

Enacting Paulo Freire's Thoughts in the University English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Classroom Through the Analysis of Mo Salah Phenomenon in the UK¹

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Abstract

In this paper, we present an example of how the selected texts (on the footballer Mo Salah) can potentially be discussed in the university EFL classroom especially (Critical) Discourse Analysis course using Freire's seminal work on Critical Pedagogy (CP). We do it by firstly introducing Freire's concept of CP which includes *problem posing education* and *dialog* as elaborated by Durakoglu et al. (2013). Then we move on to highlight the previous works conducted on CP in Indonesian EFL contexts and provide critical analysis of how the particular texts drawn from Anwar's (2020) unpublished thesis on Mo Salah's phenomenal career could be analyzed using Freire's concepts. Closing this reflection, we locate this paper within critical approaches to English Language Teaching such as post-method pedagogy and post-structural and post-colonially informed teaching.

Resumen

En este artículo, presentamos un ejemplo de cómo los textos seleccionados (sobre el futbolista Mo Salah) pueden potencialmente discutirse en el aula de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) de una universidad, especialmente en el curso de Análisis (Crítico) del Discurso utilizando el trabajo fundamental de Freire sobre Pedagogía Crítica (CP). Lo hacemos presentando en primer lugar el concepto de CP de Freire, que incluye la educación para plantear problemas y el diálogo, tal como lo elaboraron Durakoglu et al. (2013). Luego pasamos a resaltar los trabajos previos realizados sobre CP en contextos de inglés como lengua extranjera en Indonesia y brindamos un análisis crítico de cómo los textos particulares extraídos de la tesis inédita de Anwar (2016) sobre la fenomenal carrera de Mo Salah podrían analizarse utilizando los conceptos de Freire. Para cerrar esta reflexión, ubicamos este artículo dentro de enfoques críticos de la enseñanza del idioma inglés, como la pedagogía post-método y la enseñanza post-estructural y post-colonialmente informada.

Critical Pedagogy

Introduced by Freire (1970), the idea of critical pedagogy is centered on the belief that education, like all other discourses, is a political act full of negotiated ideologies. The traditional way of teaching views teachers as all-knowing and students as receivers who are expected to carry on whatever knowledge is shared by their teacher in the classroom. While this practice seems to have no harmful effects, scholars continue to challenge it because they see the presence of inequalities, oppressions, and alienations within this long-established practice. Graman (1988) argues that education should be humanizing by not making the teacher authoritarian while giving the students more freedom and opportunity to think and act as critical beings. Giroux and McLaren (1989) point out that the traditional classroom reflects a place for ideological reproductions that have the potential to disempower teachers and subjugate students' critical consciousness.

The idea started amid considerable expectations that education would be able to give solutions to problems in society. But Freire (1970) realized that such expectations would only lead to frustrations if education continued using the *banking approach*. He illustrated this as a piggy bank, where the students are viewed as empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge. For this reason, he drew on the Marxist analysis of educational systems to propose a critical alternative which he called the *transformative approach* (p. 74). On the other hand, the transformative approach emphasizes dialogue and critical thinking to reach *conscientization* that will lead to transformations in society. Therefore, Freire's idea is the path to end oppression and injustice that not only exists inside, but also beyond the classroom in society.

Durakoglu et al (2013) explained two main concepts of Freire's critical pedagogy.

- (a) *Problem posing education: This makes use of liberty to think and take action to transform the world.*
- (b) *Dialogue: the need to know ourselves through dialogue with others with equal positions-- a democratic stance for teachers.*

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Critical Pedagogy in Indonesian EFL Classroom Context

In recent years, teaching EFL in isolation is not sufficient considering the hegemonic status of the English language. According to Pennycook (1990), the obvious gap in second language education such as English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is its detachment from broader issues in educational theory. The nature of the language class, which sees language as not only the medium, but also the content of the class, has led its teaching theory to become extremely inclined toward functional language skills rather than a transformative approach that challenges the status quo.

