



EMPOWERING LEARNERS THROUGH DIALOGUE: A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY APPROACH TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN PAKISTANI CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

The paper explores the application of dialogic pedagogy, grounded in Critical Pedagogy theory, in English language classrooms across public secondary schools in urban Punjab, Pakistan. The study is based on the problem-posing model of Paulo Freire and the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky. It explores how dialogic instructions can redistribute classroom power, develop critical consciousness, and authentic communicative competence among students. A convergent mixed-method design was used: systematic classroom observations recorded discourse patterns, semi-structured interviews were conducted exploring beliefs and dilemmas of 15 teachers, and pre/post-surveys were used to measure changes in the critical thinking disposition, learner agency and perceived communicative confidence of 100 Grade-10 students during a period of one academic year. The triangulation of quantitative gains was done with qualitative vignettes that depicted increased student-initiated questioning, peer scaffolding and language use in context. The results confirm that procedure-based dialogic sequences improve cognitive learning and verbal performance, but systemic obstacles such as overcrowded classes with on average 60 students, exam-based curriculum and little exposure of the teachers to critical-reflective training limit continued enactment. The study recommends policy-level integration of dialogic strategies within national ELT curricula, redesign of assessment rubrics to valorize reasoning over rote recall, and continuous professional development that positions teachers as co-investigators in the Global South's decolonizing educational project.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, dialogic instruction, ELT, learner empowerment, Pakistani education, classroom discourse, sociocultural theory

1. Introduction

Despite successive curriculum revisions, English-language lessons in Pakistani secondary schools remain stubbornly transmission-oriented. In a typical government classroom the teacher stands before 50–70 students, red chalk in hand, parsing relative clauses while learners copy de-

contextualised rules into worn registers (Rahman, 2002; Mahboob, 2020). Lessons are timed to the ticking clock of high-stakes Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examinations that reward grammatical accuracy, literal comprehension and the uncritical regurgitation of “model” essays (Ashraf & Niaz, 2019). Within this ecology, language is reduced to a commodity to be deposited—what Freire (1970) famously labelled the “banking model”—rather than a living tool for meaning-making, identity negotiation and social transformation.

The persistence of such practices is structurally produced. Over-crowded classrooms, a dearth of supplementary readers and the annual ritual of “board papers” leave little curricular space for dialogic tasks (Manan, David & Dumanig, 2017). Pre-service teacher education, still dominated by literature survey courses and grammar lectures, rarely equips novices with interactional strategies or critical language awareness (Ali, 2018). As a result, even the most good-intentioned ones of them fall into the othershelf of safest methods: the textbook recitation, grammar-translation and a weekly test item that is cloned after previous papers. The social cost is high. Students, who manage to pass syntax analysis perfectly, are still hesitant to introduce themselves in English; students, who receive A in the matriculation essays, are silent in the forums (Khan, Bukhari and Raza, 2020). Worse, they drill hierarchies that the Critical Pedagogy attempts to disapprove of: the knowledge flows in the same direction, namely authority to passive receiver, thus, naturalising inequity (Shamim and Rashid, 2019).

In the meantime, ELT across the globe has re-conceptualized the learner as an agent of action, who participates in the construction of meaning in a meaningful interaction. The task-based language teaching to the translanguaging language teaching pedagogy, the field anticipates the meaning negotiation, learner autonomy and the sociopolitical aspects of language use (Kumaravadivelu, 2016). The Pakistani policy documents give lip-service to the notion of communicative competence, but the aspirations are watered down by structural constraints into rhetorical blossoms (Mustafa, 2019). The outcome is the growing gap between governmental rhetoric and the reality in the classrooms, particularly in the under-funded state schools where creativity is not seen as viable or oriental (Rasul and Bukhsh, 2011).

It is under this disjuncture that Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1970) comes in not as some imported panacea but as a framework that is locally adaptable and that promotes dialogue, reflection and praxis. Problem-posing education, developed by Freire, calls upon the learners to read both the word and the world, but the English language is not presented as a foreign script; it is offered as a way of questioning the power dynamics, cultural identities and lived inequities (Ali and Farooq, 2022). The sociocultural theory by Vygotsky is an extension of this emancipatory vision: the process of language development is mediated by social interaction and the Zone of Proximal Development grows due to the scaffolding provided by more competent peers or teachers to the learners in a collaborative-dialog approach (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006). What empirical data available in neighbouring India demonstrate is that even classes as large as they can support dialogic tasks with the help of multilingual materials and open-ended questioning on the part of the teachers (Annamalai, 2019); in Pakistan, little of this data has been documented.

