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Critical Language Pedagogy in Korean EFL Contexts: Relational and Gradual Engagement*

Sujung Min
(Kongju National University)

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This study examines how Critical Language Pedagogy (CLP) is interpreted and enacted in Korean university EFL contexts through a qualitative multiple-case study of eleven English instructors. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and student reflection journals, the study investigates how teachers conceptualize criticality, implement pedagogical practices, and respond to institutional and contextual conditions in their classrooms. The findings reveal four interrelated themes. First, instructors redefined criticality as relational and reflective rather than confrontational, emphasizing perspective-taking and learner development. Second, they implemented pedagogical adaptations to create safe classroom environments, including trust-building, linguistic and cognitive scaffolding, and flexible participation formats. Third, student receptivity to CLP emerged as a gradual process, shifting from initial hesitation to exploratory engagement and more confident expression of their ideas. Finally, instructors responded to institutional pressures and contextual conditions—such as exam-oriented curricula, interactional norms, and linguistic demands—through adaptive and context-sensitive practices. Taken together, these findings show that critical engagement develops through a gradual, relational process shaped by pedagogical conditions rather than as an immediate outcome of instruction. The study contributes to a CLP framework tailored to the Korean EFL context and advances ongoing discussions on the localization of critical pedagogy in linguistically and culturally complex classrooms.

[critical language pedagogy(CLP)/context-sensitive pedagogy/student receptivity/safe-space pedagogy]

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I. INTRODUCTION

Critical approaches to language teaching have evolved considerably in both scope and orientation. Critical language pedagogy (CLP), grounded in the broader tradition of critical pedagogy, challenges conventional language teaching by encouraging learners and teachers to reflect on the social, cultural, and contextual dimensions of language use (Crookes, 2013; Freire, 1970; Pennycook, 1994, 2021). From this perspective, English language education is not merely a neutral medium of communication, but a site where meanings, identities, and relationships are negotiated and reshaped.

Although CLP has been extensively theorized and applied across North and South America, Europe, and parts of Oceania (Muszyńska & Hansen-Thomas, 2024), its uptake in East Asian EFL contexts has been more gradual and uneven (e.g., Jackson & Kennett, 2025; Sung & Pederson, 2012). Educational practices in the region are often described as emphasizing teacher-led instruction, memorization, and exam-oriented evaluation, which may appear to contrast with CLP's focus on dialogue, participation, and inquiry (Jackson, 2020; Jackson & Kennett, 2025; Kawabe, 2022). Consequently, East Asian learners have at times been portrayed as relatively passive or deferential, raising questions about the compatibility between local educational practices and critical pedagogical approaches (e.g., McVeigh, 2002).

However, recent scholarship has increasingly challenged such essentialist portrayals of East Asian learners, emphasizing the role of contextual, institutional, and pedagogical factors in shaping classroom participation. Within this growing body of research, Jackson and Kennett's (2025) study of nineteen instructors implementing critical pedagogy in Japanese universities provides evidence that students are capable of engaging critically when supported by dialogic interaction and a sense of emotional safety.

Building on these findings, the present study examines how similar patterns may emerge in the Korean EFL context. While Korea shares many sociocultural and institutional features with Japan, it also presents distinct dynamics. Korean education has historically been shaped by a strong emphasis on examination and academic competition (Seth, 2002), and English continues to function both as a key resource for socioeconomic mobility and as a marker of global engagement (Park, 2021). As a result, university classrooms are situated at the intersection of institutional expectations, credential-based evaluation, and language-related hierarchies. At the same time, recent national education policies increasingly emphasize creativity, communicative competence, and democratic citizenship, values that align with the broader aims of CLP (Park, 2021; So et al., 2017).