EFL is more than merely a device for communication, but is also a medium where meaning, access, and power are contested every day. A lack of critical understanding of other aspects of English may put an individual at some disadvantage. Pierce (1995) explored how isolated teaching of EFL may imply the marginalization of learners' social identities. Canagarajah (1999) and Rajagopalan (1999) argued that the current teaching of EFL implies linguistic neo-colonialism. The standardization of speakerhood, or often referred to as native speakerism (Holliday, 2005), for instance, is said to have the potential to alienate the learners from their local languages and cultural roots, thus creating the dichotomy of 'us' versus 'them'.

To overcome this emerging problem, there has been a call to approach the teaching with the concept of critical pedagogy (Diaz-Greenberg & Nevin, 2003; Khatib & Miri, 2016; Lu & Ares, 2015). Diaz-Greenberg and Nevin (2003) promoted the principles of critical pedagogy and multicultural education in foreign language teaching to make the learning more liberatory. Khatib and Miri (2016) found that critical pedagogy has helped an Iranian EFL teacher remove 'the culture of silence' in his class, thus empowering his students to be more courageous in expressing their opinions. Lu and Ares (2015) believed that the Western pedagogies in English language teaching are oppressing to both instructors and students rather than liberating them, and propose that the ideal pedagogy should be critical and is built upon the dialogical relationship between policy-makers and practitioners' economic, social, and cultural backgrounds.

Despite some hesitation about the success of the implementation, a similar movement has also been found in Indonesia where teachers and scholars start to see the need to apply critical pedagogy in the Indonesian context (Hayati, 2010; Larson, 2014; Mambu, 2012). Hayati (2010) believed that the Indonesian curriculum should design courses that engage its educators and learners in broader learning activities by having critical awareness of possible power-relation structures ingrained in TESOL. Larson (2014) argued that critical pedagogy in the Indonesian EFL context is not only viable but also considered more meaningful to raise students' awareness of day-to-day issues through the implementation of negotiated syllabus and codes. Mambu (2012) recommended that critical pedagogy be used in Indonesian EFL teaching to advocate social justice.

In the following, we use Anwar's (2020) undergraduate thesis on Mo Salah and his influence on the reduced Islamophobia rate in the UK as the basis to teach Critical Pedagogy.

Mo Salah: A Short Biography

Mohammed Salah Hamed Mahrous Ghaly, nicknamed Mo Salah, is an Egyptian footballer who currently plays for Premier League club Liverpool FC and the Egypt National Team. Widely regarded as one of the most prolific attacking players in the world, Mo Salah is currently enjoying a successful period in his football career with Liverpool FC.

As a devoted Muslim coming from the Arab world, Mo Salah is thought to have major impacts on- and off-the pitch. On the pitch, Mo Salah has not only received numerous awards for his record-breaking individual success such as the Premier League Golden Boot, PFA Player of the Year, the Puskas Award, but also helped Liverpool FC win its first Premier League title in 30 years and almost all trophies available such as the FA Cup, Carabao Cup, Champions League, the UEFA Super Cup, and the FIFA Club World Cup. Off the pitch, Mo Salah has helped reduced the Islamophobia rate in the UK (Alrababa'h et al., 2021) and even inspired some fans to convert to Islam (Bird, 2019; Ads, 2021).

Enacting Friere's Model of Critical Pedagogy in the EFL Classroom: An Example

Problem posing education

From Anwar's (2020) thesis, we need to think about what sorts of *problems* existed in the UK context with regard to the representation of Islam prior to the popularity of Mo Salah.? The answer to this problem would be that: there was a tendency that Islam was represented 'negatively'. This can be seen from the following evidence:

Evidence 1: Despite improved attitudes towards Muslim coexistence in the community, the public's impression of Muslims remains volatile. According to a 2019 survey assessing the crisis of Islamophobia ("The conservative crisis", 2019), more than one-third of the British believed that there was a conflict between Islamic principles and the British lifestyle. The major proponents of Islamophobia in the UK came primarily from those identified as supporters of the Conservative Party. The fact that the last two UK Prime Ministers, Theresa May (2016 - 2019) and Boris Johnson (2019 - 2022), are key figures in the Conservative Party adds to the struggles of the Muslim community. They are noted for their shared views of counter-terrorism, alienation of ethnic minorities, and Brexit (Abdelkader, 2017).

