# Critical Pedagogy in the French Language Classroom in Ghana: Challenges and Perspectives

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## Introduction

Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy positions education as a tool for social change. Nkansah (2021) affirms this view, describing critical pedagogy as "an educational philosophy that seeks to empower students through thought and action." The philosophy emphasises students' "critical thinking and action, which leads to the transformation of society and conditions of life" (Freire, 1968, as cited in Nkansah, 2021, p 161). In Ghana, however, there appears to be some struggle with the integration of critical pedagogy. Recent literature suggests that instructional methods of teaching in the country are outdated as they often lack contemporary approaches such as critical consciousness, critical thinking, and problem posing, all of which are rooted in critical pedagogy. It is therefore not surprising that Nkansah (2021) characterises the instructional delivery methods in Ghana as "rigid curricula with little or no classroom discussions and interaction" (2021, p. 160). According to her, "These practices restrict creativity and transformation as students are separated from inquiry and only perform the role of listening, memorising, and repeating the thoughts and ideas teachers narrate. Students lack exposure to learning environments that are conducive to cultivating critical thinking skills and developing critical consciousness" (Nkansah, 2021, p. 160). This is a cause for concern, as fostering critical consciousness in education is essential for empowering citizens to drive positive change and make a lasting impact.

This challenge also extends to language learning in Ghana. In their study, "Exploring Spontaneous Communication in the Language Classroom," Yegblemenawo & Yegblemenawo (2018) observed that many French language lessons in selected senior high schools in Ghana relied heavily on what Freire describes as the banking model of education. Students were largely passive and seldom engaged in any form of critical thinking or critical consciousness. Lomotey (2021) reinforces this observation stating that "Students in most schools in Ghana are only expected to reproduce but not engage the teacher and other colleagues in any dialogue" (Lomotey 2021, p. 20). In this system, students are seen as passive receivers of information, as the teacher is perceived as the master of all knowledge who comes to provide lots of information that students need to pass their final examinations. This teacher-centred approach limits creativity, suppresses critical thinking, and impedes the development of critical consciousness in Ghana's secondary school system.

Similarly, Nyamekye & Zengulaaru (2023) highlight the cultural contradictions between the Western critical pedagogy and the Ghanaian cultural construction of childhood. Their study, grounded in indigenous Ghanaian proverbs and oral traditions, argues that the African child is expected to be submissive and avoid questioning authority. Their work complements the findings of Anlimachie et al. (2025) on rural education by showing how deep-rooted cultural constructs, not just resource limitation, constrain pedagogical innovation. These values often conflict with the integration of critical pedagogy.

These prior studies present a complex picture of the Ghanaian classroom. While the potential for transformative pedagogy exists, cultural, institutional, and policy-driven constraints often hinder its implementation. The findings on rural education further illustrate why Ghana's move toward learner-cantered education encounters implementation challenges beyond institutional factors.

While alternative pedagogical approaches—such as experiential learning, inquiry-based learning, and project-based learning which focus more on hands-on and problem-solving activities—have been explored in Ghanaian schools (see Boakye-Yiadom et al., 2025; Assuah, 2022; Ananga, 2013), critical pedagogy remains less researched in the context of teaching and learning French. What remains largely unexamined is how these challenges manifest in the French language classroom in an anglophone country like Ghana.

This study, therefore, seeks to investigate why critical pedagogy is not widely practised in French language classrooms in Ghana, despite its documented benefits. Through reflections from selected French language teachers, this study explores the challenges they face in integrating critical pedagogy, the systematic barriers to implementation, and potential strategies for bridging this gap. To guide this investigation, the following research questions are posed:
1. What reasons account for the absence of critical pedagogy in the French language classroom?
2. How can this be resolved?

By examining these questions, this study aims to contribute to ongoing conversations about developing 21st-century skills in Ghanaian pre-tertiary students. It focuses on critical consciousness, and education as a political act, and uses Freire's concept of critical pedagogy as a framework.

