

Integrating Social Issues into Adult L2 Classrooms: A Critical Pedagogy Perspective

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Abstract. Grounded in Freirean critical pedagogy, this study addresses the gap between emancipatory educational ideals and the specific cultural context of Chinese adult L2 classrooms. While critical pedagogy challenges the "banking" model of education and advocates consciousness-raising through the integration of social issues, its application in China remains under-theorized with respect to local cultural constraints such as face-saving mechanisms, high power distance, and collectivist values. This study constructs a three-dimensional analytical framework synthesizing critical pedagogy, andragogy, and cross-cultural theory to investigate how social issues can be effectively integrated into adult English instruction while maintaining cultural appropriateness. Through theoretical analysis, the research designs a three-stage pedagogical path: preparation phase (establishing safe discursive spaces), integration phase (deep embedding of issues with language learning), and deepening phase (transitioning from discussion to action reflection). To address the unique cultural characteristics of China, four contextual adaptation strategies are further developed: redefining harmony as constructive conflict management rather than false consensus; changing teacher authority from positional power to expertise-based guidance; utilising collectivist wisdom through collaborative inquiry; and diversifying expression formats to respect face-saving concerns. The study comes to the conclusion that incorporating social issues into adult L2 classrooms necessitates a continuous, dynamic balancing act between critical endeavours and cultural limitations, providing a methodical localisation pathway that protects language learning and the growth of critical consciousness.

Keywords: Critical pedagogy, Social issues, Adult L2 learning, cultural adaptation, Chinese context

1. Introduction

The intellectual origins of Critical Pedagogy can be traced back to the educational practices of Paulo Freire [1]. At the same time, its theoretical foundations are deeply rooted in the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School and the tradition of the Pedagogy of the Oppressed in Brazil. This school of thought fundamentally challenges the "banking model" of knowledge transmission found in traditional education, advocating instead that education should serve as a driving force for social consciousness and social change.

Applying Critical Pedagogy to the teaching of second languages forces us to reconsider a basic question: Is language acquisition really just a neutral exercise in skill development? In actuality, social structures and power dynamics are closely related to language.

The term "social issues" as used in this paper specifically refers to social phenomena or public topics that are closely related to learners' life experiences, offer space for multidimensional interpretation, and can stimulate critical thinking. The level of controversy surrounding these issues may be relatively low (e.g., environmental protection) or moderate (e.g., workplace culture); however, extremely sensitive issues that could trigger serious political risks are beyond the scope of this discussion.

Through a systematic review of relevant literature in the Web of Science and CNKI databases, we found that existing research primarily focuses on three areas: demonstrating the feasibility of critical pedagogy in adult English classrooms; the challenges encountered and coping strategies adopted in the transformation of the teacher's role; and the development of case studies integrating social issues into teaching. Traditional intercultural teaching paradigms frequently conform tightly to the culture of native English speakers and lack critical reflection on multicultural viewpoints, according to Wang et al.'s study on critical intercultural literacy among Chinese university students [2]. However, the existing literature still has three shortcomings: First, research on adaptation mechanisms tailored to the specific cultural psychology of Chinese adult learners (such as the concept of "face" and respect for authority) remains relatively weak; Second, there is a lack of a theoretical framework capable of systematically integrating adult learning theory (andragogy) with critical pedagogy; third, most existing practical approaches draw on experiences from Western classrooms without fully considering the unique characteristics of China's collectivist cultural context.

Based on these shortcomings, this study aims to address these research gaps by constructing a system of strategies for integrating social issues into Chinese adult second-language classrooms, focusing on two dimensions: theoretical integration and localization.

2. Theoretical foundation and analytical framework

2.1. Core principles of critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogy provides the core value orientation for this study, and its theoretical framework can be summarized as three interrelated principles. First, dialogic teaching emphasizes that teachers and students are equal cognitive agents who co-construct knowledge through collaborative inquiry. For adult second-language classrooms, this means breaking away from the one-way "teacher-centered—student-receptive" model to establish a space for two-way interaction, where language learning becomes a medium for meaning-making rather than merely skill training. As Panayiotopoulos and Lichrou state, "emancipatory education is dialogical rather than curricular in nature and offers an alternative pedagogical framework, which fosters the creation of spaces of resistance through critical reflection and dialogue among students and faculty" [3].

Second is problem-posing pedagogy, which use learners' tangible life experiences as a foundation, converting abstract concepts into real-world issues for exploration. The choice of social topics ought to be grounded on learners' authentic concerns and professional experiences, employing "generative themes" to enhance learning motivation and linguistic output.

The third aspect is consciousness-raising, which enables learners to go behind the surface of quotidian experiences to identify the fundamental social power structures and ideologies. This necessitates transcending a utilitarian perspective on language and reconceptualising second language acquisition as a means of comprehending the world and recreating the self.