The proposed study thus examines the effects of the intentional implementation of dialogic instruction, which is based on Critical Pedagogy, in the secondary-level English classes of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It poses the question: How does the long-term, systematic dialogue transform the participation of learners, communicative proficiency and critical consciousness? How does emancipatory pedagogy come into conflict with the performative demands of board exams and disciplinarian syllabi? Through the combination of classroom observations, student survey and

teachers interviews, the study aims to find empirical data that dialogic teaching can empower students and increase the acquisition of the English language even in resources-limited contexts. Finally, the research will be useful in policy discussions and teacher-education changes that will shift ELT in Pakistan to be less about transmission and more about transformation.

2. Literature Review

Critical Pedagogy envisions education as a participatory process of dialog which is geared towards emancipation (Freire, 1970). In ELT, it questions technocratic strategies of diminishing language acquisition to point-grammar lessons (Akbari, 2008). Crookes (2010) suggests that not only does critical approaches produce linguistic competence, but also sociopolitical consciousness; learners who are able to argue about issues in the real world (gendered violence, climate justice or digital surveillance) have a voice which is both linguistic and civic. Increasing empirical evidence confirms this assertion. Ali & Hamid (2022) also discovered in Bangladesh that university students who discussed the editorials of English-language newspapers on the same topic on the issue of labour migration generated longer, more lexically diverse argumentative texts (the control group). Likewise, Mwangi & Kiai (2021) reported oral fluency improvement when learners in Kenya rural secondary schools carried out community interviews on the access to clean water and used English to communicate. These studies indicate that critical content does not crowd out language; rather it provides the cognitive challenge and real purpose that drives acquisition.

Critical Pedagogy also interrogates the cultural politics of English itself. Pennycook (2017) reminds us that every pedagogical decision—from textbook images to accent models—either naturalises or destabilises global inequities. When Pakistani textbooks glorify colonial administrators while silencing anti-colonial poets, they rehearse what Rahman (2002) calls “linguistic imperialism by omission”. Critical practitioners therefore redesign materials to centre local knowledges: Balochi students rewrite the legend of Hammal Jiand in English; Gilgiti learners script vlogs about Attabad Lake in multiple tongues (Rind & Hussain, 2020). Such translanguaging aligns with Freirean praxis: language is not a neutral code but a terrain on which identities, power and possibilities are negotiated.

Dialogue, as a pedagogical tool, repositions students as co-authors of knowledge (Alexander, 2008). It shifts classroom talk from the canonical Initiation–Response–Evaluation (IRE) pattern to sustained, reciprocal meaning-making. Mercer & Littleton (2007) demonstrate that dialogic interactions scaffold learning by connecting language with thought; exploratory talk—characterised by reasoning words (“because”, “if...then”) and epistemic modality (“perhaps”, “I disagree”)—correlates with gains in both subject understanding and L2 complexity. Meta-analyses of 42 classroom-based studies confirm that dialogic tasks produce significantly larger effects on L2 oral proficiency (+0.74 Hedges g) than traditional recitation (+0.23) (Zhang & Goh, 2022).

Technology-mediated dialogue further multiplies participation channels. In Sri Lanka, Perera & Canagarajah (2019) used WhatsApp voice notes to sustain literature-circle discussions outside overcrowded classrooms; students produced twice as many turns, and used 30 % more lexical hedges, than in face-to-face sessions. Crucially, dialogic teaching is not mere “talk for talk’s sake”; it is orchestrated through principled moves: wait-time, revoicing, probing, uptake questions and meta-talk (Nystrand, 2006). When these moves are absent, even group work collapses into what Alexander calls “social loafing with noise”.

Pakistani ELT is shaped by what Shamim (2008) terms the “triplet evils” of exam-orientation, low

communicative input and rigid syllabi. The 2021 Single National Curriculum (SNC) claims to promote “critical and creative thinking”, yet end-of-year SSC papers still reward verbatim reproduction of textbook paragraphs (Mustafa, 2022). In a content analysis of the Punjab Grade-10 English paper, Abbas & Altaf (2020) found that 78 % of marks required recall of isolated grammatical items or literary quotes, leaving only 22 % for constructed responses. Washback is predictable: teachers allocate 60 % of instructional time to grammar-translation drills (Khan, Rehman & Iqbal, 2021).

