

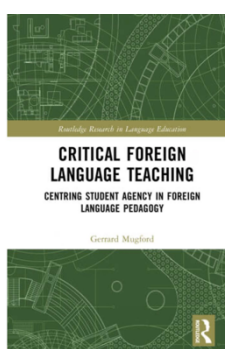
BOOK REVIEW: CRITICAL FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING: CENTRING STUDENT AGENCY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

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Mugford, G. (2025). *Critical foreign language teaching: Centring student agency in foreign language pedagogy*. Routledge.

The general focus of foreign language (FL) teaching lies in instrumental linguistic skills and native speaker (NS) norms, while student agency, their native language (NL) experience, etc. are minimally concerned. This phenomenon causes power imbalances and justice dilemmas in FL teaching. Against this backdrop, Mugford presents this provocative book, challenging the entrenched language teaching frame and developing a frame for critical foreign language teaching pedagogy (CFLP). Closely supported by the “Illustration-Interaction-Induction” (*i+i+i*) mode, CFLP helps educators recognise the ideological biases and unequal power relations in language education and further guides learners to react to interactional difficulties and hostility. In this regard, CFLP effectively addresses the justice issues by deconstructing NS norms and highlighting student agency. This book offers practical methods for language learners, teachers and researchers to understand and establish a greater degree of control over their language use.

Organized into six chapters, the book provides readers with a broad overview of CFLP. Traditional FL teaching splits the association between language and social context because it overlooks student agency and their NL experience. To address the predicament, Mugford adopts the student agency-centred CFLP. Pogers & Mosley-Wetzel (2013) defines agency as “the capacity of people to act purposefully and reflectively on their world” (p. 63). As an important aspect of CFLP, it emphasizes that

teaching should provide learners with the space for independent choice and critical reflection. Based on this, chapter 1 points out the key capacity of CFLP, namely, attentiveness, stance awareness and stance-taking. Also, chapter 1 states some key dimensions of investment and commitment in the TL, which need to emerge from learners through *i+i+i* mode.¹ Mugford sets out the target readership and the chapter structure of this book, building up the overall framework for the subsequent chapters.

Following the *i+i+i* mode, the next three chapters each detail one dimension. To overcome the limitations of decontextualized teaching (a teaching that decontextualize social context and speakers' experience), chapter 2 concentrates on "Illustration," which stands for "looking at real data" (Carter & McCarthy, 1995, p.155). This chapter guides learners to become ethnographers (Taguchi & Ishihara, 2018) and to build a personalized target language (TL) corpus by collecting daily speech, social media discourse, real-world cross-cultural interaction cases, and so on. Three aspects of attentiveness are emphasized at this stage, that is, the contextual attention, linguistic form attention and non-verbal attention. Meanwhile, this chapter stresses that the corpus collection scope ranges from Inner Circle English to Outer Circle and Expansion Circle, respecting various language variants and avoiding "standard worship". In particular, it reminds learners to distinguish linguistic forms and the ideology behind it, and reject the bias present in the data, laying the foundation for subsequent interactive reflection and the cultivation of critical thinking.

Based on the corpus in chapter 2, chapter 3 enters the "Interaction" stage, which stands for "discussion, sharing of opinions and observations" (Carter & McCarthy, 1995, p. 155) to elicit learners' stance awareness and foster critical thinking. To guide learners in exploring the underlying logic beneath linguistic phenomena, this chapter promotes a shift from traditional, one-way and teacher-led explanations to encouraging discussion and debate between students and teachers, as well as their mutual review of cases. There are two steps to cultivate the stance awareness. Firstly, teachers can guide learners to identify the different stance awareness between self and TL users. Secondly, FL interlocutors can trace back to the cultural logic, value priority and scenario requirements behind the differences and avoid the simple judgment between right and wrong. To develop learners' critical thinking, the chapter also analyses the implicit biases in the corpus, such as western centrism and gender discrimination. And to make this process a key link in deepening understanding and constructing cognition, it encourages the comparison of NL experience with the TL, avoiding blindly conforming to the TL norms.

