

Critical Language Pedagogy and Language Education in Ethiopia: Examining the Tensions between Core Principles and Classroom Realities

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Abstract: This review aims to critically examine the theoretical foundations and practical implications of Critical Language Pedagogy (CLP), focusing on its relevance to Ethiopia's language education system. Grounded in critical pedagogy and socio-cultural theory, CLP conceptualizes language learning as a tool for social justice, critical thinking, and learner agency. Drawing on comparative literature and Ethiopian language policy documents, the review identifies a substantial gap between CLP tenets and the teacher-centered, assessment-driven practices of Ethiopian classrooms. Although national language policy promotes mother tongue instruction and communicative competence, challenges such as inadequate curriculum design, limited teacher preparation, and minimal classroom interaction continue to constrain the realization of CLP's core tenets. The review highlights the importance of linking pedagogy with students' socio-cultural background and advocates for more inclusive, reflective, and interactive language teaching approaches. To address these gaps, the review provides practical recommendations for policymakers. These include integrating CLP principles into teacher training programs, revising curriculum to reflect critical and communicative goals, and fostering classroom environments that value multilingual identities, student voice and critical consciousness. The findings highlight the need for systemic reforms that align instructional practices with the transformative potential of CLP, focusing on culturally relevant and participatory language instruction.

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Introduction

The conceptual, sociopolitical, and cultural factors shaping what, how, and why languages are taught make language education inherently non-neutral. Many people think of language education as a simple, unbiased process, but research has shown that it is actually quite ideological. It is a place where power dynamics are both reinforced and contested (Pennycook, 2001; Norton & Toohey, 2004). So it is not just a technical endeavor, but deeply rooted in the social, political, and historical fabric of the society, shaping the identities and opportunities of those who learn.

In response to the limitations of traditional, depoliticized language instruction, CLP has emerged as a transformative approach that foregrounds learner agency, dialogue, and social justice (Freire, 1970; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Pennycook, 2001). Drawing on critical pedagogy, socio-cultural theory, and post-structuralist views, CLP sees language learning as a means of political engagement and empowerment (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988; Kumaravadivelu, 2006). This orientation is particularly relevant for multilingual and socially diverse contexts like Ethiopia where education intersects with issues of power, identity, equal opportunity and integrity.

Ethiopia exemplifies ethno-linguistic diversity, with language education landscape shaped by the 1994 language policy that officially recognizes over 80 languages and promotes mother tongue instruction in early stages, while English serves as the medium of instruction at secondary schools and university levels (MoE, 1994). Despite these progressive provisions, classroom practices remain largely traditional characterized by teacher-centered instruction, mechanical learning, and assessment-driven outcomes (Wagaw, 2004; Alemu, 2014). Contributing factors

include limited resources, insufficient teacher training, and a lack of culturally responsive teaching materials (Heugh et al., 2007; Skutnabb-Kangas & Heugh, 2012). This review thus aims to examine the relationship between the core principles of CLP and actual language education practices in Ethiopia. In doing so, it adds to the ongoing discussion on how it can be meaningfully applied and adapted in multilingual educational contexts.

Rationale

Language education in Ethiopia has implications beyond communication, playing a central role in shaping social identity, promoting equity, and supporting national development. The national language policy promotes multilingualism by endorsing mother tongue instruction in primary education and English at secondary and tertiary levels (MoE, 1994; Taye, 2021). Despite this policy intentions, persistent gap exists between policy and practice. Language teaching remains largely exam-driven and teacher-centered, with limited opportunities for learner interaction and critical engagement (Gebregeorgis, 2017).

Ethiopia's multilingual and socio-politically diverse context makes it a compelling case for exploring CLP, which foregrounds power, identity, and social justice. However, CLP remains unexplored theoretically and under-applied practically in Ethiopian language education. This limitation may be attributed to insufficient localized research, limited teacher preparation in critical pedagogies, and weak institutional support for reflective, and participatory approaches (Tilahun, 2022; Yigzaw, 2020). As a result, language education practices often fail to address the broader socio-political dynamics that CLP seeks to engage. This review address these gaps by examining how CLP has been implemented in multilingual contexts globally and assessing its potential for transformative application in Ethiopia. It highlights neglected areas in teacher education, offers policy-relevant insights, and contributes to the

development of a more just, reflective, and context-responsive framework for language education in Ethiopia.