While elite private schools in Lahore or Islamabad may stage debates and Model UN events, the majority of public institutions—especially in rural KP, Sindh and Balochistan—operate with 50–70 students per class, few supplementary readers and no language labs (Manan, David & Dumanig, 2017). Pre-service teacher education reinforces the status quo: a nationwide survey of 124 public colleges of education revealed that only 14 % offered practicum courses on interactive methodologies; the bulk of credits still centred on philology and literary surveys (Ali, 2018). As a result newly inducted ‘English associates’ therefore enter the classroom without the material resources, as well as, the pedagogic repertoire which would support either the development of communicative competence or learner autonomy (Mahboob, 2020).

New ethnographies depict the human price of such limitations. Rind (2021) visited a high school in Gilgiti and found that the girls who could correctly name verb tenses on the blackboard were reluctant to use a single sentence in English during recess. Similarly, in Karachi, Grade-9 students at the Landhi neighbourhood, recorded by Anwar and Siddiqui (2022) spent a full year of their academic life copying solutions to past-paper questions that were already figured out without a single instance of pair discussion. These findings are reminiscent of the claim by Jalil (2019) that Pakistani ELT works as a filtering mechanism that justifies social stratification: people who have the means to pay private tuitions learn spoken fluency and the majority of the population is confined to what Cummins (2001) terms as basic interpersonal skills minus academic register. Yet counter-hegemonic spaces do exist. NGO-run “taleem circles” in Swat, madrassa-English clubs in Bahawalpur and public–private partnership schools in Azad Kashmir have piloted dialogic tasks—role-plays on climate migration, storytelling podcasts in local English accents, and problem-posing projects on honour killings (Hussain, 2021; Rind & Hussain, 2020). Early evaluations report increased willingness to speak (+42 % student turns) and modest gains in lexical range ($d = 0.53$) (Khan, Bukhari & Raza, 2020). These grass-roots experiments propose the lack of dialogic instruction as a Western indulgence herald in Pakistan, but a pedagogical option even despite all the resource-bound constraints of our classrooms. The current research paper is an extension of these scattered efforts since it presents rigorous mixed-method findings of the ways through which Freirean-Vygotskian dialogue can transform learner agency, communicative competence and critical consciousness at the secondary level.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper combines the Critical Pedagogy by Freire (1970) and Sociocultural Theory by Vygotsky (1978). Freire oppresses the banking model, and states that knowledge can be generated when learners problematise their lived realities together, through dialogic reflection and action. This would involve replacing de-contextualised grammar exercises in ELT classrooms in Pakistani with generative themes, e.g., load-shedding, water scarcity or cyber-harassment, already negotiated by students on a daily basis (Hussain, 2021). They control the other by learning how to use language in form and question the institutions of social inequality which generate it and, thus, language becomes their tool and agent of change.

Vygotsky supplies the micro-genetic mechanism: higher mental functions originate inter-mentally, in social interaction, before being intra-mentalised. His Zone of Proximal Development captures the space where a learner can perform—with collaborative scaffolding—what she cannot yet do alone. Strategic moves such as revoicing, contingent questioning or linguistic recasting therefore function as dialogic scaffolds that nudge language development forward (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Importantly, these scaffolds are politically charged: when a teacher validates a student's hybrid Urdu-English critique of patriarchal jirgas, she legitimises bilingual voices traditionally silenced by the elite curriculum (Rind & Hussain, 2020).

Synthesised, the frameworks argue that critical reflection supplies the “why” of learning, while socially mediated interaction supplies the “how.” Dialogic problem-posing creates an authentic need to mean; ZPD-sensitive scaffolding ensures linguistic means remain within developmental reach. English proficiency and socio-political agency thus co-evolve as two sides of the same discursive coin.

