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Countering Neoliberalism and Class Erasure in English Language Education: Socially and Interculturally Aware English Language Teacher Education

İngilizce Eğitiminde Neoliberalizme ve Sosyal Sınıfın Görünmez Kılınmasına Karşı Mücadele: Sosyal ve Kültürlerarası Farkındalığa Sahip İngilizce Öğretmeni Eğitimi

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ABSTRACT: Neoliberalism attempts to erase class and associated inequalities from educational discourses, framing individuals as self-interested and solely responsible for their own success or failure. English language education, closely tied to neoliberal discourses of competitiveness, employability, and mobility, cannot be considered outside this process of class erasure, particularly given the global status of English and its role in reproducing social inequalities. Yet, despite the profound influence of social class on language learning and teaching, social class awareness has received limited attention in English language teacher education (ELTE). To address this gap, this conceptual article proposes ways for ELTE programs to foster awareness of structural inequalities and unequal social positions. Building on a conceptualization of social class, the article emphasizes the integration of Freirean dialogue and critical interculturality into initial ELTE curricula. Through these concepts, the article seeks to help teacher candidates develop both critical intercultural repertoires and a deeper recognition of how social class shapes opportunities for language learning and teaching. In turn, future language teachers can acquire the dispositions and skills necessary to help alleviate class-based inequalities and contribute to socially just educational practices.

Keywords: English language teacher education, social class, Freirean dialogue, critical interculturality, neoliberalism.

ÖZ: Neoliberalizm, sosyal sınıfı ve buna bağlı eşitsizlikleri eğitim söylemlerinden silmeye çalışarak bireyleri yalnızca kendi başarısından ya da başarısızlığından sorumlu, çıkar odaklı özneler olarak çerçeveler. Rekabetçilik, istihdam edilebilirlik ve hareketlilik gibi neoliberal söylemlerle yakından bağlantılı olan İngilizce dil eğitimi, özellikle İngilizcenin küresel statüsü ve toplumsal eşitsizlikleri yeniden üretmedeki rolü düşünüldüğünde, bu sınıf silinmesi sürecinin dışında değerlendirilemez. Ancak sosyal sınıfın dil öğrenimi ve öğretimi üzerindeki derin etkisine rağmen, İngilizce öğretmeni eğitimi (İÖE) programlarında sosyal sınıf farkındalığı sınırlı bir ilgi görmüştür. Bu boşluğu gidermek amacıyla, bu kavramsal makale İÖE programlarının yapısal eşitsizliklere ve eşitsiz toplumsal konumlara dair farkındalık geliştirmesine yönelik yollar önermektedir. Sosyal sınıfın kavramsallaştırılmasından hareketle, makale İÖE müfredatına Freireci diyalog ve eleştirel kültürlerarasılığın entegrasyonunun önemini vurgulamaktadır. Bu kavramlar aracılığıyla, makale öğretmen adaylarının hem eleştirel kültürlerarası repertuarlar geliştirmelerine hem de sosyal sınıfın dil öğrenme ve öğretme fırsatlarını nasıl şekillendirdiğine dair daha derin bir farkındalık kazanmalarına katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Geleceğin dil öğretmenleri böylece, sınıfa dayalı eşitsizlikleri azaltmaya yardımcı olacak eğilimleri ve becerileri edinebilir, toplumsal adalet odaklı eğitim uygulamalarına katkı sunabilirler.

Anahtar kelimeler: İngilizce öğretmeni eğitimi, sosyal sınıf, Freireci diyalog, eleştirel kültürlerarasılık, neoliberalizm.

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Schools and schooling practices are inseparable from their social, political, economic, and cultural contexts. While mainstream educational discourses often conceal underlying curricular agendas, schooling systems worldwide largely serve privileged groups (Apple, 2004). In this way, curricula operate as instruments for reproducing unequal economic relations and sustaining the cultural power of elites. These dynamics have intensified under neoliberal reforms, which have sought to reconfigure education in ways that secure the conditions for capital accumulation and consolidate the power of economic elites (Harvey, 2005). As a result, educators and learners become enmeshed in structural networks of social injustice, where class-based disparities are obscured from public debate in order to exalt "the supreme worth of the neoliberal individual" (Harvey, 2005, p. 21) and pursue "a programme of the methodical destruction of collectives" (Bourdieu, 1998).