Objectives

The main objectives of the study include the following:

- Examine the theoretical foundations and key principles of CLP;
- Explore empirical studies on its application in diverse educational contexts;
- Critically assess its relevance to Ethiopian language education;
- identify challenges and opportunities for integrating CLP into Ethiopian language pedagogy; and
- Propose research informed policy recommendations.

Scope

Focusing on language education in Ethiopia, this review critically examines CLP through comparative perspectives. It draws on theoretical literatures, empirical studies, and policy documents published mainly between 1990 and 2024 alongside selected classical works. Ethiopia's multilingual educational context is foregrounded by examining national language policies, classroom practices, and teacher education discussions within the broader CLP framework. Comparative insights are drawn from contexts such as South Africa, Iran, and selected Latin American settings due to their shared experiences with multilingualism and inclusive pedagogical reforms. To maintain thematic coherence, studies not grounded in CLP frameworks were excluded. Accordingly, the scope of the review is defined along four dimensions: *Theoretical*: critical applied linguistics, socio-cultural theory, and Freirean pedagogy; *Geospatial*: Post-colonial, and multilingual contexts; *Timeline*: Literature published between 1990 and 2024; and *Context*: Ethiopian teaching practice, teacher education, mother tongue instruction, and language policy.

The review synthesizes peer-reviewed research and policy documents offering contextualized insights without relying on fieldwork, learner outcome data, or longitudinal studies.

Significance

By examining the relevance of CLP within Ethiopia's language education system, this review addresses a notable gap in the literature. It synthesizes empirical research and policy analysis to illuminate challenges and opportunities for educational reform in multilingual contexts. The review provides targeted insights for researchers, educators, and policymakers, supporting more equitable, socially responsive, and contextually grounded language education. Its significance can be understood at multiple levels: *Educational*: expands CLP scholarship by incorporating under-researched and contextually complex settings like Ethiopia; *Policy*: identifies misalignment between language policy and classroom practice and offers evidence-based recommendations; *Teacher development*: highlights pedagogical challenges and training needs for integrating CLP into pre-service and in-service programs; and *Social*: emphasizes the socio-political language education and promotes learner agency, multilingual identities and educational equity. Overall, the review provides a strong conceptual foundation for future empirical studies.

Limitations

While this review provides a comprehensive synthesis of existing literature, further empirical research could deepen its contributions. Future studies may consider the following areas: *Classroom-level insights*: incorporating classroom observations and teachers' narratives to better understand policy enactment in practice; *Access to local and unpublished sources*: including practitioner-generated materials and studies in Ethiopian languages to capture grassroots perspectives; *Context-sensitive comparative analysis*: examining how international

CLP models align with Ethiopia's specific socio-linguistic and educational conditions; and *Expanded language and publication scope*: exploring non-English and non-peer-reviewed sources to uncover overlooked innovations.

By identifying these limitations and directions, the review offers a solid framework to guide future research, strengthen teacher education, and inform ongoing debates on language education in Ethiopia.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodology to synthesize, compare, and critically evaluate both theoretical and empirical literature on CLP, with a particular focus on Ethiopian language education. Data sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, government policy documents, empirical studies, and theoretical texts accessed through academic databases and institutional repositories.

A thematic review approach was employed to identify, classify, and analyze recurrent themes in the literature. Key concepts related to CLP principles, language policy implementation, and pedagogical practices were read, coded, and clustered through an iterative process to generate themes. This approach is particularly suitable for examining alignments and misalignment among educational theory, policy, and classroom realities. To maintain focus and analytical coherence, the review followed these procedures: *Literature identification*: Selection of scholarly books, peer-reviewed articles, reports, and national policy documents published between 1990 and 2024. *Inclusion Criteria*: Sources were included based on their direct relevance to CLP, language policy, and classroom pedagogy. *Comparative review*: Thematic analysis of how CLP has been conceptualized and applied in multilingual contexts like South Africa, Iran, and Latin America. *Ethiopia-specific review*: Close examination of Ethiopian studies, teacher education

resources, language curriculum, and policy documents in relation to CLP principles.

Both primary sources (policy texts and empirical studies) and secondary sources (theoretical literature) were reviewed to provide a comprehensive assessment. This review thus examines foundational CLP theories alongside Ethiopian policy developments and empirical findings, highlighting persistent gaps between CLP principles, national policy goals, and classroom practices, and laying the foundation for recommendations.

