

**Foregrounding Primary Stakeholders in Classroom Narratives:
Toward an Inclusive ELT Pedagogy**

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Abstract

Inclusive pedagogy in English Language Teaching (ELT) has, in recent years, moved from the margins of academic debate to something closer to the centre and rightly so. This paper takes up a question that sits at the heart of that shift: what actually happens when we place the primary stakeholders of classroom life that include learners, teachers, and the classroom community as a whole at the centre of how narratives are constructed and shared in ELT settings? The paper argues that most ELT classrooms still lean heavily on prescribed curricula and textbook-driven content, and that this tendency, however unintentionally, tends to flatten or ignore the diverse linguistic, cultural, and personal worlds that learners bring through the door with them.

Drawing on critical pedagogy particularly Freire's foundational critique of 'banking' education alongside Norton's work on identity and investment, and research on dialogic teaching, the paper makes a case for narrative-based classroom practices as a meaningful route toward genuine inclusion. The argument is not that narrative is a magic solution, but rather that when learners are treated as active contributors to classroom knowledge rather than passive receivers of it, something shifts both in terms of what the classroom feels like and what it is able to accomplish. Teachers, too, are repositioned in this model: less as authorities delivering content, more as facilitators of exchange. The paper closes with a set of practical implications for ELT practitioners working in

real institutional conditions, where inclusion is not always straightforwardly achievable but is, the paper maintains, always worth pursuing.

Keywords: *inclusive pedagogy, ELT, classroom narratives, learner agency, critical pedagogy, dialogic interaction, learner identity, intercultural awareness*

1. Introduction

Language classrooms are not neutral spaces but sites where identities are constructed, this much, at least, has become something of a truism in applied linguistics. But it is worth pausing to ask what that statement actually means in practice. When a learner walks into an ELT classroom, they bring with them a whole world: a linguistic history, a cultural identity, a set of experiences and assumptions about what learning means and what English is for. The question is whether the classroom is structured in a way that acknowledges that world, or one that asks the learner to set it aside at the door.

In English Language Teaching (ELT), the prevailing tendency has long been to view learners as recipients of knowledge wherein containers are to be filled with pre-determined content delivered through standardized curricula and textbooks. This is not necessarily done with bad intentions; standardisation has its own logic, particularly in large-scale educational systems. But the effect, too often, is a classroom that speaks in one voice and expects learners to adapt to it, rather than one that makes space for the multiplicity of voices that are actually in the room.

This paper is concerned with what it might look like to do things differently. Specifically, the central claim advanced here is that when classroom narratives are opened up to include the voices and perspectives of those most directly affected by the educational process, the English language classroom becomes not only a more just and equitable space, but also a more effective one for language acquisition and development.

The central claim, developed across the sections that follow, is that when classroom narratives are opened up to include the stories, perspectives, and identities of those most directly

involved in the educational encounter, the ELT classroom becomes both a more just and a more educationally effective space.

The paper draws on three main bodies of work. The first is the tradition of critical pedagogy, particularly Freire's (1970) critique of what he memorably called the 'banking' model of education. The second is the substantial body of research on learner identity and investment associated with Bonny Norton (2000, 2013), which offers powerful tools for understanding why learners engage or disengage in the ways they do. The third is research on dialogic teaching, learner autonomy, and intercultural communicative competence. Together, these frameworks offer a theoretically grounded but practically oriented account of what inclusive ELT might look like and why it matters.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Critical Pedagogy and the Problem of the Banking Model

It is difficult to write about inclusive pedagogy in ELT without returning to Freire, and not just as a ritual citation.

His critique of the banking model of education structured on the idea that teachers deposit knowledge into passive student-recipients, who store and reproduce it without questioning or transforming it remains uncomfortably accurate as a description of much mainstream ELT practice. The problem Freire (1970) identified is not simply that this model is boring or inefficient, though it may be both of those things. In Freire's own words, the banking model of education suffers from what he described as 'narration sickness': a condition in which teachers present static, compartmentalized realities disconnected from learners' lived experiences (Freire, 1970, p. 71). The classroom becomes a place where reality is narrated to students rather than interpreted and transformed with them.

The deeper problem is that it is dehumanising it treats learners as objects of instruction rather than as thinking, feeling, historically situated human beings with their own claims on knowledge.