The study first discusses the foundations of critical pedagogy in the language classroom and then situates French language teaching as the focal point of analysis. This is followed by a contextual overview of the teaching of the French language in Ghana, the research methodology, findings, pedagogical implications, recommendations, and the conclusion.

**Theoretical Framework**

**What is Critical Pedagogy?** The term, according to Breunig (2016), describes critical pedagogy as an approach that shapes teaching how one teaches, what is being taught, and how one learns. It involves rethinking, negotiating, and transforming the relationship among classroom teachings, knowledge creation, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community and society.

In other words, critical pedagogy promotes the belief that teaching should challenge learners to examine power structures and patterns of inequality within the status quo. It calls for a pedagogy that adopts a new relationship between students, teachers, and society.

**Paulo Freire and the Idea of Critical Pedagogy.** Freire, in advancing the ideology of liberation and critical consciousness, argues that there is no such thing as neutral education, and that "Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the

younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity, or it becomes the practice of freedom, how men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (Freire, 2000, p. 34).

Contrary to traditional pedagogy, which Freire refers to as the *banking system*, where the student is perceived as an "empty shell waiting to be filled with knowledge, like a piggy bank" (Freire, 2000), he strongly advocates for education to treat the student as co-creator of knowledge. To him, the younger generation does not need to meekly accept society's status quo, as education should help them critically and creatively engage with reality to transform their world.

According to Freire (2000), the more students focus on storing the information deposited in them, the less they develop the critical consciousness necessary for becoming agents of change. The more learners accept the passive role imposed on them, "the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them" (Torre et al., 2017).

Freire further argues that the purpose of education is to liberate human potential, and that is much more than a teacher simply depositing information into the mind of a learner. Torre et al. (2017) emphasise that Freire's dialogical approach to learning—as opposed to the banking model of education—adds philosophical strength to the use of problem-based learning as a primary learning modality. In other words, learners play a passive role in their learning process, as they are expected to receive, memorise, and reproduce information instead of engaging in problem-solving, critical thinking, or interactive discussions (Currell, 2020).

This approach, according to Currell (2020), has a disempowering effect on learners and can create a misuse of power. Freire's antidote to this dehumanising approach is Critical Thinking and Pedagogy which encourages participation. In a nutshell, Freire simply encourages teachers to help their students to be critical, not in the sense of objecting to everything, but in the sense of being committed to engaging in deep, critical reflections.

**Critical Pedagogy in the Language Classroom.** Critical pedagogy in language teaching, according to Crookes (2012), "is a perspective in language curriculum theory and instructional practice that supports and advances teaching and the study of languages in ways that would promote social justice" (Crookes, 2012, p.1). In his opinion, *critical pedagogy* is the most widespread term for social justice-oriented tendencies in applied linguistics and language teaching.

Crookes (2012) further explains that the term *social justice* is rooted in various critiques of present-day society (or societies) that reflect the interests of the working class, women, non-heterosexuals, ethnic minorities, marginalized peoples, and includes perspectives that valorise environmental conservation and peace (Crookes 2012, p.2).

In the language-learning classroom, Critical pedagogy requires the teacher to reflect and consider not only the objective of getting students to speak a particular language fluently but also places the burden on the teacher to help students "identify the hidden (and often not-so-hidden) biases about language, social class, power, and equity that underlie language use…to develop critical approaches to examining and understanding such knowledge" Reagan and Osborn (2020, p.184).

Teaching language with a critical or social justice focus is to "embed social justice issues in a way that supports language proficiency goals and other elements from the world language curriculum while also allowing room for students to engage in transformative learning" (Randolph Jr. & Johnson, 2017, p.99). Glynn et al. (2018) argue that "The world language classroom is uniquely suited to challenge, confront, and disrupt misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that lead to structural inequality and discrimination based on social and human differences." They suggest that the information provided by the teacher, along with the approaches and techniques used, can encourage students to "extend beyond the visible to the invisible" (Glynn et al., 2018). This transformation allows the world language classroom to evolve into "a learning environment that promotes critical thinking and agency for social change" (Glynn et al., 2018, p.14).