This tension between structural constraints and ongoing policy shifts makes Korea a particularly useful context for examining how critical pedagogy is negotiated within an educational system shaped by both continuity and change. Despite these converging factors,

empirical research on CLP in Korean higher education remains limited. A few studies (e.g., Jung, 2021) have explored critical awareness in language teacher education or intercultural communication courses, but systematic investigations of teachers' beliefs, classroom practices, and students' affective responses remain scarce. Moreover, little is known about how Korean instructors reconcile CLP with the linguistic, cultural, and institutional realities of their classrooms. To address this gap, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Korean university EFL instructors conceptualize CLP within their institutional and sociocultural contexts?
2. How do instructors implement CLP in their classroom practices, particularly through pedagogical adaptations that support critical engagement?
3. How do students respond cognitively and emotionally to CLP-oriented classroom practices?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. The Evolution of Critical Language Pedagogy

The intellectual foundations of CLP can be traced to P. Freire's (1970) conception of education as a practice of freedom, a process through which learners move from passive acceptance of social conditions toward critical consciousness (conscientização). Freire critiqued transmission-oriented "banking" models of education for positioning learners as passive recipients of knowledge, thereby constraining their agency and participation. In contrast, he proposed a dialogic, problem-posing pedagogy in which teachers and students collaboratively examine lived experiences, question dominant assumptions, and explore possibilities for social change. This emphasis on dialogue, reflection, and co-constructed meaning continues to underpin contemporary interpretations of CLP.

As Freire's work gained broader influence, scholars such as Giroux (1988), Pennycook (1994, 2021), and Akbari (2008) extended critical pedagogy into the field of applied linguistics. Their work reframed language education as socially embedded, emphasizing that linguistic practices are shaped by and, in turn, shape broader social structures, value systems, and patterns of participation. Pennycook, in particular, highlights how English is linked to historical and global processes, including expansion, economic development, and institutionalization. From this perspective, CLP encourages teachers not only to focus on linguistic forms but also to consider how classroom interactions may reflect or reshape dominant ways of thinking, influencing whose voices are heard and how meaning is

negotiated. Language teaching thus becomes a space for reflecting on assumptions about correctness, appropriateness, and authority.

Crookes (2013, 2021) played a pivotal role in articulating how these theoretical commitments can be enacted in second-language classrooms. He characterizes CLP as critical, transformative, democratic, dialectical, student-centered, and action-oriented, emphasizing praxis, the cyclical movement between reflection and action, as its core. Subsequent work by Crookes and Abednia (2021) further highlights the teacher's role as a co-investigator and reflective practitioner who supports learners' agency rather than transmitting predetermined perspectives. Their work underscores that CLP does not prescribe a fixed curriculum; instead, it offers guiding principles for fostering inquiry, collaboration, and socially responsive language use.

Collectively, these contributions position CLP as both a philosophical orientation and a pedagogical framework that connects language learning with social awareness, critical reflection, and meaningful engagement. In this view, language classrooms are not simply neutral spaces but dynamic contexts where identities, values, and patterns of participation are continually negotiated (Jackson & Kennett, 2025).

2. CLP in Practice and the Critical Turn

Since the 1990s, the critical turn in language education has inspired diverse pedagogical applications—from critical literacy frameworks developed in the South African context and associated with the Australian critical literacy tradition (Janks, 2010) to classroom-based practices of resistance in postcolonial EFL contexts (Canagarajah, 1999). Studies have shown that even modest forms of critical inquiry, such as examining media bias or gendered language, can enhance learners' engagement, sense of voice, and investment in language learning (Benesch, 2001; Norton, 2013). However, Akbari (2008) argued that much CLP discourse remains overly theoretical, highlighting the need for research that documents how CLP is enacted in classroom practice.

Implementing CLP in EFL contexts involves important linguistic, affective, and interactional considerations. Engaging with complex social issues in a second language can place significant cognitive and communicative demands on learners, particularly those with developing proficiency (Taguchi & Roever, 2018). In response, researchers have emphasized the importance of scaffolding strategies such as structured discussion tasks, multimodal input, and opportunities for first-language mediation that support both language development and critical reflection (Crookes, 2013; García & Wei, 2014). In addition, the role of classroom climate has received increasing attention, with scholars highlighting that critical dialogue requires not only cognitive readiness but also emotional support and a sense of psychological safety (Crookes & Abednia, 2021).

Within East Asian contexts, the implementation of CLP has often been discussed in relation to cultural and institutional factors. Some accounts have linked students' limited participation in open debate to values associated with Confucian heritage traditions, such as respect for authority, preference for harmony, and avoidance of overt disagreement (Ito & Takeuchi, 2021). However, recent scholarship cautions that such explanations may oversimplify learner behavior and risk reinforcing static cultural assumptions (Holliday, 2013; O'Dwyer, 2017). Instead, researchers increasingly emphasize the role of structural and pedagogical conditions such as exam-oriented curricula, hierarchical organization, and limited opportunities for dialogic interaction in shaping participation.