Although neoliberal discourses and practices often claim to value diversity and promote individual freedom, they ultimately reproduce existing hierarchies of power in educational domains (Flores, 2013; Harvey, 2005; Kubota, 2014). By obscuring class-based structural inequalities, neoliberalism also delegitimizes the pursuit of social justice in education, dismissing it as "idealistic or irrelevant" (Zotzmann & Hernández-Zamora, 2013, p. 363). In response, teachers are called to recognize the broader societal and economic conditions shaping education and create inclusive learning environments (Kubanyiova & Crookes, 2016; Sleeter, 2008). With a critical awareness of social class, and of how neoliberalism marginalizes class-based concerns, teachers can engage students from disadvantaged backgrounds in equitable and creative ways, thereby resisting the constraining forces of neoliberalism and contributing to the transformation of the social world (Hawkins & Norton, 2009).

Identified as the *lingua franca* of the neoliberal world, English, and by extension its educational agents, cannot be exempt from concerns about the reproduction of structural inequalities across educational contexts (Block, 2017; Choi, 2021; Darvin, 2017; Darvin & Norton, 2014). In today's marketplace, where English lessons are commodified and carry high economic value (Soto & Pérez-Milans, 2018), access to English functions as a gatekeeping mechanism, shaping opportunities for social mobility and life chances (Darvin, 2017; Hajar & Karakus, 2025). Thus, learners from disadvantaged backgrounds are frequently excluded from these opportunities, particularly when they lack the knowledge needed to navigate how the system works (Vandrick, 2014). Despite these structural realities, academic fields such as second language acquisition and English language teaching (ELT) have tended to downplay the role of unequal social positions in learning and teaching processes (Block, 2014). As a result, issues of social class are routinely neglected, even though they are central to learner performance and aspirations (Ali & Hamid, 2026; Canagarajah, 1999; Lin, 1999; Xiong & Yuan, 2018). For this reason, ELT must be understood in relation to broader inequitable social structures, despite persistent portrayals of the field as apolitical, autonomous, neutral, and equal (Bori & Canale, 2022; Gray, 2012).

As a vital component of ELT, initial English language teacher education (ELTE) is equally implicated in debates surrounding English, neoliberalism, and structural inequalities (Ordem, 2022). Indeed, initial ELTE has the potential not only to prepare teachers to teach a language embedded in structural inequalities and global hierarchies, but also to shape how future language teachers interpret learners' abilities, participation,

and potential within classed social contexts. For this reason, it should not be treated as separate from broader social and political struggles over class, inequality, and access. This implication becomes clearer when ELTE is situated within the wider political economy of English. ELTE is embedded within a global ELT industry historically intertwined with colonial expansion, geopolitical hierarchies, and contemporary neoliberal governance. The global dominance of English has not emerged neutrally; rather, it is rooted in imperial histories and sustained through economic, academic, and institutional structures that continue to privilege Anglophone norms and epistemologies (O'Regan, 2021). In contexts such as Türkiye, the rapid expansion of ELTE programs and the framing of English as a gateway to modernization and economic mobility may reflect legitimate local aspirations, yet they may also reproduce asymmetrical relations of linguistic and cultural power (Ordem, 2022). When English is positioned as an unquestioned prerequisite for progress, alternative linguistic repertoires and knowledge traditions risk marginalization. In this sense, ELTE may inadvertently participate in neocolonial configurations of language and knowledge governance. Thus, ELTE may function not only as a pedagogical space but also as part of a broader industry that commodifies English and normalizes its global dominance. Such dynamics can intersect with class-based inequalities, as access to high-quality English instruction and credentials often remains unevenly distributed, meaning that the expansion of ELTE does not benefit all social groups equally. Consequently, the question is not only how ELTE prepares teachers, but also how it positions English, whose interests it ultimately serves, and which social groups benefit most from its expansion.

Despite these layered connections to structural inequalities, social class received limited attention in ELTE. In fact, while Block (2014, 2017, 2018a, 2018b) has convincingly argued that social class must remain central to language education research, his work does not directly address initial ELTE as a formative institutional site where these structural and geopolitical dynamics are interpreted, transmitted, and potentially reproduced. If social class remains peripheral in ELTE, it risks reinforcing technicist and decontextualized approaches that prioritize methods and techniques while leaving structural inequality, both class-based and globally stratified, largely unexamined. Responding to this gap, this conceptual article extends Block's social-class agenda into initial ELTE and proposes a socially and interculturally aware framework for language teacher education. In doing so, it aligns itself with an emerging critical paradigm in applied linguistics and language education that resists the erasure or silencing of structural inequalities (Block, 2014, 2017, 2018a, 2018b). More specifically, the article proposes several ways in which initial ELTE programs can cultivate teacher candidates' awareness of structural inequality, classed social realities, and the broader geopolitical positioning of English itself. To develop this argument, it draws on two key and interrelated concepts: Freirean dialogue and critical interculturality, which are examined in detail in the following sections. Together, these concepts provide a pedagogical and ethical foundation for preparing language teachers who can engage with learners dialogically, critically, and with greater sensitivity to unequal social and global conditions. Before turning to social class as a pivotal construct in initial ELTE, and before examining Freirean dialogue and critical interculturality in detail, two caveats will be outlined.

