing local identity.

Constraints and Tensions in Enacting Student Voice

Although the findings indicate positive progress, the data also revealed tensions and limitations in the implementation of critical pedagogy. Some students still expressed hesitation to speak up, especially when discussion topics touched on sensitive issues or when perceived cultural norms of politeness could potentially be violated.

Furthermore, curriculum pressures and time constraints sometimes forced teachers to revert to more traditional interaction patterns. In one observation session, a teacher stated:

“I want them to talk more, but sometimes we have to finish the material.

These findings confirm that critical pedagogy in EFL is not a linear or barrier-free practice, but rather a continuous process of negotiation between pedagogical ideals and institutional realities.

Overall, the findings indicate that critical pedagogy in Acehnese EFL classrooms is realized through dialogic interaction practices, recognition of student voices, and integration of local identities into English use. However, these practices occur within the context of structural limitations that require ongoing negotiation.

Discussion

This study set out to examine how critical pedagogy is enacted through classroom interaction in an EFL context in Aceh and how such practices enable student voice and agency. The findings demonstrate that critical pedagogy in EFL classrooms does not necessarily manifest through overtly political content or explicit ideological instruction. Instead, it emerges through interactional practices that redistribute epistemic authority, legitimize learners’ experiences, and create space for dialogic engagement. In this section, the findings are discussed in relation to three key strands of literature: (1) critical pedagogy as interactional practice, (2) student voice as epistemic agency, and (3) the negotiation of local identity in Global South EFL contexts.

Re-theorizing Critical Pedagogy as Interactional Practice

One of the most significant contributions of this study lies in its reconceptualization of critical pedagogy as an interactional achievement rather than a prescriptive pedagogical ideology. While earlier scholarship has emphasized the transformative and emancipatory goals of critical pedagogy (Crookes, 2021; Pennycook, 2021), critics have questioned its applicability in constrained EFL contexts where curricular mandates and sociocultural norms may limit critical engagement (Kubota, 2020; Widodo, 2020).

The present findings address this critique by demonstrating that critical pedagogy can be enacted through micro-level interactional moves, such as open-ended questioning, delayed evaluation, and teacher uptake of student contributions. These practices align with Walsh’s (2022) notion of classroom interactional competence, in which teachers create interactional space that supports learner agency. Importantly, the criticality observed in this study does not stem from radical curricular content but from the ways in which classroom discourse positions students as legitimate contributors to knowledge.

This interactional view of critical pedagogy resonates with recent work by Lin and He (2022), who argue that critical orientations in language education are often embedded in routine pedagogical practices rather than explicit ideological statements. By foregrounding interaction, this study contributes to *System’s* pedagogical tradition and responds to calls for empirically grounded accounts of how critical pedagogy operates in real classrooms (Sayer & Braun, 2022).

Student Voice beyond Participation: Voice as Epistemic Agency

A second major contribution of this study concerns its treatment of student voice. Much of the existing literature equates voice with increased participation or opportunities to speak (Hawkins & Mori, 2021). However, the findings suggest that voice is better understood as epistemic agency—that is, students’ ability to contribute ideas that are acknowledged, taken seriously, and built upon in classroom interaction.

Drawing on Norton's (2021) theory of investment, the study shows that students were more willing to engage when their perspectives, even when linguistically imperfect, were treated as meaningful. This supports Duff's (2020) argument that learner agency is socially constructed through interactional positioning rather than inherent motivation. When teachers validated students' culturally grounded interpretations and encouraged elaboration, students began to view English not merely as an academic subject but as a resource for expressing personal and communal meanings.

This finding extends previous research by demonstrating how epistemic agency is enacted moment by moment in classroom discourse. As shown in the interactional extracts, teacher moves that suspend immediate evaluation and invite further explanation play a crucial role in transforming students from respondents into meaning-makers. Such practices challenge deficit views of EFL learners and align with critical pedagogical goals of democratizing classroom knowledge.

Negotiating Local Identity in Global South EFL Classrooms

The findings also contribute to debates on identity and Global Englishes by illustrating how EFL classrooms can become spaces for negotiating local identities rather than sites of linguistic assimilation. Students' ability to reference Acehnese cultural practices, such as *kenduri*, and to articulate local values in English reflects a shift away from viewing English as exclusively tied to Western norms.

This aligns with Canagarajah's (2020, 2022) concept of translingual practice, in which learners draw on diverse semiotic resources to construct meaning. Rather than suppressing local identities, the pedagogical practices observed in this study enabled students to integrate local knowledge into English-mediated interaction. Such practices support Widodo and Fang's (2022) argument that Global Englishes-oriented pedagogy must be grounded in classroom interaction rather than abstract curricular ideals.

Importantly, this negotiation of identity occurred without explicit instruction on Global Englishes or critical discourse. Instead, it was facilitated through teachers' openness to students' cultural references and willingness to explore multiple perspectives. This finding challenges assumptions that critical or decolonial pedagogies must be confrontational to be transformative, particularly in culturally sensitive contexts such as Aceh.

Constraints, Tensions, and the Non-Linear Nature of Critical Pedagogy

While the findings highlight the potential of interactionally grounded critical pedagogy, they also reveal persistent constraints. Institutional pressures, time limitations, and entrenched norms of teacher authority occasionally disrupted dialogic interaction. These tensions underscore Crookes's (2021) caution that critical pedagogy is always enacted within structural constraints and should not be idealized as a seamless process.