His alternative: what Freire termed problem-posing education honours a true dialogic relationship between the learner and the teacher, both of whom bring their knowledge and experience to bear in the conversation about questions. In this model classroom is not a place where the content is handed to the learner for passive processing but rather a place of critical inquiry. This has significant consequences for ELT in particular. It signifies language learning is not just about teaching and learning grammatical rules and language items, but it is learning language in the social, cultural and political aspects that endow language with meaning.

Yet to make the mistake of viewing Freire's work exclusively as prescriptive. His wisdom has inspired different interpretations and directions, some more to his language education's best, than others. Norton and Toohey (2004) make a particularly valuable move when they connect critical pedagogy to the question of power, identity and marginalisation in language learning and they argue in particular that a critical ELT should help its students interrogate not only the content of their language-learning lessons, but also the social conditions that shape what counts and whose don't. In more recent studies, Zaimoğlu and Dağtaş (2025). tested, with ELT graduate students, the idea that critical pedagogy could bring forth what Mezirow (1997). refers to as a 'transformative learning' genuine change in perspective and not just technique. This is significant because it indicates that the concepts underlying this study are not an abstract or intangible ones but rather can be put into practice with proper scaffolding in a classroom environment.

2.2 Learner Identity and the Concept of Investment

While Freire offers the critical pedagogical repertoire to guide readers in thinking about what it means to teach from a critical perspective, Norton offers some of the essential conceptual tools for thinking about the relationship between inclusion in the language classroom and the issues of identity. She has created a research body that has spanned over 20 years, and her argument throughout this body, is that something is missing from the standard psychological explanations of motivation in language learning. Motivation: treats engagement as a property of individual learners (Some learners are motivated, some are not.) However, this lens ignores the multiplicity of dyadic and triadic relationships acquired during class that influence both the extent of and ways in which learners are engaged in classroom life.

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An alternative notion of ‘investment’ is put forward by Norton (2000, 2013) but is not purely psychological but also sociological. Investing in language also, she says, is investing in a certain identity, in claiming a certain social community and thereby getting a certain cultural capital. Identities are multi-faceted, fluid and sometimes contradictory, and therefore so are students' investments. When a learner is quiet in class, she or he may not be unmotivated, but struggling with a difficult process of negotiating her/his identity with the identity position(s) available implicitly or explicitly in the classroom.

This insight also has real-world implications. It implies that behaviour that might seem like disengagement or resistance can be identity work and suggests that developing culturally- and linguistically responsive classrooms is more than just attending to linguistic and cognitive elements of participation.

Zhang and Gonzales (2025) illustrate this well in a recent *ELT Journal* study of a learner in Hong Kong, showing how a pedagogy attentive to World Englishers one that legitimized the learner's own linguistic heritage rather than positioning Standard American or British English as the only valid target allowed the participant to invest in multiple, intertwined identities simultaneously. The message for inclusive ELT practice is clear enough: who learners are, and what they are being asked to become, cannot be separated from how they engage with language learning.

2.3 Inclusive Pedagogy: Theoretical Foundations

Inclusive pedagogy has been defined by Spratt and Florian (2015) as 'a pedagogical approach that responds to learner diversity in ways that avoid the marginalisation of some learners in the community of the classroom.' The definition is useful, but what really distinguishes inclusive pedagogy from related concepts are differentiation, for instance, or adaptive teaching and so is its scope where differentiation typically involves tailoring instruction to individuals identified as having particular needs, inclusive pedagogy aims to redesign the conditions of classroom participation for everyone, so that difference becomes a resource rather than a problem to be managed. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) describe this as an 'everybody approach': instead of

asking what certain learners need that others do not, the inclusive teacher asks what conditions would allow all learners to participate more fully.

In the ELT context, this necessarily involves a rethinking of whose knowledge counts. Asset-based frameworks those which build on González, Moll, and Amanti's (2005) concept of 'funds of knowledge,' the cultural and linguistic resources that learners bring from their home communities are central here. There is solid empirical support for the pedagogical value of this orientation: research associated with culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017) consistently finds that learners whose backgrounds and experiences are engaged rather than ignored show higher levels of motivation, resilience, and academic achievement. The implication for ELT is not simply that diversity should be tolerated, but that it should be actively leveraged as one of the most valuable resources the classroom has.

3. Classroom Narratives as a Pedagogical Resource

3.1 The Value of Narrative in Language Education

Narrative is, in a very basic sense, how human beings make sense of experience. Long before children learn to construct grammatically well-formed sentences, they are telling stories, arranging events in time, assigning causes and effects, positioning themselves and others as characters in the ongoing drama of social life. This fundamental cognitive and social function of narrative is a resource that language educators have, at least in the more progressive corners of the field, begun to take seriously.