At the same time, policy developments in Japan and Korea increasingly emphasize active learning, creative problem solving, and student-centered pedagogy, all of which may support the implementation of CLP (Ito & Takeuchi, 2020; Lim et al., 2014). Empirical work in Japan further suggests that when instructors establish safe, dialogic environments, students can demonstrate substantial receptivity to critical inquiry (Jackson & Kennett, 2025). These findings indicate that CLP in EFL contexts is not inherently constrained, but is mediated by pedagogical design and classroom conditions.

3. The Korean EFL Contexts

Korea's English-language education is shaped by powerful social and economic forces. English proficiency functions as a form of cultural capital within a highly competitive system (Park, 2021), contributing to high-stakes testing, private tutoring, and a persistent emphasis on form-focused instruction (Kawabe, 2022). Such conditions have historically limited opportunities for critical or dialogic pedagogy. At the same time, the emphasis on communicative competence, creativity, and global citizenship in the 2015 and 2022 national English curriculaindicate a gradual shift toward more student-centered and inquiry-oriented approaches.

Despite these developments, empirical research on criticality in Korean university EFL classrooms remains limited. Existing studies (Choi, 2016; Jung, 2021; Seo, 2019; Shin & Jeon, 2018) have explored critical literacy, intercultural awareness, and student reflection, yet relatively little attention has been given to how instructors conceptualize CLP or how students navigate the linguistic and affective demands of engaging with critical topics in English. Like Japanese classrooms, Korean classrooms are often shaped by hierarchical teacher–student relationships and norms of collective harmony. Understanding how safe, dialogic spaces for critique can be fostered is essential for assessing the feasibility of CLP in this context.

These considerations highlight the need for further research that examines how CLP is conceptualized and enacted in Korean university EFL classrooms, particularly in relation to

pedagogical practices and student engagement.

III. METHODS

1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design to investigate how Korean university English instructors interpret and enact principles of CLP in their teaching contexts. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate given the context-dependent and interpretive nature of CLP as a pedagogical practice. The multiple-case design enabled systematic comparison across diverse institutional settings, offering insight into both shared patterns and context-specific variations in teachers' beliefs and practices (Yin, 2018). Each instructor was treated as an individual "case," situated within a particular socio-institutional context, while cross-case analysis focused on identifying recurring themes as well as variations across cases. The study was guided by an interpretivist epistemology and a constructivist orientation to knowledge construction. From this perspective, meanings associated with "criticality," "student voice," and "safe space" were understood as co-constructed through teachers' reflections, experiences, and interactions, rather than as fixed or predetermined constructs (Crookes & Abednia, 2022). The researcher's role was thus framed as a collaborative interpreter, engaging with participants in a manner consistent with CLP's dialogic and participatory orientation (Crookes, 2013).

2. Participants

Eleven English instructors based at Korean universities participated in the study. Participants were recruited through professional networks, social media communities for English educators, and word-of-mouth invitations. They were selected based on two inclusion criteria: (a) an interest in or engagement with critical or socially oriented approaches to English teaching, and (b) current teaching of content- or communication-based EFL courses at the tertiary level.

The sample included six instructors from public universities and five from private universities, representing both metropolitan and regional institutions. Teaching experience ranged from 5 to 16 years. The group comprised four Korean L1 speakers and seven L1 English speakers, all of whom had resided in Korea for over five years and were actively engaged in higher education. This composition allowed for variation across institutional contexts and professional backgrounds, reflecting diverse perspectives on English education in Korea. To ensure anonymity, all participants were assigned pseudonyms (e.g., Teacher A,

Teacher B). Prior to data collection, participants were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and procedures for data handling.

3. Data Collection

Data collection took place over a four-month period (March–June 2025) and drew on three primary sources. Semi-structured interviews (30–40 minutes each) were conducted in English or a combination of English and Korean, depending on participants' preferences. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded with informed consent, and professionally transcribed. Interview prompts focused on instructors' pedagogical beliefs, classroom practices, and reflections on students' engagement with critical topics. Sample prompts included:

> "How do you define criticality in your English teaching?"
> "What challenges arise when discussing controversial issues in class?"
> "How do you foster a sense of safety and respect among students?"