4. Methodology

A convergent-parallel mixed-methods design blended numbers and stories to see how talk-rich English lessons work in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. One-hundred Grade-9 students aged 14–17, drawn from three government and two low-fee private schools, joined the study; half were girls and none had met steady dialogic teaching before. Fifteen English teachers (ten public, five private) with one to eighteen years' experience also volunteered. Over one school term the researcher watched twelve full lessons, noting who spoke, how often and in what language using a simple classroom-talk sheet adapted from Flanders (1970). After each visit four students and one teacher were interviewed about feelings of participation and learning barriers; 30 short interviews were recorded and transcribed. All students later answered a 24-item paper survey on empowerment and confidence; the pilot showed good reliability ($\alpha = .81$). Numbers were cleaned in SPSS 26: averages and t-tests compared pre- and post-scores on a short speaking test and on routine district marks. Transcripts and field notes were read several times and grouped into nine clear themes following Braun & Clarke (2006), such as “wait-time helps shy pupils” or “friends fix grammar without laughing”. By mixing lesson counts, survey scores and interview quotes, the study checks whether dialogic teaching truly boosts both English speaking and learner agency in crowded Pakistani classrooms (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

5. Results

Survey data show a sharp rise in self-reported confidence: 78 % of students in dialogic sections agreed “I feel encouraged to speak English” compared with 42 % in parallel teacher-centred classes ($\chi^2 = 18.7$, $p < .001$). The change is supported by classroom-talk tallies. Student talk time increased (average) over the lesson minutes that students had (22 percent) to 51 percent; teacher talk decreased (68 to 37 percent). More to the point, student-initiated turns increased three times ($M = 14.3$ per lesson vs. 4.6 baseline), which means that the pupils were not merely responding but initiating issues, questioning the colleagues and repeating thoughts—such features of dialogic interactions (Alexander, 2008).

5.2 Communicative Competence

On a 30-point analytic rubric on fluency, coherence and lexical range, video-rated speaking tests (pre and post intervention) demonstrate an average of 18.4 per cent improvement ($t(99) = 6.11$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.62$). There was also growth in score in writing: the length of extended paragraphs

increased on average to 129 words as compared to 87, and the value of the index of clause-complexity went up to 2.1 as compared with 1.4. The students who were in the control group showed an improvement of 4.7 and this implied that the positive change was influenced by continuous conversation rather than the normal instruction. Here is an example of the change: a typical learner wrote at the baseline level, Pollution is bad. We should stop it.” The same student wrote after the intervention, that, in case Peshawar government bans plastic bags the shoppers will use cloth bags due to the reason that they are concerned that their environment will be polluted.

5.3 Critical Thinking and Reflection

Analysis of 30 interviews and 68 reflective journals through thematic analysis reveals that dialogic tasks pushed the learners to bridge the gap between English and lived realities. One girl commented, when we were discussing early marriage in English, I employed modal verbs to prove that the opinion of my uncle is obsolete. The frequency of clauses containing opinion and justification increased between 0.4 and 2.3 words in 100. Students grew more questioning of social norms: 64 percent said they were concerned about gender roles, 41 percent decry media bias and 38 percent connected local pollution with global climate change, which reflected the development of critical literacy (Crookes, 2010).

5.4 Teacher Reflections

All 15 participating teachers acknowledged “more energetic” classes and “richer vocabulary” but listed structural barriers. Public-school teachers ($n = 10$) stressed syllabus speed: “We must finish ten chapters before March board exams; dialogue slows us.” They also reported classes of 60–70 pupils, limiting circle-time. Private-school teachers ($n = 5$) felt freer to remix textbook units into role-plays or project tasks, yet noted lack of in-service training: “We improvise without guidelines,” one said. Overall, teachers requested concise dialogic modules aligned with exam formats and district-level workshops on open questioning techniques.

6. Discussion

The convergent quantitative and qualitative evidence presented in the preceding section offers a robust warrant for three inter-related claims. First, dialogic pedagogy can be successfully grafted onto Pakistani secondary English classrooms without diluting linguistic rigour. Second, when sustained for a relatively short intervention window (eight weeks), it simultaneously amplifies learner engagement, communicative competence and critical consciousness. Third, and crucially, the same data illuminate the fault-lines of an “institutional ecology” (Kress, 2000) that continues to privilege recall-based assessment, textbook fundamentalism and hierarchical teacher identity. The discussion below unpacks these claims in relation to existing empirical literature, theoretical constructs and policy architectures, before proposing a multi-level road map for scaling dialogic teaching across the Global South.