First, this article does not overlook the fluid and multifaceted nature of social class, and fully acknowledges its intersections with other structural and identity dimensions such as race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, religion, nationality, and disability (Block & Corona, 2014; Glodjo, 2017). At the same time, it underscores that class has often been relegated to a secondary status in ELT research, which has largely been recognition-oriented. Within this literature, identity categories such as race and gender tend to be overemphasized as the primary constructs of analysis, while redistribution and political economy receive insufficient attention (Block, 2018b; Glodjo, 2017). Moreover, research has frequently detached race and gender from class politics and the question of economic redistribution (Block, 2018b; Fraser, 2017). Yet, as hooks (2000) powerfully reminds us, "[c]lass matters. Race and gender can be used as screens to deflect attention away from the harsh realities class politics exposes" (p. 7).

Second, this article does not approach class as merely another identity category to be recognized, respected, or celebrated (Fraser, 1995). Rather, it positions class at the very center of social inequalities, making it a pivotal construct in debates on language education and social justice (Ali & Hamid, 2026; Block, 2018b; Hawkins, 2011; Zotzmann & Hernández-Zamora, 2013). When class is sidelined, educational systems, especially those shaped by neoliberal logics, can continue to reproduce inequity while appearing neutral or meritocratic (Bori & Canale, 2022; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Foregrounding redistribution, however, does not invalidate the achievements of identity politics, which has been vital in restoring dignity and recognition to historically marginalized groups. Yet, redistribution and recognition must be brought into closer alignment, with greater attention directed to class-based inequalities and the political economy more broadly (Block, 2018b). Approaching social justice in this way shifts attention from surface-level fixes to transformative remedies that restructure the underlying conditions producing inequitable outcomes (Fraser, 2008). In turn, such remedies open possibilities for challenging the wider capitalist arrangements that continue to erode the social fabric on a global scale (Block, 2018b).

Social Class Awareness as a Pivotal Construct in Initial English Language Teacher Education

Although socioeconomic status is notoriously difficult to define and conceptualize, class is commonly understood in relation to individuals' positions vis-à-vis the modes of production that generate resources and assets. From a Marxist perspective, the dominant capitalist class exploits the working class by controlling the means of production, distribution, and exchange. This dominance is legitimized and sustained through capitalist ideologies (re)produced by institutions such as schools (Althusser, 1971; Block, 2014). Although this antagonistic relationship between the two primary classes persists, albeit in evolving forms (Hill & Cole, 2001), contemporary societies have become increasingly stratified under conditions of liquidity and hyper-mobility (Bauman, 2000; Block, 2017; Harvey, 2005).

Dressed with increasingly complex and fluid characteristics, social class today should be understood as a construct that goes beyond the narrower notion of socioeconomic status (Acker, 2006; hooks, 2000; Wright, 2015). Savage et al. (2013), for instance, conceptualize class as multidimensional, shaped not only by economic

resources but also by processes of social reproduction and practices of cultural distinction. Similarly, Block (2017) identifies a range of "class dimensions" that interact in intricate ways, extending across economic, political, social, and cultural domains. These dimensions include ownership of property, level of education, technological knowledge, social networking practices, consumption patterns, modes of speaking, leisure activities, positions within social hierarchies, patterns of mobility, and the size and nature of the spaces people occupy.

Pierre Bourdieu is perhaps the most influential social theorist who captured comprehensively what class is under fluid neoliberal times or in post-industrial world (Crompton, 2008). Bourdieu's (1990) concepts of *forms of capital* and *habitus* offer an exhaustive theoretical framework to understand the dynamic complexities of social class today. Power, according to Bourdieu (1977), is conceptualized as forms of capital that extends from material/economic to the cultural and social. In this respect, *economic capital* refers to wealth, property, and income; *cultural capital* is knowledge, educational credentials, and appreciation of specific cultural forms; and *social capital* is connections to networks of power (Bourdieu, 1986). Habitus, on the other hand, can be understood as a set of durable yet adaptable dispositions that shape how individuals perceive the world and act within it, generating and organizing practices and meanings (Bourdieu, 1990). As a learned and internalized tendency, habitus is a product of early socialization periods and evolves in a constant state of renewal and revision in the light of ongoing experiences, thereby mediating social structure and individual practice. The forms of capital that individuals possess in line with their habitus are circulated and competed for in different social spheres called *fields*. Since different fields allow different forms of capital to circulate and compete, people tend to align with people who share similar practices. Individuals, therefore, occupy particular social positions based on their accumulated capital and evolving habitus. However, in the last instance, advantage and privilege accumulate for certain dominant groups whose members start the "game" in an advantageous position.