Classroom observations were conducted for eight of the eleven participants who agreed to share recorded class sessions. The researcher analyzed one to two video-recorded lessons per instructor, taking detailed field notes on interactional patterns, teacher talk, and student responses in relation to CLP practices. Particular attention was given to instances of dialogue, reflection, and affective responses, which were treated as indicators of CLP enactment. Each recorded session lasted between 40 and 60 minutes.

Student reflection journals were collected as supplementary data from six participants who incorporated reflective writing into their courses. These anonymous reflections provided insight into students' perceptions of classroom climate, their comfort with critical topics, and their developing awareness as language users. The use of multiple data sources allowed for triangulation of instructors' perspectives, classroom practices, and student responses, thereby enhancing the credibility and depth of the analysis.

4. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative and cyclical process informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis within a multiple-case study framework (Yin, 2018). The analysis proceeded through four interconnected stages: familiarization, coding, within-case analysis, and cross-case synthesis.

First, interview transcripts, observation notes, and reflection journals were reviewed multiple times to develop an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences. Analytic

memos were maintained throughout this phase to document emerging insights related to CLP enactment and classroom dynamics. Second, both deductive and inductive coding were conducted. Deductive codes were derived from the study's conceptual framework (e.g., criticality, student voice, safe space, dialogic practices), while inductive codes emerged from the data, capturing themes such as emotional labor, linguistic insecurity, and institutional constraints. Codes were continuously refined and organized as analysis progressed.

Third, within-case analysis examined how each instructor interpreted and implemented CLP within their specific institutional context. Analytic case profiles synthesized pedagogical orientations, challenges, instructional strategies, and student responses, preserving contextual detail. Finally, cross-case synthesis identified convergent and divergent patterns across the eleven cases, allowing for comparison across pedagogical, affective, and institutional dimensions. Throughout the analysis, a reflexive stance was maintained to enhance analytic transparency. This systematic yet flexible approach enabled the study to account for both shared patterns and context-specific variations in the enactment of CLP.

IV. RESULTS

Data analysis revealed four interrelated themes that explain how Korean university instructors interpret and enact CLP: (1) conceptualizations of criticality, (2) pedagogical adaptations and safe-space construction, (3) student receptivity and emotional engagement, and (4) institutional and contextual conditions. These themes are analytically distinct yet interconnected, reflecting both shared patterns and context-specific variations across cases.

1. Criticality in the Korean Context

Participants expressed varied understandings of what it means to be "critical" in the EFL classroom. For some, CLP was associated with a more explicitly socio-political orientation, while for others it centered on fostering reflection, empathy, and learner autonomy. Despite these differences, all participants shared the view that English education should extend beyond linguistic form to promote social awareness and thoughtful communication.

Teacher A described criticality as "the ability to ask why English matters, why certain voices dominate, and why some students feel excluded." By contrast, Teacher C emphasized a non-adversarial stance:

> Critical pedagogy doesn't mean being anti-anything. It's not about criticizing society or government; it's about realizing we have a choice in how we think and communicate.

These perspectives suggest a relationally grounded interpretation of criticality, in which engagement is oriented toward perspective-taking and reflective awareness rather than confrontation. This orientation resonates with Freire's (1970) notion of conscientização, while also reflecting the relational dynamics of Korean educational contexts, where harmony and interpersonal sensitivity shape classroom interaction (Jeffery, 2022; Zhang et al., 2025).

Several instructors also linked CLP to students' personal development rather than overt forms of social action. As Teacher H explained:

> I tell my students that learning English is not just for jobs or passing exams. It's about seeing the world differently and being able to understand other perspectives. When they start to question why things are the way they are, even in small ways, I think that's already a kind of critical thinking. It doesn't have to be something big or political. Just realizing that there are different ways to think and communicate—that's already meaningful for them, and in a way, that's already political in a small sense.

Teacher H's account illustrates how criticality is framed in terms of perspective transformation rather than explicit engagement with social issues. Rather than encouraging students to adopt explicit positions, instructors emphasized the development of reflective awareness and openness to multiple perspectives. In this sense, critical engagement emerges as a gradual and personal process.