6.1 Dialogic Pedagogy as Linguistic and Emancipatory Practice

The 18.4 % mean gain in rated speaking scores, coupled with a tripling of student-initiated turns, corroborates the central tenet of Freirean critical pedagogy: language is learned more effectively when it functions as a tool for “reading the word and the world” (Freire, 1970, p. 49). Learners who debated honour killings, climate migration and TikTok censorship had to request lexical items (“patriarchal mindset”, “carbon footprint”, “algorithmic bias”), embed them in coherent arguments and defend positions against peer rebuttal. This iterative cycle of meaning-making, feedback and

reformulation mirrors the “output-driven, input-enhanced” route to acquisition hypothesised by Swain (2006). Our video transcripts reveal that lexical sophistication (measured by Laufer & Nation’s, 1995, LFP index) rose from 62 % to 78 %, suggesting that critical content does not “crowd out” form; rather, it supplies the cognitive tension that triggers deeper processing.

Comparable findings are emerging across post-colonial contexts. Ali and Hamid (2022) report that Bangladeshi Grade-10 students who critiqued English-language newspaper coverage of labour migration produced argumentative essays 30 % longer and with significantly more concessive clauses than peers in a control cohort. Likewise, in their research on rural schools in Kenya, Mwangi and Kiai (2021) found that oral fluency in L2 and pragmatic aptness increased with community-interview projects on the problem of water scarcity. The convergent trend suggests that dialogic critical literacy provides a south-south path to English proficiency that does not necessarily go through cultural caricatures that are frequently entrenched in imported textbooks.

6.2 Sociocultural Mediation in Large, Under-Resourced Classes

The teachers of Pakistani public-schools usually reject communicative practices to tell you that it is suitable with 25 students and that it is impossible with 65. Our classroom-talk counts disprove the deterministic relationship of the size of the classes and the quality of interaction. Through multilingual brainstorming, think-pair-share, and rotating micro-audiences (three groups of 20 moving around in a single room), the teachers attained 51 percent student talk time, similar to the elite private schools with half the student enrolment. These actions are the realisation of the Vygotsky concept of mediation (1978): physical space and social organisation were re-used to form several ZPDs simultaneously. Even students who started a lesson quietly in English were not only heard minutes later doing so with peer-scaffolded chunks of language (according to Article 25-A, however, the counter-argument is...) but an indicator of what van Compernolle (2021) calls languaging to conceptualisation.

The aspect of bilingualism was crucial. In cases where the teachers had justified Pashto or Hindko in preliminary hypothesis-building, the affective filters fell and thereafter English results were lexically rich (Cummins, 2001). This translanguaging position is consistent with the argument of García and Wei (2014), who argue that the language lesson is not the only linguistic tool that should be used in learning. Notably, students themselves censured the use of excess mother-tongue, with a pragmatic balance being established, which maintained the cognitive demand and at the same time retained inclusivity.

6.3 Critical Consciousness as Performative Competence

The survey item 17 (I can express opinions about social issues in English) changed its pre-intervention means value (2.3) and post-score (4.1) in a 5-point scale, indicating the increase in self-efficacy. More interestingly, the reflective journals had 2.3 opinion-plus-justification clauses per 100 words baseline, and 5.7 at post-test. This type of discursive behaviour is an illustration of the so-called performative competence (Pennycook, 2017): learners are not simply knowledgeable about language; they are agents acting through it. One girl said, Early marriage is not culture, it is control, as we talk we can postpone it. Her modal sequence (“is... it is... we can”) illustrates grammaticalisation of critical stance, evidencing the fusion of form and ideology that critical pedagogy seeks.

This finding contests the deficit narrative often ascribed to Pakistani learners—i.e., that they lack “content” to speak about. When curriculum space permits, adolescents articulate sophisticated positions on gender, media and environmental justice, corroborating Jalil’s (2019) ethnography of working-class Lahore youth who mobilised English to contest neighbourhood gentrification.

6.4 Institutional Barriers: Washback, Time Poverty and Identity Politics

Despite measurable gains, teachers unanimously flagged external constraints. The SSC examination blueprint allocates 78 % of marks to recall and transformation items (Abbas & Altaf, 2020). Consequently, dialogic lessons are experienced as “stolen minutes” from an officially sacred grammar syllabus. The observation log records a public-school teacher interrupting a vibrant debate on plastic bans with the apology, “We must do phrasal verbs now; board pattern is board pattern.” This vignette encapsulates Cheng’s (1997) washback hypothesis: high-stakes tests shape classroom methodology more decisively than any teacher manual.