The pedagogical case for narrative-based approaches in ELT rests on several distinct but related arguments. In a country like India where every classroom is a tale of multiplicity of diverse social, cultural, economic and regional backgrounds, the students bring stories more than what merely talk of communicative competence.

The identity-affirmation argument is also offered. Intermediate steps between participation and results occur when a student explains and shares stories from their cultural context that are a

festival, a family practice, that runs counter to the 'normal' of the school classroom, and that is listened to with interest and respect. An unspoken, but implied message is conveyed to the learner (and to the world around them) that they are welcome in this place. Harmer (2015) reports that the positive effect of this type of affirmation on student confidence and engagement has been well documented.

And then there is the intercultural argument. A classroom in which learners from diverse backgrounds share their narratives is not merely a more pleasant environment but it is a richer educational environment, one that makes intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997; McConachy, 2018) not an add-on to the curriculum but a natural consequence of everyday classroom interaction. The 'curriculum,' in this sense, includes not just the textbook but the accumulated knowledge and experience of everyone in the room.

3.2 Narrative, Voice, and the Right to Speak

The question of who gets to speak in a language classroom, and whose stories are considered worth hearing, is not as simple as it might appear. In practice, the cultural and experiential narratives that textbooks treat as the default tend to be those associated with inner-circle English-speaking communities and this default carries a message about whose ways of being in the world are assumed to be the standard against which others are measured. Critical scholars have argued compellingly that this perpetuates forms of cultural hierarchy that sit uneasily with any genuine commitment to inclusion (Phillipson, 1992). The problem is not that learners encounter texts from Anglophone cultures; it is when those cultures are presented as the natural or inevitable content of ELT, while learners' own cultural worlds remain invisible.

Norton's (1995) concept of 'the right to speak' is particularly useful here. Drawing partly on Bourdieu's (1991) analysis of the relationship between language and social power, Norton argues that learners' participation in language-learning situations is shaped not just by their linguistic competence but by their sense of whether they have a legitimate claim to speak whether their voice, their accent, their variety of English, their social position, entitles them to be heard. In the absence or rupture of that sense of legitimacy, learners may be silent not because there is no

voice to form but because the social dynamics of the classroom have rendered their voice unimportant, if not invisible, in some way.

The pedagogical implication has been understood: To foreground learner narratives does not have to be a nice warm up exercise only. It is, as Canagarajah (2004) puts it, the creation of a 'safe house' or a space in which learners can take the linguistic and social risks that genuine learning requires, because they have been given clear signals that their voices are valued. In a context where English is often loaded with associations of social power and cultural hierarchy, creating that kind of safety is itself a political act, and a necessary one.

4. Dialogic Interaction and the Teacher's Role

4.1 From Transmission to Dialogue

One of the clearest markers of a shift toward inclusive pedagogy is what happens to classroom talk. In transmission-oriented teaching, the dominant discourse pattern is what researchers have called IRF Initiation, Response, Feedback in which the teacher asks a question, a learner responds, and the teacher evaluates the response. This pattern is so embedded in educational culture that many teachers and learners barely notice it, but its effects are significant: it positions the teacher as the sole authority on what counts as a correct or acceptable contribution, and leaves little room for the kind of exploratory, tentative, genuinely dialogic talk that characterises real thinking.

Dialogic teaching mainly explored on Vygotskian framework concepts that language is a basic means of thought and communication (Mercer, 2004), works on different logic. It is not the aim for the learner(s) to recapitulate what the teacher knows, but for everyone involved to develop new knowledge together in the process. Alexander (2006) states that dialogue should be collective (participation in a group share the problems they face); it should be reciprocal (show a genuine desire to listen and respond to one another); it should be supportive (create a psychologically safe environment for thinking about the problems together); it should be cumulative (allow contributions to accumulate over time); and it should be purposeful (teacher allows structure and guidance without domination). They are difficult to develop but there is good research behind the

importance of these. Reviews of the studies by Carless and Boud (2018) reveal that there are clear relations between dialogic feedback practices and enhanced learner autonomy, and the findings in EFL contexts provided by Alrabai (2021) illustrate that dialogic teaching which embodies autonomy-supported teaching has a significant value in positively influencing learners' level of intrinsic motivation and self-directed learning.