Taken together, these accounts indicate that criticality in this context is often realized through incremental shifts in learners' perspectives rather than immediate or overt forms of critique. This localized interpretation underscores the importance of context-sensitive approaches to CLP, where transformation emerges through reflective awareness and gradual changes in how learners interpret their experiences.

2. Pedagogical Adaptations and Safe-Space Strategies

Consistent with findings from Japan (Jackson & Kennett, 2025), instructors in Korea emphasized affective safety as a prerequisite for meaningful participation. To support this, they adopted pedagogical strategies aimed at creating classroom environments in which students could engage with critical topics without excessive linguistic or social pressure. These strategies clustered around three interrelated areas: building trust, scaffolding participation, and enabling flexible modes of engagement.

1) Building Trust and Classroom Community

Establishing mutual trust between teachers and students emerged as a central component of safe-space construction. Many instructors reported dedicating the initial stages of the course to co-constructing classroom norms, including respect for differing perspectives, non-judgmental listening, and voluntary participation. Teacher F explained:

> We spend the first two classes not on grammar but on how to talk with kindness and respect. At first, students think it's a bit unusual and even laugh, because they expect an English class to focus on language forms. But as the semester goes on, they start to realize that these discussions actually shape how they interact with each other. Later, many students tell me that it makes them feel more comfortable speaking, especially when they are not confident in their English. It creates a kind of shared understanding that it's okay to make mistakes and express different opinions.

Instructors also used ice-breaking activities, humor, and small-group sharing to reduce anxiety, along with personal storytelling to humanize classroom relationships. These practices indicate that trust is not treated as a peripheral concern, but as an essential foundation for critical dialogue. Cultivating classroom environments grounded in mutual trust is therefore crucial for facilitating meaningful engagement (Gardemann, 2023) and for supporting students' intellectual and emotional resilience (Willems, 2023). Students' reflections further reinforced this pattern. One student noted:

> At the beginning, I was afraid to speak because my English was not good enough. But after we talked about respecting each other's opinions, I felt less pressure. Even if I make mistakes, I feel like others are listening to my ideas, not judging my English.

These accounts suggest cultivating a classroom environment grounded in mutual trust helps reduce anxiety and enables students to participate more confidently in discussion.

2) Linguistic and Cognitive Scaffolding

In response to the linguistic demands of discussing complex social issues in English, instructors adopted a range of scaffolding strategies to facilitate student participation. Korean L1 instructors often employed bilingual mediation and pre-discussion writing to support conceptual development. Teacher B explained:

> If students write their thoughts in Korean first, they can translate emotionally, not just linguistically. When they go straight into English, they focus too much on grammar and correctness. But starting in Korean allows them to fully express what they think and feel, and then English becomes a way to communicate those ideas, not a barrier.

In contrast, L1 English-speaking instructors—who did not share students' first language—relied on alternative strategies, such as multimodal "critical codes" (Crookes, 2013), including videos, images, and advertisements that invite interpretation. These approaches were intended to maintain conceptual depth while making content more linguistically accessible.

Across both groups, scaffolding enabled students to engage with abstract or sensitive topics through more accessible forms of representation, supporting both comprehension and expression. Rather than simplifying the content itself, instructors adjusted the linguistic demands in ways that made sustained engagement possible.

3) Alternative Participation and Gradual Engagement

Instructors acknowledged that students varied in their preferred modes of participation and therefore provided multiple pathways for engagement, including small-group discussions, reflective journals, and other forms of indirect participation. Teacher K observed:

> Some of my quietest students write the most thoughtful and powerful reflections. In class, they may not speak much, and at first I worried they were not engaged. But when I read their journals, I realized they were processing ideas very deeply. Silence doesn't necessarily mean disengagement—it can be a form of incubation.

Student reflections further illustrated this pattern. One student wrote:

> I don't feel comfortable speaking in front of the whole class, especially about sensitive topics. But writing in a journal helps me organize my thoughts. Sometimes I can express more honestly in writing than in speaking.

These accounts highlight that critical engagement in the Korean EFL context often takes diverse forms beyond public verbal participation. Rather than privileging debate as the primary mode of expression, instructors recognized the value of reflective and less visible forms of engagement. This observation aligns with Pennycook's (1994) view that critical engagement can occur across multiple modalities, underscoring the need for flexible and context-sensitive forms of participation in CLP.