Randolph Jr. and Johnson (2017) further assert that "The language education classroom provides the ideal context for entering critical, transformative spaces of culture and community study informed by a social justice framework." Because, while social institutions use traditional pedagogy to prepare students to function in the social conditions in which they find themselves, "Critical pedagogy prepares students to resist, reconsider, reflect, and enact change in response to social inequity" (Randolph Jr. & Johnson, 2017, p.101). However, Pennycook (1990) adds that the nature of second language education requires us to "understand our educational practice in broader social, cultural, and political terms, and it is to critical pedagogy that I think we could most profitably turn to extend our conception of what we are doing as language teachers" Pennycook (1990, p. 306).

**French Language Education in Ghana**

Ghana is an English-speaking country in West Africa, surrounded by three francophone countries: Togo to the east, Burkina Faso to the north, and Ivory Coast to the west. To engage effectively in trade, diplomacy, and regional integration with these francophones, Ghanaians must communicate effectively in both oral and written French. This will facilitate socio-economic transactions and foster strong cross-border partnerships without language barrier issues.

In Africa, French is one of the key working languages of most, African and international organisations such as the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA, 1958), the African Union (AU, 1963) as well as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS, 1975). With nine out of 16 West African countries being francophone, five anglophone, and two luxophone, it is strategically important for English-speaking countries, like Ghana, to encourage their citizens to learn the French language.

Over the years, Ghana has taken significant steps to promote the teaching and learning of the French language, recognising the key roles it plays during peacekeeping missions (Yegblemenawo, 2012; Yegblemenawo, 2018), regional integration, diplomacy, and economic cooperation in West Africa. The government of Ghana has encouraged its study at all levels of education—from primary 4 to primary 6, through junior high school (JHS), and senior high school (SHS), as well as in many of its tertiary institutions—to develop all four competencies of

language acquisition which are: oral comprehension, written comprehension, oral expression, and written expression. This commitment is further reinforced by Ghana's recent acceptance as a full member of the International Organisation of La Francophonie (OIF), after years of associate membership.

In 2023, the government of Ghana, through the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NaCCA), introduced a new French curriculum for the SHS level aiming to equip students with 21st-century skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving, collaboration and communication, innovation and creativity, and global citizenship and multilingual competencies. Successfully developing these skills in learners will depend on the fidelity of implementation in the classroom.

To ensure the effective teaching and learning of French in Ghana, the Centre Regional pour l'Enseignement du Français (CREF) training centres were established in all ten (at that time) regional capitals in 1992. These training centres, in collaboration with the French Embassy in Ghana, have served as locations for in-service training sessions and provided pedagogical support and teaching/learning resources to French language teachers across the country at both the JHS and SHS levels. However, recent engagement with the CREF National Coordination Office indicates that the frequency of in-service training has reduced due to funding constraints, limiting the centres' ability to equip teachers with up-to-date pedagogical approaches which support the development of 21st-century skills.

In addition to CREF, the Ghana Association of French Teachers (GAFT), though not a training centre, supports teachers through initiatives such as the discussion on best practices and policy developments during annual congresses, reading programmes such as *Lire en fête* (which promotes French literacy among learners), the celebration of the *Journée Internationale des Professeurs de Français* (JIPF), and through the publication of *INFOPROF*, the association's journal dedicated to the teaching of French language in Ghana. However, despite these supportive initiatives, the unavailability of funding negatively impacts both CREF and GAFT. Without regular opportunities for French teachers to stay updated on new pedagogical approaches, it will be challenging to effectively implement the French curriculum.

**Methodology**

**Research Design and Sample.** This research uses a qualitative approach to investigate the implementation of critical pedagogy in French language classrooms in an anglophone context. Using a purposive sampling technique, 20 French language teachers, each with more than three years of teaching experience at the senior high school level in Ghana were selected from 20 public secondary schools. These teachers were purposively chosen to ensure insights were gathered from participants with sustained classroom experience, specifically those who had taught for at least three consecutive academic years.