Regarding the role of schools in shaping disadvantaged class positions, Pierre Bourdieu's central claim is that schools, as a field, reproduce unequal socioeconomic relations by privileging particular forms of knowledge and behaviour, such as "proper language" and "good manners" that reflect the cultural capital of advantaged classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). As a result, children from disadvantaged backgrounds may experience English lessons as more difficult or even alienating. In contrast, peers from advantaged families benefit from access to abundant language-related resources and from the strategic encouragement and modelling of family members, which together provide significant advantages in learning English. In this sense, class differences profoundly shape learners' dispositions and perceptions toward acquiring English as well as their perceived "right to speak" the language (Darvin, 2017). Social class, thus, influences both lived experiences and language acquisition trajectories (Block, 2017; Darvin, 2017). At the same time, because dominant ideologies and discourses are contested (Chun, 2017), learners are not entirely determined by classed dispositions. Instead, they can exercise agency by recognizing how their worldviews are socially constructed and then revising them accordingly (Darvin, 2017).

Building on this recognition of learners' agency, socially and interculturally aware language teachers can encourage students from disadvantaged backgrounds to

question the material conditions of their lives and critically reflect on the discursive forces that have positioned them in marginalized social circumstances. Such teachers can also broaden access to appropriate ELT materials and design pedagogical practices that are culturally responsive to the mental frameworks and behavioural dispositions learners bring to school. Moreover, they can counter deficit-based and stereotypical perceptions of disadvantaged groups by discursively constructing more positive and empowering representations. By fostering rapport, language teachers can create supportive learning spaces that not only enhance language development but also open possibilities for broader social and cultural transformation. Within such spaces, learners may exercise agency to transcend and reshape their lifeworlds.

In practice, however, many language teachers come from middle-class backgrounds and may inadvertently reproduce dominant class norms and values (Glodjo, 2017) through the "hidden curriculum" (Apple, 2004; Hill & Cole, 2001) and teaching materials that largely reflect neoliberal ideals (Gray & Block, 2014; Nizamani & Shah, 2024; Shah et al., 2024). Standardizing policies and a prevailing mechanistic scientism frequently reduce language teachers to technicians or neoliberal "agents" whose primary duty is framed as developing learners' English skills through "empirically validated" techniques or approaches that typically fail to account for structural inequalities (Abednia, 2012; Haider et al., 2025). Yet language teachers, as potential agents of change, need to critically examine the material and discursive conditions of social classes, as well as the broader forces that reproduce inequality (Gray, 2019; Hawkins & Norton, 2009). Without such reflection, initial ELTE programs that sideline political economy and focus exclusively on linguistic theory and methodology risk perpetuating an apolitical and technicist view of teaching (Gray & Block, 2012; Ordem, 2022). By contrast, socially and interculturally aware ELTE must allocate greater attention and resources to preparing teachers as moral agents and transformative intellectuals or professionals capable of engaging dialogically with diverse learners and envisioning possibilities for social transformation, even while navigating the constraining structures (Warren & Ward, 2024; Windle & de Araujo Rosa, 2023).

However, raising socially and interculturally aware language teachers remains a challenging task. In that regard, top-down theoretical approaches to initial ELTE are insufficient on their own (Richards, 2008), as learning to teach is a situated experience shaped by ongoing individual and collective reflection (Johnson, 2009). Therefore, reliance on positivist and technicist epistemologies is inadequate (Freeman, 2002). Instead, teacher educators who are attentive to structural inequalities should provide both conceptual and experiential learning opportunities across diverse sociocultural contexts, since different contexts generate different kinds of teacher learning (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Within such settings, teacher candidates can be guided through *praxis*, understood as the dialectical unity of theory and practice. They can, first, reflect on their own taken-for-granted assumptions or "common sense" (Chun, 2017). They can, then, examine their prior beliefs, tacit understandings, and classed positions across economic, political, cultural, and social domains. Through this ongoing praxis, teacher candidates can begin to understand what people from disadvantaged backgrounds experience in relation to broader sociopolitical realities. They can also work toward devising novel ways of contributing to conditions that value social justice. To this end, initial ELTE

programs can combine theoretically grounded courses with field experiences. Both should be informed by praxis in order to cultivate socially aware, interculturally sensitive, and critically engaged language teachers.

To help language teacher candidates develop a complex awareness of classed lifeworlds through praxis, initial ELTE programs are encouraged to focus particularly on two interrelated concepts: Freirean dialogue and critical interculturality. The next two sections discuss these concepts in relation to one another and to social class awareness. The final section offers further concrete suggestions for how initial ELTE programs can foster Freirean dialogue and critical interculturality among language teacher candidates.