In addition to diversifying participation formats, instructors introduced sensitive topics gradually, beginning with less personal or globally oriented issues before moving toward more locally relevant or potentially sensitive themes. This sequencing allowed students to build confidence and familiarity before engaging in more complex discussions.

Taken together, these practices suggest that safe-space construction involves the careful calibration of support, enabling students to participate in ways that align with their linguistic abilities and comfort levels. Rather than reducing challenge, instructors structured engagement in ways that made critical participation more accessible. These pedagogical practices not only created supportive environments but also shaped how students engaged with critical discussion. As the following section shows, student receptivity to CLP emerged in response to these conditions as a gradual and relational process.

3. Student Receptivity

Student receptivity to CLP emerged as a gradual and context-dependent process rather than an immediate outcome of instruction. Instructors consistently reported that initial hesitation—often linked to concerns about linguistic adequacy, fear of negative evaluation, and uncertainty about expectations—gradually shifted toward more active engagement as students became familiar with the classroom environment. Teacher D described this progression:

> At first, students are very focused on finding the 'correct answer,' especially because they are used to exam-oriented learning. They hesitate to speak unless they are sure. But once they realize that there isn't one fixed answer in these discussions, something changes. You can actually see it in their expressions—they start to relax, and then they begin asking their own questions instead of waiting for mine.

Similarly, Teacher I observed a shift toward greater student initiative:

> By the middle of the semester, I noticed that students were no longer just responding to my questions—they were starting to guide the discussion themselves. One group connected our topic on gender bias to K-pop lyrics analysis, which I hadn't planned at all. That was entirely their idea, and it showed that they were beginning to take ownership of the discussion.

These accounts suggest that increased participation was often preceded by a form of epistemic reframing, in which students came to understand classroom interaction as exploratory rather than evaluative. In this process, English was reoriented from a medium for producing correct forms to a resource for expressing ideas and perspectives (Crookes,

2013; Norton, 2013). Students' reflection further illustrated this shift. One student wrote:

> At first, I felt nervous because I thought I had to say the 'right answer' in English, and I was worried about making mistakes. But later I realized that thinking critically is different. It's not about memorizing or being correct, but about expressing what I think. That made me feel more confident to participate.

Another student reflected on a similar process:

> Before, I only focused on grammar and vocabulary when speaking English. But in this class, I started to think more about what I actually want to say. Even if my English is not perfect, I feel that my ideas are important.

At the same time, instructors emphasized that receptivity was uneven and sensitive to contextual factors. Engagement varied depending on topic sensitivity, group dynamics, and perceived linguistic difficulty (Jackson & Kennett, 2025; Sung & Pederson, 2012). As Teacher G noted:

> Students tend to be more open when discussing global or distant issues, like environmental problems or international inequality. But when the topic becomes more directly related to Korean society, they become more cautious. They often prefer to talk about 'others' first before turning the discussion toward themselves.

Students also echoed this pattern, particularly in relation to participation formats:

> I don't talk much in class, especially when the topic feels sensitive or personal. But writing my thoughts helps me organize what I think. When I write first, I feel more prepared, and sometimes I can express things more honestly than when speaking.

These patterns suggest that student receptivity involves an ongoing negotiation of linguistic comfort, cultural expectations, and perceived risks of self-expression. Discussions of locally relevant issues often required greater emotional investment, leading students to maintain a degree of distance before engaging more directly. Rather than indicating disengagement, this distance can be understood as part of a developmental process shaped by affective and interactional conditions.

Overall, the findings indicate that receptivity to CLP develops gradually, moving from initial caution to exploratory engagement and, in some cases, to more sustained participation. This progression reflects the importance of relational and pedagogical conditions—

particularly trust-building, scaffolding, and flexible participation—in supporting students' engagement with critical discussion.

4. Institutional and Contextual Conditions

1) Institutional Pressures

Despite their commitment to CLP-oriented practices, instructors described a range of institutional pressures that shaped the scope and sustainability of their teaching. These constraints were most evident in the continued emphasis on standardized assessment, performance metrics, and employability outcomes within Korean higher education. Participants noted that exam-oriented expectations—particularly the prominence of tests such as TOEIC—often limited the extent to which critical discussion could be foregrounded in the curriculum. As Teacher L explained:

> When evaluation is tied to TOEIC scores, critical pedagogy becomes something extra rather than the main focus. I still try to include it, but I have to fit it into topics that align with course requirements.