**Data Collection Method and Analysis.** Data for the study were collected through virtual focus group discussions conducted via Zoom and WhatsApp video calls. Four focus groups, each comprising five language teachers, engaged in in-depth discussions to share their views, perceptions, and experiences related to the implementation of critical pedagogy in their French

language classrooms. On average, the focus group discussions lasted between one hour and one and a half hours. These discussions were audio recorded after verbal consent had been obtained from all participants.

Audio data were segmented and annotated using Audacity and ELAN software. The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method was used for data analysis following a systematic coding process. As outlined by Smith et al. (2009), the IPA is grounded in three theoretical orientations:
1. Phenomenology – Understanding how experiences appear to individuals.
2. Hermeneutics – Interpreting the mindset of individuals to decode their lived experiences.
3. Idiography – Focusing on understanding an individual or specific case rather than making broad generalisations about groups.

IPA was adopted because it offers in-depth insights into how individuals, within specific contexts, make sense of a particular phenomenon (Smith et al., 2007) - in this case, language learning. The method emphasises understanding the participants' experiences from their parsecs (emic view) while considering the researcher's interpretative stance (etic view).

**Participant Profile.** The participants in this study were all French language teachers drawn from various public senior high schools (SHS) across Ghana, ensuring a diverse geographic representation. All 20 participants were professional, certified teachers, each holding at least a bachelor's degree which is the minimum academic qualification required to teach at the SHS level in Ghana.

Of these, 16 (80%) held a Bachelor of Education degree (B.Ed.) in French, a degree that integrates academic content with professional teacher training. The remaining four participants (20%) held a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in French. These four had also completed professional teacher training at a college of education before obtaining their B.A. degrees; two had a three-year post-secondary Teacher's Certificate 'A' and the other two had a Diploma in Education in French. In addition to the minimum qualification, four out of 20 participants (20%) had pursued a Master of Philosophy degree (M.Phil.) in French as the highest academic qualification.

As shown in Table 1:
- Five of the participants (25%) had been teaching between 4 and 9 years.
- Seven participants (35%) had 10-15 years of experience.
- Six participants (30%) had been teaching for 15-20 years.
- The remaining two participants (10%) had more than 20 years of teaching experience.

**Table 1**
*Participants' Years of Teaching French*

| Professional Experience | Number | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| 4-9 years | 5 | 25% |
| 10-15 years | 7 | 35% |
| 15-20 years | 6 | 30% |

| 20+ years | 2 | 10% |
|---|---|---|
| **Total** | **20** | **100%** |

**Discussion of Findings**

**Research Question 1: What Reasons Account for the Absence of Critical Pedagogy in the French Language Classroom?** Participants were first asked how frequently they integrated critical pedagogy into their classrooms. Fifteen out of the 20 teachers (75%) reported they did not incorporate critical pedagogy at all in their French language class. The remaining five teachers (25%) admitted that they occasionally implemented it.

When probed further about what could have accounted for this, participants cited a range of factors influencing their limited use of critical pedagogy. These responses have been categorised into thematic areas and presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**
*Reasons for the Absence or Occasional Integration of Critical Pedagogy by Participants in Their French Language Classrooms*

| Themes | Samples of Participant's Voice |
|---|---|
| **Limited instructional time** | ▪ "The time allocated to teach French is inadequate to explore critical pedagogy."<br>▪ "The term is so short that if I integrate critical pedagogy in my lessons, I will not be able to teach all the topics I need to teach each term."<br>▪ "The time allocated is not adequate to listen, let alone address all the varying views of my students." |
| **Learner passivity and reluctance** | ▪ "Most of my learners are timid. They do not even want to talk in class despite all the effort I put in to encourage them. This makes it difficult to engage in critical consciousness." |
| **The perceived complexity of the curriculum** | ▪ "I believe it is complex to apply. I tried it a few times, and it didn't work. Probably because classroom conditions are unfavourable."<br>▪ "After 19 years of teaching so far, I think it is not practicable because our educational system and evaluation system seem not to valorise its application." |
| **Learner language proficiency barriers** | ▪ "My students' level of proficiency is too low for such class activities. This makes it impossible to even have engaging discussions with them."<br>▪ "I think comprehension on that part of learners is key to facilitating the successful integration of critical pedagogy. When learners do not understand what you are trying to discuss with them, it becomes difficult to engage in meaningful conversations."<br>▪ "Most of my students do not understand French and cannot speak the language, so it is a struggle to engage them in critical thinking and all." |