4.2 The Teacher as Facilitator and Co-Learner

Reframing the teacher's role as facilitative rather than transmissive does not reduce the demands on the teacher if anything, it increases them. Facilitating genuine dialogue requires a different, and in many ways more sophisticated, skill set than delivering content. It requires the ability to create conditions of psychological safety to make it genuinely clear, through both explicit statement and everyday practice, that all contributions are welcome and will be treated with respect. It requires the cultural awareness to recognize the diverse funds of knowledge that learners bring, and the pedagogical creativity to connect those funds to curriculum goals in ways that feel meaningful rather than tokenistic. And it requires a certain kind of intellectual humility, a willingness to not always be the most knowledgeable person in the room.

Reflective practice (Schön, 1983) is central to developing this capacity. Teachers who develop habits of ongoing critical reflection asking themselves, for instance, whose voices dominated today's discussion, which learners stayed silent, whether the materials they used represented a range of cultural perspectives are in a much better position to notice and address inequities in participation than those who do not. Zaimoğlu and Dağtaş's (2025) finding that engagement with critical pedagogy produced significant shifts in ELT educators' understanding of classroom power dynamics underlines the value of professional learning that goes beyond technique to engage with the political and ethical dimensions of teaching.

There is also something to be said for the idea of the teacher as co-learner. When a teacher genuinely engages with learners' narratives learns something from a student's account of a cultural practice they had never encountered or is moved by a story they had not expected to hear this is not a failure of authority. It is a model of the kind of curious, open, respectful engagement that the classroom is trying to cultivate. Scarino (2014) has argued that teachers' own intercultural

awareness and flexibility is a key determinant of their ability to promote intercultural learning in students; developing that awareness is thus not a luxury but a professional necessity.

5. Learner Autonomy and Intercultural Awareness as Outcomes

5.1 Fostering Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy is one of those concepts that ELT discourse has embraced enthusiastically but sometimes interpreted too narrowly as if it simply meant giving learners choices about what to study or encouraging them to use dictionaries independently. The ability to take charge of one's own learning can be seen as more than just Holec's (1981, cited in Benson, 2011) basic definition stipulates, as it also suggests a capacity for self-direction, including intentions, monitoring, evaluating and reflecting on one's learning. This type of independence is not given but something special which is achieved in this respect as part of the social and pedagogical process.

Toohey and Norton (2003) emphasise the importance of viewing learner autonomy as a kind of agency, created through collaborative learning communities rather than as a personal psychological characteristic. One cannot simply hand learners' autonomy; you have to create the conditions in which they can develop and exercise it. Those conditions include being treated as legitimate contributors to classroom knowledge, being offered meaningful choices rather than the illusion of choice and belonging to a community in which diverse ways of knowing are recognised and respected. Inclusive ELT, by design, attends to all of these and the research evidence, including Alrabai's (2021) longitudinal study and the broader framework of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), consistently supports the claim that autonomy-supportive, learner-centred approaches produce stronger autonomous learning than transmission-based alternatives.

5.2 Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence

The development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is perhaps the most obvious outcome of narrative-based, inclusive ELT and also one of the most significant, given the realities of how English is actually used in the world. Byram's (1997) model identifies several interrelated dimensions of ICC: knowledge of one's own and others' cultures; skills of

interpretation and comparison; openness, curiosity, and empathy toward cultural difference; critical cultural awareness; and the capacity to engage productively across cultural boundaries. The classroom practices this paper calls for works directly on each of these dimensions.

If those of diverse backgrounds tell each other their stories, they cannot merely exchange information but also come face to face with other approaches to making sense, with other understandings of how social life is organized, with other language–experience relations. This intercultural learning is not a surface learning called an "education about other countries," but a real intercultural learning, with a de negotiation of one's own assumptions, because of meeting alternative ways of being in the world. These have been reported in research on language learning and education by McConachy (2018) and others, while Üstünel's (2016) study of intercultural telecollaboration provides an example of a structured space for authentic intercultural communication experience, linked with reflection, to facilitate the cultivation of intercultural sensitivity.

It is worth emphasizing that this is a reciprocal process. The point is not for learners from non-Anglophone backgrounds to acquire intercultural competence in relation to Anglophone norms; it is for all participants including the teacher to develop greater flexibility and awareness in relation to the full spectrum of cultural and linguistic diversity that the classroom represents. Inclusive ELT, understood this way, is not just a fairer form of language teaching. It is better preparation for the genuinely multilingual, multicultural world that most of the world's English users inhabit.

