

Review of “Frame Analysis, Critical Theory, and English Language Teaching”

Title	Frame Analysis, Critical Theory, and English Language Teaching
Authors	Robert J. Lowe
Year of Publication	2026
ISBN	978-1-03-253280-6
No. of Pages	187 pp.
Place of Publication	Oxon, United Kingdom
Publisher	Routledge

Share and cite

Jackson, L. (2026). Review of “Frame Analysis, Critical Theory, and English Language Teaching” *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching [e-FLT]*, 22(2), 149–154. <https://doi.org/10.56040/ljts2315>

Reviewed by Lachlan Jackson (Ritsumeikan University, Japan)

Growing academic interest regarding critical approaches to language teaching, has, over the past two decades, spanned such topics as materials development (e.g.: Gray, 2013; Bori, 2018), critical pedagogies (e.g.: Biel & Esleben, 2025; Cogo, et al., 2023; Crookes & Abednia, 2022; Davidson et al., 2023; Ludwig & Summer, 2023), and critical language teacher training (e.g.: Gray, 2019; Selvi & Kocoman, 2024). However, while there exists a substantial literature tracing the overall development of critical theory, when it comes to critical methodological approaches to second language teaching research, “many in the field have resisted socially and politically situated inquiry” (Davis, 2011, p. 1), and this has resulted in an underdeveloped literature (Troudi, 2015, p. 89). Robert Lowe’s *Frame analysis, critical theory, and English language teaching* is an attempt to help address this gap. So, what does it mean to be a critical language teacher/researcher? This is the departure point of Lowe’s latest work.

Clearly, critical language teaching is about “aiming to do more than simply ‘teach English’” (Marsh & Suzuki, 2023). Its objectives extend beyond merely developing in students a capacity for critical thinking—itself a completely “apolitical approach to thinking” (Pennycook, 2021, p. 2). The critical language teacher aims, broadly speaking, at “social transformation through education” (Akbari, 2008, p. 276), or as Crookes (2013, p. 8) has put it, “teaching languages for social justice, in ways that support the development of active, engaged citizens.” These transformative, emancipatory, and agentive goals of critical teaching are also features of critical research. This is because unlike the conventional interpretivist researcher who aims “at understanding a particular teaching or learning process from the perspectives of teachers or learners,...[the] critical researcher...[aims] at challenging and changing certain practices in the first place” (Troudi, 2015, p. 90).

The story that unfolds in Robert's Lowe's latest work is, in one sense, a personal reflection of one teacher-researcher's experience of gradually coming to grips with the type of researcher they want to be, the kind of research they want to engage in, and the aspirations they hold with regards to the potential impact their research might have on others. By reflecting on his initial interest in, and inclination for critical research, as well numerous interactions he has had with critically oriented colleagues, Lowe gradually comes to the realization that "[w]hile critical researchers share a common interest in social justice, the theoretical assumptions and beliefs that justify this interest can be rather divergent and at times even incommensurate" (p. 2). He notices "radical differences" regarding "the ontological and epistemological beliefs and perspectives" informing an array of critical research agendas, and this leads him "into an ongoing exploration" of what the implications are for him having labelled his work "critical" (p. 2). The narrative of this book details Lowe's quest "to establish a robust theoretical perspective within which to conceptualize [his] work". Lowe explains that while he initially conducted his research from a post-structuralist perspective, he gradually found this approach lacking. He consequently begins to seek a better way "to integrate [his] focus on "native"/"non-native" issues with other critical concerns, and with social theory more broadly" (p. 2). Lowe subsequently begins to delve into the post-Marxist critical social theory literature associated with the so-called Frankfurt School, and in particular, into the writings of Max Horkheimer. Informed by Horkheimer's theoretical insights, Lowe assembles a "bricolage" of methods from the fields of critical ethnography, critical participatory action research, critical pedagogy, and critical discourse analysis, combined with the social scientific concept of "framing" to develop his transformative, participatory research agenda (pp.7-8). The book traces his application of this "frame analysis" method to a small-scale study of undergraduate English language students studying in a prestigious women's university in Japan. In this way, the book is "a hybrid of a methodological guide and a research report" (p. 9), deserving serious consideration.