Literature Review

Principles of Critical Language Pedagogy

CLP is grounded on Paulo Freire's (1970) seminal work, which views language education as a political act aimed at liberation. Central to Freire's approach is the development of critical consciousness through dialogue and reflection. In language education, this perspective encourages learners to examine how language interconnects with power, identity, and social inequality (Pennycook, 2001; Norton & Toohey, 2004).

CLP also draws on post-structuralist and socio-cultural theories that challenge the view of language as a neutral conduit for meaning. Instead language is understood as a site of ideological struggle and identity construction (Fairclough, 1992; Gee, 2012). From this perspective, language pedagogy should move beyond surface-level skill drilling to critically interrogate hegemonic discourses and empower marginalized voices. Scholars such as Kumaravadivelu (2006) and Canagarajah (2005) argue that CLP equips learners with tools to resist cultural domination and reclaim linguistic and cultural agency. Key principles of CLP include: *Dialogic and interactive learning* that values students' identities, voices, and experiences; *Critical examination of language* in

relation to power, identity, and cultural representation; *Learner agency* in meaning-making and literacy practices; *Teacher as co-learners and facilitators* rather than authoritative knowledge holders; and *Contextualized, student-centered content* that linked to learners' lived realities. Although these principles effectively applied in many multilingual contexts, their integration into Ethiopian language pedagogy remains limited and under-explored.

Practice of Critical Language Pedagogy: Empirical Insights

Empirical research from multilingual and post-colonial contexts such as South Africa, Brazil, and Iran demonstrate CLP's transformative potential. These contexts provide relevant points of comparison due to their shared characteristics including linguistic diversity, colonial educational legacies, and ongoing struggles for educational equity.

For instance, Janks (2010) documents how South African classrooms used critical literacy practices to analyze colonial ideologies, gender, and race embedded in textbooks, enabling students to challenge dominant narratives. In Iran adaptations of CLP have been shown to enhance learner engagement and critical thinking (Akbari, 2008). These cases suggest that effective CLP implementation requires more than theoretical commitment; it necessitates systemic and pedagogical reforms, including: Institutional support and flexibility in school governance and policy; Culturally responsive curriculum design based on learners' lived experiences; Teacher training programs that fosters CLP-related competencies; and Recognition of learner identity and agency. Even in these settings, challenges persist where CLP principles conflict with rigid testing procedures, harmonized curriculum, and traditional teaching practices, highlighting the need for context-sensitive approaches.

Language Education in Ethiopia

Ethiopia's Education and Training Policy of 1994, designates English as the medium of instruction at secondary and tertiary levels, while promoting mother tongue instruction in primary education, acknowledging more than 80 regional languages (MoE, 1994). In principle, this framework supports equity and linguistic diversity. In practice, however, research consistently reveals a substantial gap between policy and implementation. Limited funding, poorly designed materials, and inadequate teacher preparation hinder implementation (Heugh et al., 2007; Skutnabb-Kangas & Heugh, 2012). Learner-centered and reflective pedagogies are often replaced by grammar-translation approaches that continue to dominate instruction (Yigzaw, 2020; Tilahun, 2022). Studies by Alemu (2014) and Gebregeorgis (2017) identify persistent challenges, including: Limited inter-cultural contents in textbooks; Predominance of rote memorization and decontextualized grammar drills; Centralized, top-down curriculum structures and Minimal attention to learner voice and socio-political reflection.

Principles vs. Practices

Despite CLP's theoretical promise, its core tenets are often absent from actual teaching practices in Ethiopian language classrooms. Table 1 summarizes these discrepancies illustrating how learner identity, dialogic learning, and real-world relevance are frequently overlooked.

Table 1. Gaps in Implementation

CLP Principles	Ethiopian Classroom Practices	Implications for Learning
Method: Dialogical and reflective learning	Teacher-centered, and test driven; active learning and critical thinking are limited	Limits students' critical think, and meaningful participation
Language as social interaction and empowerment	Grammar-focused, and depoliticized instruction	Reduces relevance and critical engagement
Curriculum prioritizes learner identity and voice	Rigid and harmonized curriculum with little room for linguistic and cultural identities	Undermines engagement, and ownership of learning
The lesson contents relate to real-life experiences	Disconnects language learning from students' everyday lives and decontextualized contents	Weakens real-world skills development; learning is abstract and less meaningful
Teachers serve as co-learners and facilitators	Teachers are authoritative figures; restrict learner agency	Discourages creativity and autonomy

Table 1 illustrates the systemic misalignment between CLP theory and classroom practice, highlighting the need for coordinated reform across pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment.