2.2. A Complementary perspective from adult learning theory

Malcolm Knowles' theory of adult learning (Andragogy) provides an important complementary perspective for understanding learner characteristics in this study [4]. Adult learners typically exhibit five distinct characteristics: a shift in self-concept from dependency to self-direction; a wealth of accumulated experience serving as a rich learning resource; learning readiness closely linked to developmental tasks in real-life contexts; a learning orientation that tends to be problem-centered rather than subject-centered; and learning motivation primarily driven by internal factors rather than external pressure. These characteristics offer several important insights for the design of teaching that integrates social issues.

Adult learners have extensive social experience and established viewpoints, which offer cognitive resources and an emotional basis for engaging in discussions on social issues; educators must be skilled in activating and leveraging these experiences.

Secondly, adult learners possess distinct instrumental objectives, necessitating that social issues pertain to their professional advancement or personal requirements, therefore augmenting the relevance and applicability of their education.

Finally, within a collectivist cultural context, adult learners may harbor reservations about "sensitive topics," worrying that openly expressing dissenting opinions could disrupt group harmony; therefore, instructional design must establish safe discussion spaces and risk management mechanisms. This methodology aligns with the results of a systematic literature review on Challenge-Based Learning (CBL): CBL incorporates various educational theories and pedagogical methods, such as problem-based learning (PBL) and inquiry-based learning (IBL) [5]; furthermore, CBL in higher education is founded on validated experience and theoretical principles [5].

2.3. A harmonization perspective in cross-cultural contexts

Geert Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions, along with related analyses of Confucian culture, provides a useful lens for understanding the Chinese cultural context [6]. Chinese culture exhibits a high degree of collectivism, emphasizing group harmony and a sense of belonging; it also features a high power distance, indicating that people generally respect authority and hierarchical order, indicating that people experience a certain degree of anxiety in ambiguous situations.

These cultural traits profoundly influence classroom interaction structures through the Confucian educational tradition: the tradition of respecting teachers and valuing the Way endows teachers with unchallengeable moral authority; the concept of "face" means that openly questioning or expressing dissenting opinions is often viewed as disruptive to group harmony; and communication strategies aimed at avoiding conflict are frequently prioritized over confrontation of viewpoints. Shao expressly observed in his case study of Chinese language courses in the United States: The distinctions between Chinese and American cultures regarding individualism and collectivism result in differing levels of attention from teachers to students' individual interests and differences; variations in power distance influence the disparities in teacher-student relationships and classroom management approaches in both nations [7].

These characteristics create potential tensions for the implementation of critical pedagogy. Therefore, localization strategies must account for cultural adaptation and seek a dynamic balance between critical inquiry and cultural appropriateness. Safa also emphasized this in his research on teacher preparation for hyper-multicultural classrooms: "Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) represents a transformative educational framework that emphasizes the importance of cultural responsiveness, cognitive engagement, and strong community connections" [8].

2.4. The integrated analytical framework of this study

Based on the dialogue and integration of the three theories mentioned above, this study constructs a three-dimensional analytical framework applicable to Chinese adult second-language classrooms.

Dimension One (Theoretical Level) establishes the core concepts of critical pedagogy—dialogic interaction, problem-posing models, and consciousness-raising objectives—as the value orientation for instructional design.

Dimension Two (Learner Level) fully considers adult learners' prior experiences, self-directed learning needs, instrumental goal orientation, and cultural concerns regarding sensitive issues, ensuring that teaching strategies align with learner characteristics.

Dimension Three (Contextual Level) acknowledges the collectivist nature of the Chinese cultural context, its high power distance, face-saving mechanisms, and values of harmony, viewing these factors as contextual variables that require negotiation and adaptation rather than as obstacles.

The core proposition of this framework is that integrating social issues into adult second-language classrooms is not a mechanical transplantation of critical pedagogy, but rather requires a continuous, dynamic balance between "critical inquiry" and "cultural appropriateness," achieved through creative adaptation to recontextualize theory.

3. Analysis of the challenges in integrating social issues into adult second language classrooms

3.1. Theoretical tensions

The integration of critical pedagogy into adult second-language teaching raises multiple theoretical tensions. The first tension lies between the "social change" orientation of critical pedagogy and the "skill development" orientation of traditional language teaching. Teachers often worry that overemphasizing social issues may sacrifice training in linguistic accuracy; on the other hand, they fear that focusing solely on linguistic forms may undermine the political potential inherent in critical education. Some scholars, from a post-methodological perspective, argue that the concept of traditional pedagogy is itself a product of Western modernism, neglecting power relations and ideological factors in classroom practice [9].