The introduction lays out the book's rationale, aims, and structure. In a well-organized literature review, Lowe surveys the ways in which the term "critical" has been interpreted and utilized by researchers in ELT and applied linguistics more generally. Such approaches include those focusing "on questions of inequality and redistribution" (p. 4), as well as others that are concerned with "issues relating to identity, diversity, and inclusion, shifting the locus of concern from structure to agency" (p.5). The tone is gentle, and Lowe to be commended for rendering this rather intimidating body of work into something both accessible and intriguing. Here, Lowe details his increasing interest in social philosophy and political economy, and how this curiosity led him to writers from the Frankfurt School, and alienation—a concept he elaborates on in subsequent chapters.

In Chapter Two, Lowe explicates the theoretical foundations of his critical approach to ELT. He first explains the overall aims of critical research, which he believes are ultimately about emancipating people from a state of alienation. According to Lowe, "the concept of alienation can be applied broadly to conditions in which people are prevented from acting freely in the world, and are thus prevented from realizing their human potential" (p. 21). Alienation, as it affects language teachers in the increasingly neoliberal and commercialized world of ELT, for example, is evidenced by "an ever-greater stultification of teaching practices, and growing attempts by language schools and centers to standardize practice and deskill teachers, often couched within the language of "standards", objectives", and "targets" (p. 23). It also manifests in the proliferation of the global coursebook, which reduces the art of teaching to a "kind of mechanistic process, akin to a factory production line" (p.23) (see also Gray, 2010). Alienation also affects language learners, for whom English language learning is often presented as a gateway to a more empowered, cultured, cosmopolitan life. Yet,

because some varieties of English are more valued than others, some students may feel “the need to [alter] or [abandon] aspects of their linguistic identity” (p. 24) in order to acquire the symbolic capital that speaking the right variety of English confers, and this may also lead to feelings of alienation. Lowe believes the ultimate goal of critical research is the “emancipation from social domination and alienation” (p. 25). The way to achieve this, he argues, can be found in the early critical theory of Max Horkheimer. Through a process known as ‘immanent critique’, critical researchers can interrogate the dominant ideologies in society to identify where commonsensical ideological understandings about the world are, in fact, contradictory to how individuals experience their social reality. By demonstrating “the ideological nature of dominant beliefs and values” (p. 36), and “highlighting the rupture between the values propounded by society and the failure of society to live up to these values” (p. 39), critical researchers can create opportunities for social transformation.

Next, in Chapter Three, Lowe introduces a methodological approach called frame analysis, and explains how it can be used “as a tool for conducting critical research focused on ideology critique and social transformation in ELT” (p. 46). He provides a concise but informative overview of four critical approaches to critical research that have influenced the development of his frame analysis: critical ethnography, critical participatory action research, critical pedagogy, and critical discourse analysis. This section, which compares and contrasts these sometimes-overlapping perspectives, is highly informative, and should be of particular interest to readers relatively new to the field of critical applied linguistics. Lowe then explains how his interpretation of frame analysis—borrowed from the field of social movement research—can be used to “connect the methods and concerns of early Frankfurt School critical theory to the work of qualitative researchers in ELT” (p. 47). Frames, broadly speaking, are “perceptual filters that can be used by individuals to interpret situations based on background knowledge or belief” (p. 56). Frames are “collectively maintained” (p. 56) when they embody the commonsensical assumptions that circulate in public discourse, and Lowe uses the term master frame to refer to the dominant “values, attitudes, and beliefs” (p. 61) circulating in society (e.g.: the desire to acquire ‘native-like’ pronunciation, the notion that a high level of English proficiency ensures upward economic and social mobility, etc.). Conversely, a counter frame can emerge when “a person begins to acknowledge the problematic reality of the conditions in which they live, and the misalignment of these conditions with their stated or dominant values” (p. 62). When participants are able to recognize “clashes between their dominant values and beliefs, and the reality of the world which they implicitly acknowledge” (p. 65), they are able to transcend the alienating social conditions that they are subjected to (p. 69). And this, according to Lowe, is the fundamental goal of critical research.