These persistent mismatch suggest that without comprehensive reform, Ethiopia's language education system is unlikely to achieve its transformational goals. Aligning pedagogy with CLP tenets requires curriculum and assessment reform, sustained teacher development, adequate resource, and institutional flexibility.

Thematic Synthesis of the Literature

This section synthesizes insights from the theoretical, empirical, and policy-oriented literature on CLP, focusing on its relevance to Ethiopian language education. Five interrelated themes emerged, illuminating both the potential and limitations of CLP in Ethiopia.

Policy-Practice Disconnection

While Ethiopia's language policy promotes inclusive, multilingual education, empirical evidence shows significant divergence between policy goals and classroom realities. English instruction often reinforces existing inequalities, marginalizing learners from rural or non-dominant language backgrounds, while many teachers lack training in multilingual pedagogy (Heugh et al., 2007; Gebregeorgis, 2017). A persistent unilingual bias, privileging English is evident in curriculum design, assessment systems, and resource allocations, undermining indigenous languages despite policy commitments.

Lack of Critical Language Pedagogy in Teacher Education

Another recurrent theme is the limited incorporation of CLP in teacher education. Pre-service and in-service programs prioritize methodological skills, linguistic accuracy, often neglecting critical reflection, dialogic pedagogy, and socio-linguistic awareness (Alemu, 2014; Tilahun, 2022). This absence constrains teachers' ability to address power, identity, and inequality in multilingual classroom.

Dominance of Unilingual and Structural Language Ideologies

A salient theme in the literature is the persistence of unilingual ideologies and structural conceptions of language in Ethiopian language education. Language is often treated as a set of decontextualized grammatical skills rather than a socially and politically embedded practice -a perception

widely internalized by learners and the broader public. English is commonly associated with achievement, modernity, and socio-economic mobility, while local languages are often viewed as having limited educational value (Pennycook, 2001; Skutnabb-Kangas & Heugh, 2012).

In multilingual contexts like ours, CLP provides a framework for valuing linguistic diversity and empowering learners through the inclusion of their mother tongues into formal education enhances both engagement and academic performance (Teshome, 2007). However, the rapid and under-resourced implementation of mother tongue education has resulted in shortages of instructional materials and trained educators (Cohen, 2007). These constraints often reinforce the dominance of English, particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels.

The continued marginalization of learners' mother tongues contradicts Ethiopia's progressive multilingual language policy and broader international efforts to promote linguistic rights. It also undermines CLP's core commitment to fostering learners' linguistic agency and cultural capital within the educational systems.

Critical Language Pedagogy in Multilingual Contexts

Despite persistent challenges, substantial evidence shows that CLP with its emphasis on power relations, identity formation, and social justice offers an effective and empowering model for language education in multilingual contexts (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Janks, 2010). Such contexts, often characterized by linguistic inequality, and socio-political complexity, align well with CLP's aim of transforming language learning into a site of critical reflection and emancipation.

Case studies from South Africa, Tanzania, and Brazil illustrate how educators apply CLP to engage students in examining language-based discrimination, identity negotiation, and social problems. These practices

commonly involve community-based projects, critical discourse analysis of local texts, classroom debates, and collaborative storytelling (Brock-Utne & Alidou, 2011). Such approaches enhance linguistic competence while strengthening socio-cultural awareness and agency. This growing body of practice highlights CLP's potential to transform language classrooms into spaces of inclusion, dialogue, and transformation particularly in societies striving to reconcile diversity and equity through education.

Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

Teachers' positive outlooks play a crucial role in CLP implementation. Although many Ethiopian educators support student-centered approaches, systemic constraints such as large class size, rigid curriculum, and limited resources pose significant challenges (Tilahun, 2022). The lack of training in the ideological dimensions of language teaching further limits teachers' capacity to adopt CLP-oriented methods. In addition, teachers face pressures to cover the prescribed content quickly leaving little room for student-led inquiry or real-life problem exploration. Some educators may also be unwilling to move away from traditional teacher-centered methods due to concerns about classroom management. All in all, these themes show the potential of CLP to bridge the gap between Ethiopia's progressive language policy and its conservative classroom practices.