Evidence 2: When it comes to work prospects, the failure rate among men Muslims in the UK has been relatively high (76%) while women's failure rates are six times higher (Khattab & Johnston, 2014). Despite the fact that some people are more likely than ever to succeed in their careers, others are still rejected, most often due to discriminatory hiring processes based on race and religion. Furthermore, because young Muslims are the most vulnerable category, they are told that they are more likely to encounter unemployment and other struggles (Stevenson, 2017). Many young Muslims find it challenging to socially integrate into public domains where alcohol is prevalent and gender standards do not align with Islamic views. In education, teachers or school authorities frequently fail to provide interpersonal engagement, causing Muslims' sense of belonging to erode. Islamophobia is also unavoidable in football, the UK's most popular sport. Some fans like chanting offensive songs directed toward Muslim players.

Now, based on Freire (Durokoglu et al., 2013) we need to think that this misrepresentation can be transformed without being afraid of Muslim's position as the minority in the UK. That is in the context of Anwar's (2020) thesis, how could Mo Salah's goal productivity and popularity transform the negative representation of Islam in the UK. The evidence can be seen in the following:

Evidence 1:

The footballer's talents are universally admired especially at a time when Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments have been on the rise in Britain. (Excerpt 1.3, p. 81)

Evidence 2:

And having scored 43 goals in 51 games, putting himself on par with the world's best, in Merseyside's Liverpool, Salah is known as 'The Egyptian King'. (Excerpt 1.9, p. 83)

These two excerpts show how Mo Salah's prolific goalscoring ability with Liverpool FC can make a big difference in changing the way people start to see a Muslim in a better way. In February 2018, a group of Liverpool FC supporters was spotted singing a chant that embraces Mo Salah's identity. From its lyrics, they even considered converting to Islam:

Mo Sa-la-la-lah, Mo Sa-la-lal-ah,

If he's good enough for you, he's good enough for me,

If he scores another few, then I'll be Muslim too

Sitting in the mosque, that's where I wanna be!⁴

To be more concrete, a paper by Alrababa'h et al. (2021) supported this by stating that since Mo Salah joined Liverpool FC, anti-Muslim hate crimes had decreased by 16%, anti-Islam tweets dropped from 7.3% to 3.8%, and familiarity with Islam and Moslem has increased through observation of Mo Salah's faith and behaviors.

Dialogue

In the context of Mo Salah, the following questions could be proposed:

(1) How could his position as a member of the Muslim minority in the UK be understood better through his influence on people's spiritual journey? This is to understand his identity through the presence of others.

Following the Brexit referendum in 2016, the Muslim sentiments in the UK were heated as the UK right-wing extremists were on the rise. They believed that they were in the middle of a race war against Muslims who are often depicted as a threat to the British society and culture. Several disgraceful acts targeting British Muslims were reported, including a case in 2015 when an intolerant Liverpool fan took a photo of two Muslim

⁴ Following the tune of Dodgy's 1996 hit "Good Enough", the chant was first sung by a group of Liverpool supporters in Portugal after Mo Salah helped Liverpool FC beat Porto in the Champions League's Last 16 in 2018 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B-icmPutQDk>).

fans praying at Anfield stairwell and shared it on Twitter with the disrespectful caption “Muslim fan praying at half-time at the match yesterday. #Disgrace.” (Ratcliffe, 2015).

During that difficult time, there came Mo Salah who is a Muslim, Arab, and North African. Mo Salah’s success in his debut season with Liverpool FC transformed into a phenomenon far greater than his goal tally. People were mesmerized by Mo Salah’s gestures after scoring goals as much as they were mesmerized by his goals. On the pitch, Mo Salah always professed his Muslim identity unashamedly by performing *sujood*⁵ on the many occasions that he scored for Liverpool FC. He was also widely known for his generosity outside the pitch, in which he was seen many times involved in charitable acts such as building school infrastructure, providing oxygen cylinders to coronavirus’ sufferers, and regularly donating a large amount of money to support the people in need.