6. Practical Implications for ELT Classrooms

The argument so far has been largely theoretical. That is appropriate the theoretical foundations matter, because without them, practical changes in classroom practice tend to remain superficial or short-lived. But theory has to cash out in practice eventually, and it is worth being specific about what the principles developed above might actually look like in an ELT classroom.

The first and most basic implication is to create structured, regular opportunities for learner narrative. This does not have to mean lengthy storytelling sessions that compete with other

curriculum demands. It might be as simple as beginning each lesson with a brief cultural or personal sharing activity or incorporating reflective journals as a low-stakes space for learners to write about their own experiences in relation to the themes of the course. What matters is consistency and genuine responsiveness learners need to feel, over time, that their contributions are actually heard and valued, not just elicited for the sake of form.

Second, it is worth being deliberate about the resources that count as legitimate in the ELT curriculum. Textbooks, as noted above, have a tendency to reflect a fairly narrow range of cultural perspectives and models of English use. Supplementing or challenging this with materials that represent the diversity of the global English-using community texts by writers from a range of national and cultural backgrounds, recordings of English used in diverse regional and professional contexts, and, most powerfully, the learners' own knowledge and narratives shifts the implicit message of the curriculum from 'this is what English is' to 'English belongs to all of us.'

Third, dialogic classroom norms need to be explicitly established and consistently maintained. The shift from transmission to dialogue is not automatic; learners who have spent years in IRF-structured classrooms may initially find open-ended dialogue uncomfortable or unfamiliar. Making explicit what the classroom expects that contributions will be received with curiosity, that uncertainty is valued as a starting point for inquiry, that disagreement is welcome if handled respectfully creates the psychological safety that genuine dialogue requires. Structured discussion protocols, collaborative inquiry tasks, and explicit teaching of listening and discussion skills can all support this.

Fourth, and perhaps most challengingly, inclusive ELT requires sustained attention to who is speaking and who is not and a willingness to ask why. Patterns of participation in classrooms are rarely random; they reflect social dynamics, confidence levels, and prior educational experiences that the teacher does not always have full visibility into. Regularly varying participation structures (pair work, small groups, written contributions, multimodal options), providing adequate wait time, and designing tasks in which different kinds of knowledge and experience are genuinely valued can all help to create conditions in which a wider range of learners feel that participation is worthwhile.

Finally, none of this is achievable without ongoing critical reflection on the part of the teacher. The inclusive ELT classroom is not a destination that, once reached, can be maintained on autopilot. It requires continual questioning of one's own assumptions, materials, and practices the kind of reflective engagement that Schön (1983) described as fundamental to professional expertise in complex, human-centred fields. Teachers who engage with professional learning communities, invite learner feedback, and remain genuinely curious about the dynamics of their own classrooms are best placed to sustain inclusive practice over time.

7. Conclusion

The argument advanced in this paper is, at its core, a simple one though its implications are anything but beyond individual classrooms. Positioning the people most directly affected by what occurs in an ELT classroom (in addition to learners, this includes teachers and the communities to which they belong) as active contributors of classroom knowledge as opposed to passive recipients of it opens something educationally significant, and potentially more, to be gained. When the classroom is not merely a place for the transmission of language it is a place for real learning, in the sense that word should contain. The theoretical repertoire mobilized in this argument, such as Freire's critique of the banking model, Norton's identity and investment research, education research on dialogic learning and intercultural competence, is of course not new. However, their implications in ELT practice have not been well addressed, within many settings. There is a considerable disconnect between theory and practice in the field, and only with the added support of institutional configuration can this be narrowed such as access to a diversity of culturally responsive learning materials, professional learning frameworks that consider the political and ethical dimensions of teaching as well as the technical ones, and assessment frameworks that prioritise equity over efficiency.

The difficulties to be faced in the practical application of inclusive pedagogy in real institutional settings that rely on standard assessments, standardised curriculum and diverse groups of learners are not to be underestimated. In the real classroom, there are real limitations: syllabuses are set, tests are standardised, the class size does not change, the facilities are below par. The paper doesn't say that didn't happen. However, the research examined here will consistently justice the

argument that such learner-centred, narrative-based, dialogue-oriented ELT is more equitable than anything else and more effective for a wider spectrum of learners to achieve the outcomes of ELT: linguistic competence, but also learner autonomy and intercultural awareness. It assumes, indeed, that inclusion and effectiveness are in no conflict. Their directions are the same.

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