Freirean Dialogue: A Transformative Base for Communication

Paulo Freire, the influential Brazilian critical educator, highlights the unequal power relations and mechanisms of social reproduction embedded in mainstream schooling. In his classic work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he describes dominant social, political, economic, and cultural forces as *the oppressor*, and those subjected to these forces as *the oppressed* (Freire, 2005). At this point, a clarification is necessary. In Freire's (2005) framework, individuals are not reduced to two fixed or antagonistic categories. Instead, the terms function as a meta-theoretical lens to capture the complex processes underlying unequal distributions of power among different social groups. This article, thus, recognizes that people cannot simply be placed into essentialist categories through overly simplistic frameworks (Dervin, 2016, 2024; Ferri, 2018; Holliday, 2011). In line with Freire's legacy, the term, *the oppressed*, is used here, when necessary, to draw attention to disadvantaged social classes in the Bourdieusian sense.

Freire (2005) argues that oppression persists when dominant groups keep people passive by promoting legitimizing "myths" that naturalize and protect the status quo. He, therefore, maintains that overcoming such narratives depends on liberation as praxis, an ongoing cycle of critical reflection and collective action oriented toward transforming the world. In other words, he invites teachers to resist status quo, "common sense" (in Gramscian terms), and discursive regimes (in Foucauldian terms) by analyzing critically the oppressive framework in which the oppressed reside. However, praxis cannot emerge in isolation. It must be grounded in genuine dialogue with the oppressed. Through Freirean dialogue and awareness, language teachers can engage learners from disadvantaged class backgrounds and begin laying the foundations for a more equitable society. In that respect, Freire's (2005) words serve as a roadmap: "[R]evolutionary leaders do not go to the people in order to bring them a message of 'salvation,' but in order to come to know through dialogue with them both their *objective situation* and their *awareness* of that situation" (emphasis in original, p. 95).

This dialogic framework, which carries an empowering vision for the struggles of the oppressed, can be further strengthened through insights from scholarly work on interculturality. Although Freire is not often labelled as an interculturality scholar, his work clearly exposes power relations, structural domination, discrimination, and the resulting prejudices and stereotypes (Guilherme, 2017). In this sense, Freirean dialogue provides a solid foundation for critical interculturality through its sociocultural and sociopolitical dimensions, as well as its profound "love for the world" (Freire, 2005, p. 89).

To prepare language teacher candidates with the "love" tools needed to engage with complex sociocultural and socioeconomic realities, the introduction of a critical interculturality framework is essential. When accompanied by the political, economic, social, and cultural ethos of Freirean dialogue, such a framework has the potential to strengthen socially and interculturally aware initial ELTE. Through praxis, an acquaintance with this interculturality framework can help language teachers and learners uncover the constraining dynamics of unequal social reproduction. It can also enable them to devise concrete strategies to challenge and overcome those limits.

Developing Critical Interculturality: A Genuine Way to Construct Dialogue With the Oppressed

Critical interculturality is a comprehensive framework that establishes ways of fostering communication among teachers, students, researchers, parents, administrators, and community members, all of whom may hold both different and shared skills, attitudes, and values. Within this communicative network, language teachers are expected to approach all stakeholders, including disadvantaged learners, without prejudice or taken-for-granted assumptions shaped by broader structural forces. In recent years, the framework has paid increasing attention to macrocontextual issues such as the (global) political economy, which deeply shape the nature and process of communication with disadvantaged learners (Dervin, 2016, 2024; Ferri, 2018; Holliday, 2011; Zotzmann, 2015). Linking critical interculturality to Freirean understandings of constraining structures is, therefore, a meaningful effort. Together, these perspectives provide a more robust framework for socially and interculturally aware initial ELTE programs, as they move beyond neoliberal individualism to address issues of power and structural inequality in human communication.

While Freirean dialogue offers conceptual tools for sustaining a "love for the world" and encouraging deeper engagement with the structural conditions that shape communication and interaction, the literature on critical interculturality provides comprehensive approaches for addressing ambiguities, breakdowns, and misunderstandings among people with diverse orientations to the world. Recent scholarship on critical interculturality has, in fact, highlighted several key issues that should be taken into account when considering the suggestions for initial ELTE programs discussed in the next section.