As a result, Mo Salah’s iconic Islamic gestures and morals ignited a broad conversation among the public who observed him every week. They not only began to take note of him, but also respect Mo Salah’s religion. Ben Bird, a Nottingham Forest season-ticket holder, admitted that he had gone from despising Islam to becoming a Muslim due to Mo Salah.

Salah showed me that you can be normal and a Muslim, if that’s the right phrase. You can be yourself. He’s a great player and is respected by the football community and his politics, his religion, don’t matter – and to me that’s what football can do. (Bird, 2019)

Another positive testimony came in a report that two British sisters, Amy and Nikki, had converted to Islam after being inspired Mo Salah’s humility, “We were influenced by the morals of Muslims in Europe and the humility of Mohammed Salah.” (Ads, 2021).

Ben Bird and the two British sisters are only two examples, but they likely reflect a new British view on Islam and Muslims on a broader scale. To a certain degree, Mo Salah has seemingly improved British perceptions of Muslims. In a world that has ignored the complexity of Islam, Mo Salah has apparently advanced the discourse about Islam much further than any politicians or other influencers could have done.

(2) How could he establish egalitarian dialogues with his fellow footballers in the league and with other people in the UK.?

Mo Salah’s audacity to embrace his Muslim identity at a time when Islamophobia was becoming mainstream is saluted by people from various elements. FARE⁶ Executive Director Piara Powar said, “This is the first time I’ve seen such an exuberant, overt, positive appreciation that includes [a player’s] religion,” (Bogage, 2018). In addition, John Oliver, the host of HBO’s *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, wrote during the inauguration of Mo Salah as *Time* magazine’s 100 most influential people of 2019 that he was more than a football player – he was one of the best football players in the world, yet still humble, thoughtful, and funny⁷.

Through an explicit display of his Muslim identity, Mo Salah has been considered to have taken part in building egalitarian dialogue between two irreconcilable worlds – that is the Western and Muslim worlds. According to Din (2022), partly thanks to the work of Mo Salah and other Muslim players in the Premier League, many clubs including Liverpool FC have now recognized the importance of having a special room that can accommodate the religious needs of their fans. With a growing number of Muslim fans, a multi-faith prayer room has now been available in the majority of football stadiums in the UK. Moreover, halal food is also served, marking a new era of football as an inclusive sport regardless of color and background.

(3) Or was/were there still problem(s) with dialogues that Mo Salah tried to establish? If so, how can those problems be mitigated?

Evidence: Despite all the credits, Mo Salah’s contribution in reducing the bad stigma of his religion is inseparable from the role of the media. Media ensure that the improbable story of Mo Salah can be heard by people around the world, thus amplifying Mo Salah’s significance. Alrababa’h et al. (2021) describe that Mo Salah is not only noted for his soccer skill, but also his noticable Islamic Identity as when scoring he does *sujood* (Muslim prayer). These scholars noted that after Mo Salah joined Liverpool F.C. hate crimes in the Liverpool dropped by 16% and the Liverpool Fans F.C. fans “halved their rates of posting anti –Muslim’s tweets” (p.1111). However, media such as MEE and ITV are interested more on Salah’s football achievement rather than his Islamic identity, it is important that we question the information why the Islamic identity is

⁵ In Islam, *sujood* is the act of low bowing or prostration to Allah (God).

⁶ Founded in 1999, FARE (Football Against Racism in Europe) is an international organization dedicated to tackling discrimination which has received backing from football’s major governing bodies such as UEFA and FIFA (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fare_network)

⁷ Listed on the Titans category, Mo Salah was named in *Time* magazine’s 100 most influential people of 2019 along with LeBron James, Tiger Woods, and Mark Zuckerberg (<https://time.com/collection/100-most-influential-people-2019/5567841/mohamed-salah>)

missing? Anwar's (2020) thesis instanced how several media may have represented the Mo Salah phenomenon only in the football achievement alone.