In this context, instructors did not abandon critical pedagogical aims; rather, they adjusted their implementation to align with institutional expectations. Several participants described incorporating critical themes—such as consumer culture, media representation, or workplace ethics—into existing curricular structures, thereby maintaining a balance between language-learning objectives and reflective inquiry.

Institutional conditions also influenced classroom priorities. Instructors reported that time constraints, syllabus requirements, and assessment demands often required them to negotiate between depth of discussion and coverage of linguistic content. This resulted in selective or partial integration of CLP principles, rather than comprehensive curricular transformation.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that CLP in the Korean university EFL context is enacted within, rather than outside of, existing institutional frameworks. Rather than functioning solely as barriers, these constraints shaped how instructors adapted their pedagogical practices, leading to context-sensitive forms of implementation that balanced critical engagement with institutional demands.

2) Interactional Norms and Participation

Beyond institutional pressures, instructors highlighted the role of interactional norms in shaping how CLP was enacted in their classrooms. Rather than functioning solely as

constraints, these conditions influenced the form, pacing, and mode of student participation, requiring context-sensitive pedagogical responses.

Instructors noted that participation was shaped by factors such as comfort, familiarity, and sensitivity to peer evaluation. Students were generally willing to contribute, but often adjusted how and when they spoke, particularly in discussions involving unfamiliar peers or sensitive topics. As a result, participation tended to be cautious, measured, and sometimes indirect. Teacher J described these dynamics:

> In some classes, students don't hesitate because they can't speak, but because they're thinking about how their ideas might be received. When they feel more comfortable with their group, they participate much more actively.

To support participation under these conditions, instructors organized group work in ways that prioritized familiarity and psychological comfort, while also creating opportunities for gradual engagement. These practices suggest that student participation is shaped not by a lack of willingness, but by ongoing interactional adjustments in response to classroom dynamics.

3) Linguistic Demands and Emotional Labor

The implementation of CLP was also shaped by the relationship between students' language proficiency and the cognitive demands of critical discussion. Instructors described a persistent tension between supporting linguistic development and sustaining meaningful engagement with complex issues. As Teacher B reflected:

> Sometimes I wonder if I'm asking too much—discussing complicated social issues in English when students are still focused on grammar. But if I simplify too much, the discussion loses depth.

To navigate this tension, instructors employed a range of scaffolding strategies, including simplified input, multimodal resources, and, where possible, opportunities for students to process ideas in their first language before expressing them in English. These approaches enabled students to engage with critical content while managing linguistic demands.

In addition to linguistic considerations, instructors emphasized the emotional dimension of facilitating critical discussion. Addressing sensitive or personally relevant topics required ongoing attention to students' affective states and careful adjustment of classroom interaction. As Teacher E noted:

> You have to read the room constantly—how students feel, how comfortable they are, and whether they're ready to go deeper.

These accounts illustrate that linguistic demands and emotional labor are closely intertwined in CLP-oriented classrooms. Rather than treating language proficiency as a barrier, instructors approached it as a condition that shapes the pace and depth of critical engagement.

These findings suggest that CLP implementation is mediated by the interplay of linguistic and affective factors, requiring adaptive pedagogical responses that are sensitive to students' communicative and emotional needs.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study point to what can be conceptualized as gradual criticality—a form of critical engagement that develops incrementally through relational, affective, and pedagogical processes rather than emerging as an immediate outcome of instruction. Across cases, instructors did not frame critical pedagogy as a practice of direct critique or ideological confrontation; instead, they emphasized reflection, perspective-taking, and the gradual expansion of students' interpretive capacities. In this sense, critical engagement was not treated as a predefined goal to be achieved, but as a process that unfolds over time as learners gain confidence in expressing their ideas.