Synthesis of Key Insights

Overall, this review shows how CLP can transform language education by empowering learners, and fostering critical awareness of language as a site of power and identity formation. While international evidence highlights CLP's promise, implementation often remains fragmented and superficial (Pessoa & Freitas, 2012). In Ethiopia, the disconnect between progressive language policy and conservative classroom practice persists due to centralized curriculum, limited localization, exam-driven

instruction, and entrenched didactic traditions. Key challenges include: *a centralized syllabus that limits adaptation to local linguistic realities; inadequate teacher preparation; resource constraints and large class sizes; and unstable and assessment focused educational culture.*

Simultaneously, Ethiopia's linguistic diversity and rich cultural heritage present strong opportunities for CLP integration. Reframing language as a cultural and political resource supported by curriculum reform, teacher development, and institutional change can help align practice with policy.

Challenges and Opportunities in Integrating CLP into Ethiopian Language Teaching

CLP aligns well with Ethiopia's multilingual, and socially diverse context. However, its implementation faces, institutional, ideological and practical barriers. Table 2 summarizes, key challenges and opportunities highlighting strategic entry points for CLP integration through curriculum reform, teacher education, and community engagement.

Table 2. Challenges and Opportunities

Challenges	Opportunities
High stakes national examinations have built a long standing teacher centered, and test driven culture.	Growing recognition of inclusive and student-centered approaches in current policy debates and reform initiatives.
Absence of CLP integration in CPD and teacher training.	Opportunities of integrating CLP concepts into pre-service and in-service teacher education programs.
Large class sizes, limited resources, and insufficient instructional materials.	Use low-cost interactive techniques and locally relevant resources (oral histories & community texts).
English domination and indigenous language demotion.	Strong legislative backing for multilingual education by the Language Policy (MoE, 1994).
Curriculum rigidity and emphasis on mechanical learning.	Existing policy space for curriculum revisions that support CLP principles.
Limited awareness of language as a socio-political practice.	Expanding regional and international discussions on language rights and CLP.
Lack of empirical data on CLP implementation in Ethiopia.	Relevant case studies from comparable multilingual, and postcolonial contexts.

Despite challenges such as exam-oriented instruction, limited CLP-focused training, resource constraints, and unilingual ideologies, opportunities exist in Ethiopia's supportive policy framework, growing openness to pedagogical innovation and rich linguistic diversity. Therefore, the recommendations that follow build on these insights to promote sustainable and context-sensitive CLP integration across Ethiopia's language education system.

Recommendations

In the short term, a national dialogue involving key stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education, universities, NGO's, teacher associations, and community leaders should be initiated to examine the relevance and feasibility of implementing CLP framework. The process should lead to development of initial guidelines for integrating CLP principles into existing practices. CLP tenets should also be embedded in policy implementation guidelines and pilot initiatives. Practical teaching materials and resources should be developed to demonstrate how learner voice, critical inquiry, and cultural relevance can be enacted in classrooms and educational projects. Moreover, concise policy briefs should be prepared to advocate CLP-informed reforms to education officials, emphasizing alignment with national development goals such as social cohesion, educational equity, and critical thinking for employability.

Over the long term, policy revisions should formally recognize CLP as a foundational philosophy of language education, explicitly supporting learner agency, socio-political awareness, and linguistic diversity. Multilingual education policies should also be implemented across all educational levels, supported by transparent reporting systems, regular implementation reviews, and dedicated funding. A national advisory board on inclusive CLP should also be established, comprising teacher educators, scholars, and representatives of linguistic communities. This body would support the Ministry of Education in policy implementation, curriculum development and continuous professional development.

Conclusion

Integrating CLP into Ethiopia's language education system requires a coordinated, and sustained approaches that link to policy reform, curriculum redesign, and continuous professional development. CLP is not merely a teaching technique but an educational philosophy grounded in social justice, dialogue, and critical consciousness.

Although systemic change is gradual, targeted interventions such as revising learning materials to reflect linguistic and cultural diversity, strengthening teachers' professional development, and reflective assessment practices can begin to transform classroom practices and promote more inclusive, and critically engaged language education system.

The recommendations presented in this review offer a practical and context-sensitive framework for policymakers, educators, and institutions. They emphasize language teaching as a means of learner empowerment, critical reflection, and social transformation. Although some suggestions remain conceptual, future efforts should incorporate empirical classroom research, field-based trials, and participatory design to refine and localize these initiatives and cultivate learners' voices, identities, and critical capacities.

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