Second, there is a dilemma regarding the degree of intervention between the teacher's role as a "facilitator" and the cultivation of learners' "sense of autonomy." Critical pedagogy requires teachers to relinquish their authority over knowledge, but overly hands-off approaches may lead to unfocused discussions; conversely, excessive intervention may reproduce traditional power relations and stifle learners' critical thinking. As Piacentini warns, "Teaching is never neutral: every pedagogical choice reflects and reproduces social and political commitments" [10]. Besides, "the classroom, like the research field, is a site of ethical reflection and responsibility, where pedagogical choices shape how knowledge, power and care are enacted in practice" [10].

Third, there is an inherent tension between the "controversial" nature of social issues and the need for a "safe space" in the classroom. Critical pedagogy requires confronting social contradictions and power inequalities, but openly discussing controversial topics may trigger emotional conflicts or political risks, particularly in educational contexts with strong institutional constraints.

3.2. Fourfold challenges at the practical level

Based on literature review and theoretical analysis, this study systematically identifies practical challenges across four dimensions: teachers, learners, institutional frameworks, and culture.

The principal concern at the teacher level is the absence of structured training in critical pedagogy and practical assistance, resulting in technical challenges during implementation. Simultaneously, apprehensions that socially difficult subjects may incite classroom discord diminish teachers' pedagogical boldness and receptiveness.

For learners, a dependent learning style ingrained by passive education stifles independent inquiry and critical questioning; face concerns and peer pressure deter open discussion of sensitive topics and limited language proficiency hampers in-depth engagement with complex social issues. In her reflection on Hong Kong's Liberal Studies curriculum, Chen Liwei noted: "The critical thinking pedagogy advocated by the Liberal Studies curriculum.....involves the rigid transplantation of teaching methods originally designed for universities into senior high school and even junior high school settings, where they are applied to students who are minors and lack the capacity for independent thought and judgment" [11]. This cautionary observation is equally applicable to the timing of critical thinking instruction in adult second-language classrooms.

Institutional challenges primarily center on rigid curriculum guidelines and standardized teaching schedules that constrain the flexible integration of social issues, while the pressure of high-stakes standardized exams compresses the time and space required for critical teaching.

Cultural challenges are particularly significant: a structural conflict exists between the tradition of teacher authority and the egalitarian principles promoted by critical pedagogy; the "face" mechanism restricts the candid expression of dissenting views; and the tension between the principle of "harmony above all" and the discourse on contentious issues may result in "false consensus" or the evasion of substantial problems.

3.3. Existing response strategies

In response to the above challenges, existing research has proposed several strategies that provide important references for constructing a localized approach in this study. The gradual integration strategy advocates starting with social topics that are less sensitive but highly relevant (such as environmental protection and cultural differences) to gradually establish discussion norms and build trust, before transitioning to more controversial issues.

Learner-centered strategies emphasize that topic selection should fully incorporate learners' input, allowing them to determine discussion topics based on their own experiences and interests. This enhances motivation and emotional engagement while also avoiding the cultural discomfort that may arise from teachers' subjective choices.

Teacher collaboration strategies advocate establishing teacher learning communities. Through collective lesson planning, classroom observations, and reflective practice, these communities share teaching resources on social issues and provide emotional support and professional guidance.

The contextual adaptation strategy advocates adjusting discussion formats according to specific cultural contexts—such as increasing group discussions, utilizing written assignments, and incorporating role-playing—to accommodate the communicative characteristics of high-context cultures. Research by Spires et al. on critical inquiry and social action also indicates that "critical inquiry, like critical literacy, assumes that students develop a sense of agency and believe that 'they can make a significant positive difference in the world'" [12].

Although these methodologies offer significant insights for localisation procedures, their constraints must not be disregarded. Consequently, there is an immediate necessity for a more systematic localisation approach that integrates the effective components of current tactics while specifically considering the distinctive attributes of the Chinese setting.

4. Constructing a localization pathway: strategies for integrating social issues into Chinese adult second language classrooms

4.1. Design of a three-stage pathway for integration into teaching

Based on integrating existing strategies and considering the Chinese cultural context, this study identifies the types of social issues that are most relevant in the Chinese context: workplace issues (such as gender equality, overtime culture, and intergenerational communication in the workplace); social development issues (e.g., urban-rural disparities, population aging, environmental protection); cultural identity issues (e.g., the conflict between tradition and modernity, cross-cultural adaptation, cultural identity); and personal development issues (e.g., educational choices, diverse standards of success, work-life balance). These topics combine relevance, discussability, and relative safety, making them suitable entry points for exploring the localization of critical pedagogy.

Moreover, this study designed a practical three-stage integration pathway.

Stage One: Preparation Phase—Establishing a Safe Discussion Space. The core task of this stage is to clarify discussion norms through a classroom contract, establishing basic principles such as respecting differences, prioritizing active listening, and presenting arguments based on facts. Teachers can utilize low-risk topics (such as experiences of cultural differences or personal career experiences) to cultivate learners' discussion habits and expressive abilities. Crucially, teachers need to demonstrate how to express differing opinions while upholding the dignity of dialogue partners, providing discourse templates that allow for "disagreement while maintaining politeness" to address concerns arising from face culture.