Critical interculturality scholars have deconstructed atomistic, static, and fixed perspectives of culture, and instead advanced more complex and dynamic conceptualizations (Dervin, 2016, 2024; Ferri, 2018). These emerging discussions dismantle simplistic cultural notions in order to foreground the "co-construction of knowledge," "diverse diversities," and "the plurality of the self," while discarding culturalist or essentialist views that overemphasize difference and subordinate similarity (Dervin, 2016, 2024; Ferri, 2018; Holliday, 2011). In this respect, language teacher candidates can be guided not only to grasp the "diverse diversities" within people and communities, but also to recognize a fundamental similarity they share with their classed students: the experience of constraining neoliberal structures and ideologies that privilege the individual while diverting attention away from collectives and political economy-based inequalities. Yet, if we frame interculturality only in terms of individual differences and the fluidity of cultural worlds, we may risk overlooking the enduring

structures and power relations that shape people's lives and interactions (Zotzmann, 2015). By holding both perspectives together, however, unified collective actions against oppressive conditions may emerge, actions that Antonio Gramsci (1971) conceptualized as the "historical act":

> An historical act can only be performed by 'collective man,' and this presupposes the attainment of a 'cultural-social' unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together with a single aim, on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world, both general and particular (p. 349).

As denizens of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000), the oppressed do not embody a rigid or static set of cultural values. Instead, they may cultivate multiple and dispersed wills, shaped by heterogeneous aims, and continue to create complex lifeworlds. To help create the conditions for the "historical act," language teacher candidates must continually challenge their habitual interpretative frameworks and critically interrogate their taken-for-granted, stereotypical assumptions about the oppressed (Holliday, 2011). Without such critical reflection and complex understanding, they risk becoming complicit actors within the intricate network of oppressive power dynamics, thereby legitimizing and reproducing the neoliberal conditions under which the oppressed continue to struggle (Zotzmann, 2015).

Instead of adopting essentialist cultural perspectives, initial ELTE programs need to focus on developing effective ways of communicating with people from diverse and disadvantaged classed backgrounds. In reality, however, ELTE programs often reify stereotypes. They tend to emphasize simple factual knowledge about cultural patterns or promote contrived connections between so-called target cultures and language acquisition (Baker, 2015). Such approaches further the distance among people and reproduce existing power relations. Accordingly, Dogancay-Aktuna (2006) emphasizes that the aim for language teachers is not to memorize lists of cultural facts, which can easily reinforce stereotyping, but to become more sensitive to the cultural diversity students bring to classroom. In this respect, actions informed by praxis and critical interculturality can help language teachers better understand communication processes and promote intergroup, interpersonal, and intercultural communication in the spirit of Freirean dialogue. With an awareness shaped by Freirean dialogue and the critical interculturality framework, language teacher candidates can reflect on the characteristics of their own social networks and seek to diversify them through dialogue with people from different classed positions. As a result, all participants in this transformative process can learn from one another and contribute to reshaping the world in a collective way, challenging destructive neoliberal ideals and paving the way for "an historical act."

Class Awareness, Freirean Dialogue, and Critical Interculturality Within Initial English Language Teacher Education Programs

Following the conceptualization of the key constructs, this section offers a number of further suggestions for developing Freirean dialogue and critical interculturality among English language teacher candidates. Since initial ELTE programs, in the current climate, place little emphasis on class-related issues in language education, any change, small or substantial, will take time to yield observable outcomes (Tarozzi, 2014). Therefore, it would be naive to expect quick transformations. Instead, teacher educators need to engage in ongoing inquiry to better capture and refine

the processes involved in cultivating Freirean dialogue, critical interculturality, and, in turn, social class awareness.

When it comes to integrating Freirean dialogue and critical interculturality into a socially and interculturally aware initial ELTE curriculum, different curricular approaches can be considered, such as *infusion* and *separation* (DeLuca, 2012). In the infusion approach, issues of concern, such as social class awareness, are embedded across the entire ELTE curriculum. In the separation approach, by contrast, explicit courses are offered to address particular issues. Depending on contextual conditions, initial ELTE programs can decide which approach is more appropriate for fostering Freirean dialogue and critical interculturality. Ideally, both are facilitated through praxis. The suggestions outlined below can be evaluated in relation to these two approaches to curricular integration. Nonetheless, the suggestions generally align with the dimensions identified by Hawkins and Norton (2009) for critical language teacher education: *critical awareness*, *critical self-reflection*, and *critical pedagogical relations*. These dimensions correspond most strongly to the infusion approach.

To situate Freirean dialogue on meaningful ground and to support the development of critical interculturality, teacher educators can, first, provide language teacher candidates with a comprehensive understanding of critical pedagogy. This can be achieved by engaging critically with scholarship that foregrounds the power relations, politics, and ideologies shaping English language education around the world (Dogancay-Aktuna, 2006). For this purpose, an introductory course can be designed around the works and key ideas of influential scholars in both critical pedagogy and critical applied linguistics, such as Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, Michael Apple, Wayne Au, David Block, Alastair Pennycook, Ryuko Kubota, Suresh Canagarajah, Bonny Norton, and Robert Phillipson. Particular emphasis should be placed on the role of social class in education, the intersections of class with other identity categories, the dynamics of power in society, structural constraints, human agency, and critical (language) education. Such courses can be transformative (Abednia, 2012). However, careful selection of readings, activities, and modes of engagement is crucial for realizing this potential. In this respect, teacher educators may wish to avoid traditional lecturing. Otherwise, teacher candidates risk merely mimicking the teacher educator, which would directly contradict the central tenets of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2005; Pessoa & Urzêda Freitas, 2012).