| Memorisation culture in the education system | ▪ "Students are used to memorisation from day one at the basic school level through to the junior high school level, and so it's difficult to change their way of learning at this stage regardless."<br>▪ "It is not in tune with our current instructional lesson delivery mode, where students need to reproduce what is taught and nothing else…the focus is on how to make students pass exams and nothing more." |
|---|---|
| Diverse learner abilities | ▪ "Individual differences are one reason…some students can assimilate quickly…. but others can't and that destabilises the pace of discussions during lessons." |
| Overcrowded classrooms | ▪ "I currently have a class size of 45 students, and it is very difficult to address each student as an individual or even give them all the chance to express themselves."<br>▪ "The class size is so large that I find it difficult to engage my learners in class activities."<br>▪ "It's impossible to integrate critical pedagogy. I have a large class, and I need to complete the syllabus before exams." |
| Limited instructional resources | ▪ "Most of the textbooks available are based on the French spoken in France, ignoring the French spoken in the francophone countries in Africa."<br>▪ "In my institution of work, we are entreated to strictly follow what is in the textbooks. So, if textbooks do not have activities that are tailored towards critical pedagogy it is difficult."<br>▪ "I started to integrate it at some point, but I stopped because I did not find it easy. It wasn't easy at all, so I stopped. I no longer apply it in my class. This is because of a lack of materials, resources, and cooperation from students."<br>▪ "Classroom conditions were just not favourable, so I stopped at a point…" |
| Final examination not critical pedagogy-oriented | ▪ "You see, not until the format of standardised test[s] or evaluation[s] by the West African Examinations Council integrates questions that are tailored towards critical pedagogy, most of my colleagues and I, personally, will not be encouraged to use it. Yes, it is beneficial for the learners, but will it help them pass their exams, which are only geared towards encouraging memorisation? No!" |
| Teacher training gap and pedagogical preparedness | ▪ "Honestly, I feel I am not well-equipped with the requisite knowledge to successfully integrate critical pedagogy in my class."<br>▪ "I cannot integrate something that I am not an expert at…in this case, the integration of critical pedagogy." |

**Research Question 2: How Can This Be Resolved?** All the respondents agreed that critical pedagogy is beneficial as it broadens the minds of students, enhances their ways of thinking, and deepens their perspectives on society. They all supported the view that critical pedagogy helps to deconstruct notions of inferiority and superiority complexes while fostering values such as respect, morality, and equality in students. Therefore, they offered several suggestions to encourage the regular integration of critical pedagogy in classroom practices.

***Curriculum and Textbook Revisions.*** Participants proposed that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NaCCA) use accredited textbooks which incorporate critical pedagogy orientations. They emphasised the need for balanced cultural representation, noting that current materials often prioritise Parisian French at the expense of Afro-Francophone cultures as well as Canadian Francophone cultures. However, learning a language also entails embracing the unique culture of its speakers. By exposing French language learners in Ghana to francophone cultures beyond the Parisian context, they are more likely to appreciate the histories, lifestyles, and socio-cultural challenges of these communities. Such exposure, in turn, promotes respect for socio-cultural differences, diverse political views, and gender issues, while helping to reduce—if not eliminate—false stereotypes and discrimination against speakers of the non-Parisian French varieties, which are often perceived as inferior.