Stage Two: Integration Phase—Comprehensive Integration of Societal Issues and Linguistic Acquisition. This phase uses a problem-posing approach with visuals or provocative short texts to spark critical analysis of social issues. Teachers must provide substantial language support—key academic vocabulary, sentence patterns for expressing views, and logical connectors—to address learners' language gaps. Discussions can be tiered: small groups first to create a safe space for expression, then whole-class sharing after synthesizing ideas, ensuring public speaking is well-prepared. Ye Hong proposed in his reform of critical pedagogy in writing instruction: "The core of critical pedagogy is to create an appropriate teaching context and space for dialogue between teachers and students... By breaking through traditional writing contexts, learners are liberated from constraints, unleashing their passion for writing and creativity" [13]. This philosophy is equally applicable to the design of oral discussions on social issues.

Stage Three: Deepening Phase—From Critical Discussion to Action Reflection. In this phase, project-based learning has learners conduct mini-research, analyze data, and present findings, linking language use with real-world practice. The writing reflection component asks learners to track their evolving perspectives, emotional responses, and future action plans, thereby internalizing critical awareness. Incorporating multiple voices and resources from diverse cultural, class, and political perspectives helps learners cultivate diversified views and cross-cultural understanding. A research by Spires et al. revealed that engagement in critical inquiry and social action "ignited students' critical consciousness, empowering them to perpetually contribute to and transform their world" [12].

4.2. Adaptation strategies for the cultural context

Given the specific characteristics of the Chinese cultural context, this study proposes the following adaptation strategies. About respecting the "face" mechanism, teachers should avoid forcing learners

to express their views publicly and immediately, and allow them to reserve their opinions; at the same time, they should reduce the risk of losing face in classroom interactions by providing diverse modes of expression, such as written reflections, group representative speeches, and anonymous feedback collection. During the feedback phase, a "affirmation—suggestion—affirmation" feedback strategy can be adopted to preserve learners' sense of dignity.

Mi and Yuan assert: "Foreign language instruction should endeavour to establish an environment of equality between educators and learners (vertical equality) ... Foreign language instruction must ensure equitable chances for the emancipation of students' uniqueness (horizontal equality) [14]. Regarding the redefinition of the concept of harmony, it is necessary to use classroom culture building to help learners understand that harmony does not refer to a false consensus of "no differing opinions," but rather a constructive atmosphere where "differing opinions can be treated rationally."

In harnessing collective wisdom, we can fully leverage the collectivist culture's emphasis on collaboration and collective intelligence. Through group-based inquiry, peer support, and collective presentation of outcomes, individual expression can be transformed into an integral part of collective knowledge construction. This approach not only satisfies individuals' need for self-expression but also fosters a sense of belonging within the group.

5. Conclusion

Drawing on critical pedagogy, adult learning theory, and cross-cultural context theory, this study constructs a three-dimensional analytical framework for integrating social issues into Chinese adult second-language classrooms. The core proposition is that a continuous, dynamic balance is required between critical inquiry and cultural appropriateness. This proposition not only addresses the crisis of theoretical legitimacy faced by the localization of critical pedagogy but also provides practical, actionable room for adaptation.

The findings indicate that the difficulties in integrating social issues arise from the interaction of several tensions: the tension between the liberatory aims of critical pedagogy and the structural limitations of the Chinese cultural context; the tension between adult learners' desire for self-directed learning and their dependence on traditional learning styles; and the tension between the evolution of the teacher's role and institutional inflexibility.

Addressing these challenges requires moving beyond technical fixes at the strategic level to a systemic restructuring at the pathway level. The proposed three-stage integration pathway and four cultural adaptation strategies aim to provide concrete solutions for this restructuring—upholding the core values of critical pedagogy while fully respecting the particularities of local culture; leveraging the motivational function of social issues while ensuring substantive progress in language learning.

The transformation of the teacher's role is key to implementing this approach. The shift from "knowledge transmitter" to "learning facilitator" and "dialogue facilitator" requires us to redefine the foundation of professional authority—moving away from the coercive power conferred by position toward respect earned through instructional design skills, cultural sensitivity, and ethical commitment. This transformation does not diminish the teacher's role but rather sets higher standards for professional competence.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its integration of three theoretical traditions, filling a gap in existing research on the systematization of frameworks; its practical contribution is the proposal of a set of strategies tailored to the Chinese cultural context. As a conceptual study based on literature analysis and theoretical deduction, it has not yet undergone empirical testing. Future research could adopt a Design-Based Research approach to iteratively validate and optimize

this framework in real classrooms, while also exploring the moderating role of digital teaching environments on localization pathways.

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