In Chapter Four, Lowe makes a marked shift from the theoretical to the practical, as he begins to describe in detail the research project he conducted in a small, elective university class to which his Frame Analysis was applied. Comprised of just two Japanese and two Italian undergraduate students, the class, called Teaching as lingua franca, explored such topics as the varieties of Englishes around the world, the concept of intelligibility, accommodation, code-switching, and intercultural communicative competence. The stated goal of this 15-week course was

“not to convince the students of any specific set of ideas around ELT, but rather to familiarize them with an area of thought within the field which is growing in prominence and influence, and which they would need to be aware of as potential language teaching professionals” (p. 77).

Lowe took a three-pronged approach to data collection. Firstly, fieldnotes were taken during the lessons, and in addition, Lowe kept a research journal, where he recorded more formally his impressions after each class. Secondly, at the start of the course, the students participated in individual, semi-structured interviews “to collect examples of their declared beliefs with regard to the English language and English language education prior to being exposed to” (p. 81) course content. Thirdly, Lowe analyzed the work produced by the students as the course progressed, as well as the students’ final project that “offered deep insights into the ongoing tensions, conflicts, and unresolved questions they were considering at the end of the course” (p. 82). Lowe initially identified in the students a master frame regarding the students’ conceptions of ELT coalescing around three major themes: notions concerning the ownership and status of different varieties of English; the idea that English was a ‘tool’ that could be acquired and utilized by anyone; the view of English learning as a form of human capital investment that could be leveraged to achieve economic, social, and cultural advancement. Lowe notes that while the first two discourses of the master frame “appeared to be influenced by socially liberal beliefs around tolerance, diversity, and cultural pluralism, ... the third was more expressive of neoliberal ideas” (p. 93) relating to an ever-increasing globalized economy. As the course progressed, however, he noticed that the students gradually began to voice more nuanced views that contradicted elements of the master frame when contrasted with their own language learning experiences.

In the following chapter, Lowe sets out how he broached these contradictions with the students in his study. Sometimes this was done in ‘real time’, during class conversations in which the contradictions arose. In other instances, Lowe elected to engage students later—in a subsequent class, or by email, for example. The range of student responses ranged from “frame maintenance” (where students essentially ignored the contradiction); “frame sheltering” (where students acknowledged the contradiction, but maintained their original frame when pressed); “frame modification” (where students acknowledged the contradiction and made small, consolatory amendments to their original frames without forgoing them completely); and “counter framing” (where students expressed marked changes in their reframing based on the insights they had gained from participating in the course) (pp. 66-67).

Chapter six reports on findings drawn from the student’s final assignment. For this piece of assessment, students were asked to collaborate in a series of recorded discussions with each other and produce a co-authored report “to dialogically reflect together on what they had learned, and thus to continue the process of reflection and negotiation of views that had occurred in the class itself” (p. 137). Although Lowe was struck by the “fractured and inconclusive qualities” (p. 140) of the students’ report, it did suggest, overall, that they had developed a more-ELF aware perspective contrastive of their previously held views about ‘native speakers’ as reified exemplars of correct English. Students also reportedly expressed greater awareness that, far from being a resource freely and equally available to all, English is, in fact, tightly bound to dominant cultural expectations about inner circle countries, and that this has problematic implications for how it is both learned and leveraged by people who are not from such countries. Lowe is both realistic and measured in the claims he makes about the extent to which the class enhanced the critical dispositions of the participating students. He observes:

“Rather than a clear and unidirectional shift of ideas, we see the perspectives of the students developing through constant change and negotiation with each other, with the researcher, and within themselves. Their final counter-framing might not represent the radical change that a critical researcher may hope for, but it

certainly points to an unsettling of perspectives, and a seeming awareness of the limits of the ideology that had earlier characterized their views” (p. 152).