***Student Engagement and Classroom Discussions.*** Teachers should find ways to motivate students to actively participate in classroom discussions. This involves recognising the uniqueness of each learner by understanding the personal circumstances that may influence a student's classroom behaviour and engagement. Such awareness enables teachers to make sound judgments regarding relevant discussion topics that resonate with students' lived experiences. Consequently, teachers must be well-informed and thoroughly prepared to sustain meaningful discussions and foster continuous student engagement.

***Resource Persons and Extracurricular Engagements.*** Participants suggested that resource persons can be invited to share their lived experiences with learners in the French language, or through a combination of languages that facilitate understanding. This approach not only introduces new vocabulary but also encourages interactions among students. Additionally, extracurricular engagements—such as excursions to cultural centres or historical sites and establishing French clubs—can expose learners to diverse cultural narratives and enhance their understanding of the target language through real-life cultural immersion.

***Integrating Real-Life Situations into Classroom Activities.*** Teachers should be encouraged to integrate real-life situations into classroom discussions by utilising available platforms to introduce diverse, relatable topics. This contextual approach enhances learners' ability to apply practical, common-sense solutions, thereby promoting active classroom participation and encouraging civic engagement beyond the school environment.

***Reforming Assessment Strategies.*** Final examination questions should be designed to assess students' abilities to make inferences and formulate independent viewpoints. This approach would greatly reduce students' over-reliance on rote memorisation (commonly known in Ghana as "chew and pour") and encourage critical thinking that applies to learners' unique environments.

***Encouraging Native Language Reflection.*** To encourage critical thinking among learners with limited language proficiency, teachers should provide opportunities for learners to reflect in their native languages where necessary without restraining their development in the target language (French). Randolph Jr. & Johnson (2017) assert that this strategy not only fosters critical thinking but also expands learners' vocabulary through translation and cross-linguistic reflection.

**Conclusion**

As Osborn (2000) rightly puts it, world language education is "…unsurpassed in its power to liberate the mind and spirit from the prisons of cultural provincialism, servile ideological conformity, and social class distinctions, thereby freeing the person to think for herself or himself." This assertion continues to gain relevance in today's diverse and globalised educational contexts. "Critical reflection in the language classroom will serve as a powerful means to that end" (Osborn, 2000, p.124).

It is, therefore, imperative for language teachers to intentionally cultivate critical thinking in their classrooms. Rather than dismissing or discouraging learners who question traditional norms or challenge instructional authority, teachers should foster an open and inclusive learning environment, one that actively invites and values diverse student perspectives. This encourages learners to engage thoughtfully with language, culture, and society

The findings from this study show various implications for the teaching and learning of French in Ghana especially in the light of ongoing new curriculum reforms at both the pre-tertiary and tertiary levels of education. Despite these reforms, critical pedagogies remain largely absent in many language classrooms in Ghana. This gap could be because of limited focus on critical pedagogies during initial teacher training as well as inadequate and unsustainable support through continuous professional development initiatives. While interventions such as Professional Learning Communities (PLC) have been introduced to support teachers in integrating various interactive and learner-centred pedagogies into their lessons, many teachers still rely on teacher-centred pedagogies. This study also found that some teachers give assessments which tend to reward memorisation, thereby undermining the development of critical thinking and other essential 21st-century skills.

To empower learners as conscious thinkers who are capable of interrogating societal norms, deconstructing harmful ideologies, such as linguicism and articulating their values and beliefs, language teachers must assume transformative roles. As professionals, language teachers are well-positioned to guide learners in becoming informed, engaged citizens who are equipped to make ethical and socially responsible decisions.

There is, therefore, an urgent need for language teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers to rethink and revolutionise educational content policies as well as teaching approaches. Such reform will help shift learners from passive recipients of information to active critical thinkers, who are agents of positive, sustainable change in their communities, countries, and the world.

As the popular saying goes, "Challenges come to us to make us better, not bitter." It is, therefore, important for language teachers to view these challenges as opportunities for professional growth. By embracing and addressing them, teachers can make the teaching and learning process not only engaging and dynamic but also more meaningful and fulfilling for both themselves and the learners.

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