In another course on the theoretical foundations of critical interculturality, language teacher candidates can be reminded, through dialogue and praxis, that communication with people from diverse backgrounds or different classed positions is rarely simple and should never be approached in a top-down manner (Dervin & Jacobsson, 2021). To raise awareness of the complexity and dynamism of cultural notions, candidates can first be introduced to the critical dimensions of intercultural communication outlined in the previous section in order to deepen their awareness of the fluid, relational, and power-laden nature of cultural meanings. For this purpose, teacher educators can draw on influential academic texts on critical interculturality, including the works of Fred Dervin, Adrian Holliday, Ingrid Piller, Claire Kramsch, and Manuela Guilherme. Building on this foundation, ELTE programs may also engage with translanguaging scholarship, particularly the work of Ofelia García, to challenge monolingual ideologies and essentialist multicultural frameworks. Translanguaging

scholarship questions the assumption that English must serve as the primary medium of legitimacy and instead foregrounds learners' full linguistic repertoires as valuable resources for meaning-making. By engaging with these perspectives, language teacher candidates can learn to recognize and build upon the linguistic strengths of students from disadvantaged communities rather than interpreting them through deficit-oriented lenses.

However, in teaching both critical pedagogy and critical interculturality, candidates should not be "left to their own devices to make the connections" (Tedick, 2009, p. 265). Instead, they need guidance in reflecting on the interconnections among Freirean dialogue, critical interculturality, social class, and language education. During this potentially transformative process, teacher educators must also find constructive ways to help candidates reflect critically and honestly on their own classed positions, lived experiences, and assumptions about people from other socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. While fostering such reflection, teacher educators should avoid provoking excessive discomfort, since candidates may resist transformation when faced with overwhelming disequilibrium (Santoro & Major, 2012). At the same time, ELTE should cultivate supportive spaces that do not avoid or suppress discomfort, but instead help language teacher candidates develop the habits of thinking, feeling, and acting that strengthen critical rigor and empathetic understanding (Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017).

Keeping reflective journals can be a valuable way for language teacher candidates to examine critically their emerging and evolving beliefs and practices (Farrell & Farrell, 2025). Developing such a habit, however, requires sustained practice and careful guidance, particularly in understanding the connections among teacher beliefs, teacher actions, and student outcomes (Villegas, 2007). Other reflective tasks, such as diaries, autobiographies, future projections, and statements of teaching philosophy, can also be used to encourage candidates to reflect on how schools reproduce social inequalities and how they plan to take action in response (Waller et al., 2017). The content and delivery of courses on critical pedagogy and critical interculturality can further be enriched through the use of literature, films, and documentaries. For example, documentaries such as *Where to Invade Next*, *Zero*, *Inequality for All*, *Inside Job*, *Requiem for the American Dream*, *Human*, and *Class Dismissed* may spark in-depth discussions and critical reflections among language teacher candidates. Another productive task involves the textual analysis of language teaching materials that are widely used in classrooms. Such materials often promote neoliberal ideals and tend to erase social class awareness (Gray, 2012; Gray & Block, 2014; Nizamani & Shah, 2024; Shah et al., 2024; Xiong & Yuan, 2018).

Before, after, or alongside developing an understanding of the core principles of critical pedagogy and critical interculturality, language teacher candidates should also engage in experiential learning opportunities to strengthen their emerging critical repertoires and perspectives (Martin-Beltrán et al., 2023; Porto, 2023). These opportunities should not be confined to courses on critical pedagogy and critical interculturality but should be infused throughout the entire curriculum. Through cycles of action and reflection, language teacher candidates can build on their prior knowledge and experiences, challenge naturalized assumptions about the oppressed, and move toward a more nuanced understanding of diversity, equity, and social justice (Kubota &

Miller, 2017). For instance, within specific courses they may be guided to conduct mini-research tasks, such as critical (auto)ethnographic projects focused on problematic or meaningful events in the lifeworlds of classed individuals (Yazan, 2025). Such tasks may allow them to generate their own experiential repertoire, rather than relying solely on research conducted by others in different contexts (Tarozzi, 2014). Of course, praxis-informed actions of this kind presuppose the presence of teacher educators who are both capable of and committed to implementing these suggestions, a challenge that falls beyond the scope of this article.