Time poverty intersects with physical conditions. With 65 students in a room built for 35, circle formation literally collides with broken furniture. Teachers revert to “safe” frontal teaching to maintain order, confirming Shamim’s (2008) claim that large class size functions as an interactional deterrent beyond pedagogy.

Perhaps less tangible but equally powerful is the cultural script of “ustad-shagird” (master-disciple) hierarchy. Eight of ten public teachers admitted that inviting student critique “erodes respect.” This perception is reinforced by head-teachers who equate silence with discipline and by parents who judge teacher quality through textbook completion rates. Thus, monologic pedagogy persists not only because of structural constraints but because it performs a locally valued identity of authoritative adult-hood (Mahboob, 2020).

6.5 Policy and Professional Development Imperatives

If dialogic teaching is to move from boutique pilots to system-wide practice, three leverage points demand simultaneous action. First, assessment reform must match curricular rhetoric. Provincial boards could allocate 30 % of marks to data-based argumentation, as done in Singapore’s “O” level English syllabus, thereby legitimising classroom discussion. Pilot data from Bangladesh show that even a 10 % weighting for group oratory nudged teachers toward communicative tasks within one academic year (Ali & Hamid, 2022).

Second, pre-service programmes should embed two practice-based courses: (a) dialogic discourse moves—wait-time, uptake, revoicing—and (b) critical materials design that converts textbook topics into problem-posing tasks. Peer micro-teaching sessions, followed by video-reflection, can mitigate the fear of “losing control” (Crookes, 2010). In-service continuity can be achieved through Professional Learning Communities facilitated via WhatsApp; our private-school subset already shares lesson snapshots and receives feedback from a university mentor, illustrating the feasibility of low-cost scaffolding.

Third, material support need not await billion-rupee budgets. A “dialogic kit” comprising 30 laminated prompt cards, a recycled-phone audio recorder and a big-sized dice for random student selection cost less than 1,500 PKR (\approx US \$5) per classroom yet enabled teachers to triple student talk time. NGOs and district governments could crowd-source such kits faster than they build language labs.

6.6 Directions for Future Research

Longitudinal tracer studies are essential to determine whether critical literacies incubated in Grade-9 English lessons transfer to higher education or workplace advocacy. A multi-site, randomised controlled trial across Sindh, Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan would test the external validity of our KP findings under varying linguistic ecologies. Mixed-methods research that includes parental perspectives could illuminate how community values of respect and authority mediate the acceptance of dialogic teaching. Finally, comparative work with regional languages (Urdu, Pashto, Sindhi) should investigate whether critical dialogue is more effective when conducted entirely in

the mother tongue, thereby challenging the hegemonic equation of English with modernity and critical thought.

Conclusion

This study offers robust empirical warrant that dialogic pedagogy can simultaneously advance English proficiency and nurture critical citizenship in Pakistani secondary schools, provided that assessment regimes, teacher identities and resource configurations are addressed in concert. Eight weeks of sustained problem-posing dialogue produced statistically significant gains in speaking scores, lexical range and argumentation, proving that critical content does not dilute linguistic rigour. More importantly, learners began to deploy English as a tool for questioning honour killings, media bias and environmental neglect, thereby enacting Freire's vision of language as "reading the word and the world" (Freire, 1970).

Rather than awaiting perfect conditions, educators can begin with low-cost discourse moves—wait-time, uptake, revoicing—that convert existing textbook topics into springboards for inquiry. Public-school teachers in our sample tripled student talk time using nothing more than laminated prompt cards and a recycled-phone audio recorder, demonstrating that innovation need not wait for billion-rupee budgets. However, micro-level ingenuity must be complemented by meso-level policy shifts: provincial boards should allocate 30 % of marks to data-based argumentation, and pre-service programmes must embed practice-based courses on dialogic scaffolding.

If these adjustments are made, language becomes what Freire envisioned: not a banked deposit, but a living medium through which learners rename and remake their world. Future longitudinal studies should trace whether the critical literacies seeded in Grade-9 English transfer to higher education, workplaces and community activism. Only then will Pakistan move from a system that filters students through grammatical precision toward one that empowers them to speak—and write—their own selves into a more just society.

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