After "Illustration" and "Interaction," chapter 4 extends the *i+i+i* mode to its final stage "Induction," which stands for "making one's own, or the learning group's, rule for a particular feature, a rule which will be refined and honed as more and more data is encountered" (Carter & McCarthy, 1995, p. 155). The chapter aims at making

¹ The Illustration–Interaction–Induction (*i+i+i*) mode comprises three key components: illustration refers to observing authentic target language data; interaction refers to discussing and reflecting on language use; and induction refers to learners constructing their own understandings and rules for language practice.

learners “the owners of language,” transforming from “passively receiving knowledge” to “actively constructing rules.” What’s more, it argues that induction is not about memorizing the standard answers in textbooks, but rather about learners independently summarizing personalized language rules that suit their communication needs and cultural backgrounds based on the accumulation of the previous two stages. During this process, learners must master three paths to critical stance-taking and positioning, that is critical agency, enacting a critical voice, and critical participation. On formal occasions, learners are expected to follow TL norms; In daily communication, learners are encouraged to enact their critical voice by leveraging the social intelligence of their NL, or by combining the advantages of both languages to construct personalized expressions. In addition, to make the critical participation a reality, it stresses the cultivation of learners’ pragmatic creativeness, assertiveness and resistance. For further illustration, this chapter uses an example where Mexican EFL learners face language bias and hold their stance in complex scenarios.

To further exploit the potential resources, chapter 5 proposes the concept of critical relational assets, which challenges the traditional teaching practice where NL experience is treated as a disturbance term. To make full use of these resources to build critical relational assets, the chapter provides specific strategies, such as leveraging first language knowledge as asset, activating pragmatic processing, etc. Interactional assets like the empathy ability can be integrated into FL expressions through cultural logic transfer; Transactional assets like the communication framework for consultation can reduce the difficulty of scene adaptation through the reuse of the framework and the transformation of language; Cultural assets strengthen our confidence through disseminating one’s own culture in FL. These practical methods for assets activation are vividly presented through specific cases, which not only avoids the underemployment of NL’s experience but also provides solid resource support for implementing CFLP, making the teaching process more aligned with learners’ actual foundations.

The book culminates in chapter 6: interaction-driven critical pedagogy, which integrates theory, mode and resource into an organic whole. Mugford states that four major principles must be followed to implement CFLP in classrooms: vehemently opposing the “banking education” approach (a traditional teacher-centred approach that treats learners as passive recipients of knowledge), focusing on learner’s real communicative needs, balancing skills and education, and dynamically adjusting strategies according to learners’ progress. Meanwhile, targeted solutions were proposed in order to address the challenges such as the practical influence of Inner Circle English, the insufficiency of teachers’ critical literacy and learners’ anxiety. For instance, allowing learners to independently follow or break the norms, suggesting that teachers enhance their capabilities through training, and using successful experiences to reinforce and simulate real scenarios to alleviate anxiety. Ultimately, Mugford elevates the core value of CFLP: FL teaching is not only a skill training, but also an educational practice that makes us fully human to use language. It enables learners to fully unleash

human potential in language use: learners can confidently engage in cross-cultural communication and promote social justice and cross-cultural equality, which provides the ultimate direction for the innovation of FL teaching.

The book's most notable strength is its landmark deconstruction of "native-speaker centrism," a paradigm that has dominated FL pedagogy for decades by framing non-native speaker (NNS) TL use as deficient and prioritizing imitation of Inner Circle English. Mugford's CFLP subverts this by validating the legitimacy of English as a lingua franca (ELF) and English as an international language (EIL) practice, positioning NNS TL use as strategically adaptive rather than structurally flawed. However, the book is constrained by limitations that could affect its scalability and adaptability. Firstly, it lacks a systematic NNS TL corpus, a critical resource for the "Illustration" stage. While the book provides fragmented examples, it offers no publicly accessible multi-context corpus, creating barriers for teachers who struggle to collect high-quality data in resource-constrained contexts (e.g., developing countries), leaving a gap between theory and practice. What's more, it underdeveloped teacher-training guidelines, a bottleneck to CFLP's adoption. CFLP requires teachers to shift from knowledge transmitter to critical facilitator, a role that demands skills in guiding critical dialogue, analyzing power dynamics, and adapting the *i+i+i* mode for diverse learners, whether elementary or advanced. Though the book only briefly mentions "teacher as intellectual" without detailing training modules, a notable omission given that many FL teachers, especially in non-Anglophone contexts, could lack critical pedagogy training. Additionally, its focus on English limits cross-language applicability. Though framed as "context responsive," nearly all case studies focus on English; the book does not explore adaptations for TLs with distinct structural or pragmatic features (e.g., Spanish as a pro-drop language or Japanese as a high-context language).

In sum, the book is a transformative work that reorients FL pedagogy toward equity and learner empowerment. Its theoretical innovations and practical framework address long-standing dilemmas, while its limitations serve as a road map for further research. By shifting the field from cultivating native-like speakers to empowering learner agents who use the TL for identity expression and equitable engagement, the book establishes a new agenda for FL education, one that prioritizes learners' realities over normative standards.

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