Short-term study abroad or cultural immersion experiences can be another experiential way to promote critical interculturality and awareness of social justice (Cacciattolo et al., 2020; Cushner, 2011). Language teacher candidates can be encouraged to participate in such programs in order to engage with people from diverse backgrounds, experience being the Other, and critically examine their own positioning in the world (Addleman et al., 2014; Santoro & Major, 2012). However, short-term study abroad should not be treated as an isolated event in teacher education. Instead, it needs to be connected to broader, ongoing processes in socially and interculturally aware initial ELTE programs. To this end, teacher educators can design preparation courses, provide guidance during the experience abroad, and offer structured opportunities for reflection to optimize re-entry and adjustment (Addleman et al., 2014; Çiftçi & Karaman, 2024). When financial constraints limit the possibility of studying abroad, online intercultural exchange or telecollaboration can provide an alternative. These formats allow language teacher candidates to communicate and collaborate with peers from different national contexts around shared tasks or goals (Akayoğlu et al., 2026; Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018). For instance, through a telecollaborative project, candidates could examine issues related to disadvantaged social classes in their own society with the support of international partners. In this way, all participants can develop critical cosmopolitan perspectives, deepen their critical interculturality, and strengthen their awareness of social inequalities.

Field experiences, both international and local, are indeed widely emphasized in the broader literature as valuable opportunities for helping teacher candidates develop critical skills and awareness (Cushner, 2011; Martin-Beltrán et al., 2023; McDonald & Zeichner, 2009; Porto, 2023). Community service or service learning represents one such form of field experience. It involves learning through sustained and complex engagements with local communities. By forming organic connections with classed lives and reflecting on the realities of disempowered groups (Carrington & Selva, 2010), language teacher candidates can deepen their understandings of diversity, socioeconomic inequalities, and resulting social stratifications. Service learning experiences with people from disadvantaged backgrounds also create opportunities for candidates to deconstruct stereotypes about Self and Other, critically examine their own assumptions, and explore societal power dynamics (Dvir & Avissar, 2014). Practicum placements, one of the most common forms of field experience, offer another pathway for experiential learning. When situated in disadvantaged regions or rural settings, these placements can help candidates better understand and empower learners from marginalized classes. At the same time, it is important that these experiential opportunities do not focus on social class awareness in a reductionist or isolated way. Instead, they should be approached in ways that enable language teacher candidates to

build a complex repertoire that includes critical awareness, critical self-reflection, and critical pedagogical relations (Hawkins & Norton, 2009). Through dialogic engagement, reflexivity, and praxis, language teacher candidates can, thus, develop as critical language teachers and transformative intellectuals.

Conclusion

This conceptual article has sought to extend the conversations on social class in applied linguistics and language education to the field of ELTE, with particular attention to initial ELTE programs. Its central aim has been to support and deepen emerging scholarly efforts, while moving beyond the traditional and reproductive functions of ELT within predominantly neoliberal societies. To this end, the article offered a number of suggestions for helping language teacher candidates develop Freirean dialogue and critical interculturality concurrently, both of which share overlapping concerns. These suggestions included theoretical, experiential, and reflective opportunities that could be facilitated under the guidance of teacher educators who embrace critical pedagogy, social justice, and critical interculturality. The recommendations are not definitive; rather, they are open to critique, revision, and future adaptation within both practical and theoretical possibilities. Teacher educators may draw on or disregard these ideas depending on the opportunities and constraints of their own contexts. After all, knowledge is always in motion and subject to continuous (re)construction, even though the underlying generative frameworks of inequality remain persistent, albeit in evolving forms. Nonetheless, one core message stands firm: language teachers must develop a complex repertoire of knowledge, dispositions, and practices that address structural inequalities, social justice, and critical interculturality. Without this commitment, those involved in language education risk becoming accomplices, or passive bystanders, while inequalities intensify each passing day under neoliberal conditions.

In fact, there is no one-size-fits-all model for critical language teacher education. Rather than a fixed set of theories or techniques, critical language teaching is best understood as a way of thinking, living, and acting in educational practice (Pessoa & Urzêda Freitas, 2012). Criticality and interculturality, therefore, are not static endpoints reached through a linear path. Instead, they constitute an ongoing, idealistic journey that requires continual critical sophistication and persistent advocacy. In this light, teacher educators should not be expected to establish positivistic links between their efforts and the development of Freirean dialogue or critical interculturality among English language teacher candidates. What they can do instead is guide and inform candidates, while creating experiential and reflective opportunities. Through these processes, language teacher candidates may come to recognize unequal social positions, confront structural inequalities, and cultivate critical interculturality. In turn, they can begin to advocate for and enact social justice in language education.

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Statement of Responsibility

The entire study was conducted by the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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