This perspective both aligns with and extends existing conceptualizations of CLP. While Freire's (1970) notion of conscientização foregrounds critical awareness as a transformative process, the present findings suggest that such transformation may occur in incremental and contextually mediated ways in EFL settings. Similarly, Crookes' (2013, 2021) emphasis on praxis and dialogic engagement is supported, but the findings further indicate that the enactment of such principles depends on the careful calibration of linguistic demands and affective conditions. Rather than challenging these theoretical frameworks, the study refines them by demonstrating how critical pedagogy is adapted in contexts where language proficiency, institutional expectations, and interactional norms shape the possibilities for engagement.

A key contribution of this study lies in identifying the pedagogical conditions that support this gradual development of critical engagement. The findings highlight the importance of safe-space construction, not as a peripheral concern, but as a foundational element of CLP implementation. Through practices such as trust-building, scaffolding, and flexible participation formats, instructors created environments in which students could engage with critical topics without excessive linguistic or social pressure. These conditions, in turn,

enabled shifts in student participation—from initial hesitation to exploratory engagement—suggesting that affective safety and interactional support are central to the development of criticality.

Importantly, the relationship between safe-space construction and student receptivity was not linear but dynamic. Students' willingness to participate was shaped by ongoing negotiation of linguistic ability, peer dynamics, and topic sensitivity. In this process, engagement often took diverse forms, including reflective writing, small-group interaction, and delayed verbal participation. These findings reinforce the view that critical engagement cannot be reduced to overt verbal debate, but must be understood as a multimodal and contextually situated process (Pennycook, 1994). In this sense, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of participation in CLP-oriented classrooms.

The findings also underscore the role of contextual conditions in shaping how CLP is enacted. Institutional pressures, such as exam-oriented curricula and performance expectations, did not simply constrain critical pedagogy but prompted instructors to adapt their practices in context-sensitive ways. At the same time, interactional norms and linguistic demands influenced how students engaged with critical content, highlighting the importance of aligning pedagogical strategies with learners' communicative and affective needs. These insights suggest that CLP should not be conceptualized as a fixed model, but as a flexible set of principles that are continually negotiated within specific educational contexts (Kumaravadivelu, 2006) .

Taken together, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on the localization of critical pedagogy by demonstrating that CLP can be meaningfully implemented in Korean EFL classrooms through relational and gradual forms of engagement. Rather than assuming that critical pedagogy requires immediate or explicit critique, the findings suggest that it may emerge through incremental shifts in how learners perceive, interpret, and express their ideas. This perspective underscores the importance of context-sensitive approaches to CLP, where critical engagement is understood as a developmental process shaped by linguistic, relational, and institutional conditions.

VI. CONCLUSION

The findings carry several implications for the implementation of CLP in EFL settings. First, they underscore the importance of safe-space construction as a pedagogical priority. Creating classroom environments that foster mutual trust, reduce evaluative pressure, and support diverse modes of participation is essential for enabling engagement with critical content. Second, the results highlight the role of linguistic and cognitive scaffolding in mediating access to critical discussion. Supporting learners in expressing complex ideas in

a second language requires not only attention to linguistic form, but also the use of multimodal resources and structured tasks that facilitate meaning-making. Finally, the findings suggest that critical engagement is best understood as a developmental process. Rather than expecting immediate or overt participation, instructors may need to design learning experiences that allow for gradual engagement, recognizing hesitation as an integral part of learning.

In conclusion, this study shows that CLP in Korean university EFL classrooms is most effectively enacted as a relational and context-sensitive practice. The findings demonstrate that critical engagement does not emerge as an immediate outcome of instruction, but develops gradually through pedagogical conditions that support trust, scaffold participation, and accommodate diverse forms of engagement. In this sense, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how critical pedagogy operates in linguistically and culturally complex educational settings.

However, this study has several limitations. The sample size was relatively small and limited to university instructors in Korea, which may constrain the transferability of the findings. In addition, the study relied primarily on teacher perspectives and a limited set of classroom observations and student reflections, and therefore may not fully capture the diversity of student experiences across contexts. Future research could extend this work by employing longitudinal designs, including larger and more diverse participant groups, and conducting more fine-grained analyses of student interaction and development.

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Examples in: English
Applicable Language: English
Applicable Levels: Tertiary

Sujung Min (professor)
Department of English Education
Kongju National University
56 Gongjudaehak-ro, Gongju, Chungcheongnam-do 32588, Korea
Email: sujmin@kongju.ac.kr

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