Here, it should be emphasized, that the ultimate aim of Lowe’s critical approach was never to convert his students to his own ideological position. It was simply to “confront their own ideas with their acknowledged social reality, so as to highlight antagonisms between the two, and thus provide a space in which they could work to transcend both” (p. 163).

In the concluding chapter, Lowe reflects on his study. He flags several “pitfalls to avoid” (p. 170) as well as a number of theoretical, practical, and ethical questions for consideration. Of these, one, concerning the transformative, emancipatory, interventionist goals of critical research, struck me as particularly interesting: “[W]hat right does the researcher have to try and enact change in a research setting?” (p. 168). Lowe’s exploration of this oft-cited reservation regarding critical research (and teaching, for that matter) is honest, considered, and logical. Here, he adopts a Freirean perspective, emphasizing the need for researcher/teachers to meet research participants (and students) “in the field as equals, adopt a position of humility, and view the project as something akin to a collaboration through dialogue and discussion (pp. 171-172).

The strengths of Robert Lowe’s Frame analysis, critical theory, and English language teaching are readily apparent. First, Lowe presents the complex and, for some, intimidating subject of critical theory in a fashion that is both highly accessible and engaging. Second, he presents his version of frame analysis in a way other researchers will be able to draw from and modify to their own research contexts. Third, Lowe’s description of the project is unquestionably honest. He readily acknowledges the limitations of his approach, and the messiness that this kind of research entails. As such, his assertions are both bridled and sustainable. Robert Lowe’s latest work displays all the hallmarks of sound research—it is ethical, theoretically robust, reflexive, logically presented, and above all else, thoroughly engaging. It is, therefore, also highly recommended.

References

- Akbari, R. (2008). Transforming lives: introducing critical language pedagogy into ELT classrooms. *ELT Journal* 62(3) 276–283.
- Biel, A. & Esleben, F.N. (Eds.). (2025). *Social justice in language education: taking action*. Multilingual Matters.
- Bori, P. (2020). *Language textbooks in the era of neoliberalism*. Routledge
- Cogo, A., Crookes, G.V., & Siqueira, S., (2023). *English for a critical mind: language pedagogy for social justice*. Delta.
- Crookes, G.V. (2013). *Critical ELT in action: foundations, promises, praxis*. Routledge.
- Crookes, G.V. & Abednia, A. (2022). *Starting points in critical language pedagogy*. Information Age Publishing.
- Davis, K.A. (2011). Introduction: towards critical qualitative research in second language studies. In K.A. Davis (Ed.), *Critical qualitative research in second language studies: agency and advocacy*. Information Age Publishing.
- Davidson, K.S., Johnson, S.M. & Randolph Jr., L.J. (Eds.). (2023). *How we take action: social justice in PK-16 language classrooms*. Information Age Publishing.
- Gray, J. (2010). *The construction of English: culture, consumerism, and promotion in the ELT global coursebook*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gray, J. (Ed.). (2013). *Critical perspectives on language teaching materials*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ludwig, C. & Summer, T., (Eds.) (2023). *Taboos and controversial issues in foreign language teaching: Critical language pedagogy in theory, research and practice*. Routledge.
- Marsh, R. & Suzuki, M.A. (2023). Imparting criticality and raising consciousness: Aiming to do more than simply ‘teach English’. *The Center of English as a Lingua Franca Forum* (3). 15–24. Tamagawa University.
- Pennycook, A. (2021). *Critical applied linguistics: a critical reintroduction*. Routledge.

- Selvi, A.F. & Kocaman, C. (Eds.). (2024). *International perspectives on critical English language teacher education*. Bloomsbury.
- Troudi, S. (2015). Critical research in TESOL and language education. In J.D. Brown & C.A. Coombe (Eds.) *The Cambridge guide to research in language teaching and learning*. Cambridge.