Instead of giving more highlights on Mo Salah's Muslim identity, both Middle East Eye (MEE) and Independent Television (ITV) emphasize Mo Salah's statistics and achievements in football as the factor which earns him the position he is today – the position which public see as an advantage and capable of decreasing the sentiments upon Islam and Muslim community, and therefore can improve public's perception ... a bigger concern on the aspect of statistics and achievements would implicitly bear on the quasi-acceptance of Islam once it is not comprehensively understood. (p. 113)

Such an attitude may lead to a quasi-acceptance of Islam. This is a situation where Islam is seemingly accepted but yet . Clear evidence can be found in the lyrics of Mo Salah's viral chant by a group of Liverpool FC supporters, "If he scores another few, then I'll be Muslim too". We may conclude here that Mo Salah's Islamic identity comes with a condition – Only IF Mo Salah keeps scoring goals that their perception(s) toward Muslims changes.

To improve this matter, it is necessary that the public start to see Muslims as they are. Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan (2019) , a British-Pakistani poet and proud Muslim woman, made a bracing, witty, and exposing point through her famous poem *This Is Not A Humanising Poem*⁸.

Love us when we're lazy,

Love us when we're poor,

Love us in our backs-to-backs, council estates, depressed, unwashed and weeping,

Love us high as kites, unemployed, joy-riding, time-wasting, failing at school,

Love us filthy, without the right colour passports, without the right sounding English. (Line 17, Manzoor-Khan, 2019)

Reflecting on her struggle as a minority, Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan sent a powerful message to the public that often simplifies Muslims in the 'good vs. bad Muslims' binary. In an interview with The Muslim Voice Magazine (The language of the prisoner, 2019), she explained that such a classification is unjust, problematic, and only dehumanises Muslims. Muslims should not be essentially asked to prove their loyalty whenever there is a terrorist attack or other acts of violence because it will never represent the entire Muslim community after all. The same rule applies to Muslims who excel in particular fields such as Mo Salah and other influential Muslim figures who will never portray the entire scene of the Muslim community either.

No matter how reprehensible a human is, we should not have a right to dehumanise them. And that is something that exists in Islam because our belief is that only Allah is allowed to make distinctions and reprimand people. That is solely His right and not ours. As a Muslim community, when we try to fit in the stereotype of good Muslim, we give these people making the rules a further excuse to marginalize ourselves. (The Muslim Voice Magazine, 2019, pp. 24-25)

If a certain community has the privilege to get forgiveness for the cruelties they commit, then Muslims should have too because all races are equal. Mo Salah is just an example of how inspirational a Muslim can be. But the public should begin to root their acceptance of Muslims not based on anything other than who they are. Therefore, to achieve a more democratic space and social cohesion, it is instructive that all parties work together to break their barriers by examining biases, eliminating prejudices, and recognizing each other's worth.

To engage undergraduate students of English department enrolled in cultural studies and critical discourse analysis classes, for example, in conversations about how the media representation of the Mo Salah phenomenon might contribute to the quasi-acceptance of Islam, instructors can use Freire's model of *problem posing education* and *dialogues* with students (Durakoglu, et al, 2013). To prepare this activity, students can be put into small groups and given the text to read and then the poem. Following that, they can be asked to generate some possible problems of the representation in the texts. Then, they can discuss how to deal with the problems of discrimination in the texts and then how Mo Salah's football achievement, humble behaviour, and his noticeable Islamic identity have decreased anti-Muslim's sentiment among Liverpool Fans in the UK.

A Concluding Remark

This is one possible example where selected texts on a particular theme can be used to teach critical pedagogy using Paulo Freire's educational model. In the above examples, we have made Freire's thoughts practical to implement not only in the university EFL classroom where Muslims are the majority in the

⁸ Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan debuted *This Is Not a Humanising Poem* at the UK poetry competition, *The Last Word Festival 2017* and was awarded the runner-up prize (Manzoor Khan, 2017).

country (e.g., Indonesia, Malaysia), but also where Muslims are a minority in the West. Bringing these social, political, and identity issues into an EFL classroom is justifiable in the teaching profession, especially those enacting critical approaches such as post-method pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 2006) and post-structural and post-colonial approach (Wahyudi, 2018; 2021), identity and emotions in the classroom (Mugford et al., 2013) and so on. In the university EFL classroom, the enactment of Freire's thoughts as we have exercised above can also be used in any cultural studies and critical discourse analysis course to advocate for any dominated and marginalized groups. (Wodak & Meyer, 2001)

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