Rather than viewing these constraints as failures, this study conceptualizes them as part of the non-linear and negotiated nature of critical pedagogy in EFL. The oscillation between dialogic and traditional interactional patterns reflects teachers' attempts to balance pedagogical ideals with curricular demands. This perspective aligns with recent Global South scholarship emphasizing pragmatism, adaptability, and contextual sensitivity in pedagogical innovation (Widodo et al., 2023).

Implications for EFL Pedagogy and Research

Pedagogically, the findings suggest that fostering student voice does not require radical curricular overhaul. Instead, small interactional shifts—such as valuing student perspectives, encouraging elaboration, and legitimizing local knowledge—can have significant impacts on learner engagement and agency. These insights are particularly relevant for EFL teachers working in contexts where overt critical instruction may be culturally or institutionally constrained.

For research, this study demonstrates the value of combining interactional analysis with critical perspectives to capture the complexity of classroom life. It responds directly to calls in *System* for empirically grounded studies that bridge pedagogy and theory. Future research could extend this work by examining longitudinal changes in student agency or comparing interactional practices across different EFL contexts.

Summary of Discussion

In sum, this study advances a practice-oriented understanding of critical pedagogy in EFL, demonstrating that student voice emerges through interactional practices that redistribute epistemic authority and affirm learners' identities. By situating these practices in an Acehnese EFL context, the study contributes Global South perspectives to ongoing debates in language education and underscores the pedagogical relevance of interaction-focused critical inquiry.

D. Conclusion

This study examined how critical pedagogy is enacted through classroom interaction in Indonesian EFL classrooms in Aceh and how such practices enable student voice and agency. Drawing on classroom observations, interactional transcripts, student reflections, and interviews, the study demonstrated that critical pedagogy in EFL does not necessarily require radical curricular content or explicit political agendas. Instead, it is realized through interactional practices that redistribute epistemic authority, validate learners' experiences, and create dialogic spaces for meaning-making.

The findings revealed that student voice emerged not simply as increased participation, but as epistemic agency, where students were positioned as legitimate contributors to classroom knowledge. Through open-ended questioning, delayed evaluation, and teacher uptake of student contributions, classroom interaction shifted from teacher-dominated patterns toward more dialogic engagement. These interactional shifts enabled students to articulate perspectives grounded in their local cultural and social contexts, thereby integrating Acehnese identities into English-mediated discourse rather than marginalizing them.

By situating critical pedagogy at the level of classroom interaction, this study contributes empirical evidence to ongoing debates in applied linguistics regarding the pedagogical realizability of critical approaches in EFL contexts. In doing so, it responds to calls for research that moves beyond normative advocacy and provides grounded accounts of how criticality operates within the constraints of everyday classroom practice.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study offer several implications for EFL pedagogy, particularly in Global South contexts. First, they suggest that fostering student voice does not necessitate extensive curricular reform. Small, interactionally sensitive pedagogical moves—such as inviting elaboration, acknowledging multiple perspectives, and legitimizing local knowledge—can significantly enhance learner agency and engagement.

Second, the study highlights the importance of teacher awareness of interactional positioning. Teachers play a critical role in shaping whether students are positioned as passive respondents or active meaning-makers. Professional development programs in EFL could therefore benefit from incorporating training on classroom interactional competence, with attention to how interactional practices support or constrain student voice.

Third, the findings underscore the pedagogical value of integrating local identities and experiences into English language learning. Rather than viewing local culture as peripheral or incompatible with English instruction, teachers can leverage it as a resource for meaningful communication and critical engagement. This approach aligns with Global Englishes and culturally sustaining pedagogies, while remaining pedagogically feasible in contexts with strong cultural and religious norms.

Implications for Research

From a research perspective, this study demonstrates the value of combining interactional discourse analysis with critical qualitative inquiry to examine learner agency and voice. Such an approach allows researchers to capture both the micro-level dynamics of classroom interaction and participants' lived experiences, offering a more comprehensive understanding of pedagogical processes.

Future research could build on this study by adopting longitudinal designs to examine how student voice and agency develop over time, or by comparing interactional practices across different institutional or cultural contexts. Quantitative or mixed-methods studies could also explore relationships between interactionally grounded critical pedagogy and learning outcomes, such as motivation, confidence, or language development.

Limitations

As with all qualitative research, this study has limitations that should be acknowledged. The

findings are based on a relatively small number of classrooms in a specific regional context, which limits the generalizability of the results. However, the aim of the study was not to produce universally generalizable claims, but to offer **analytically transferable insights** grounded in detailed empirical analysis.

Additionally, while efforts were made to capture diverse student perspectives through multiple data sources, some students may have been less willing to express dissenting views due to cultural norms and power relations. Future studies might explore alternative data collection methods to further mitigate these constraints.

Final Remarks

In conclusion, this study advances a **practice-oriented understanding of critical pedagogy in EFL**, demonstrating that student voice and agency emerge through interactional practices embedded in everyday classroom life. By foregrounding classroom interaction as a site of critical pedagogical action, the study contributes to *System's* pedagogical focus and enriches applied linguistics scholarship with empirical insights from an underrepresented Global South context.

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