

# The Philosophy of English Education: An Exploration of Theoretical Foundations and Practical Implications

Bona Xiao <sup>1, \*</sup>, Jun Cui <sup>2, \*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Liaoning Communication University, Liaoning 110136, China

<sup>2</sup> Solbridge International School of Business, Woosong University, Daejeon 34606, Republic of Korea

## \* Correspondence:

Jun Cui

[jcui228@student.solbridge.ac.kr](mailto:jcui228@student.solbridge.ac.kr)

Bona Xiao

[bonaxiao0822@hotmail.com](mailto:bonaxiao0822@hotmail.com)

*Received: 29 March 2025/ Accepted: 29 May 2025/ Published online: 7 June 2025*

## Abstract

This paper investigates the philosophy underpinning English education, focusing on both its theoretical roots and practical relevance in teaching and learning. By reviewing key historical and philosophical developments, it illustrates how educational theories have shaped instructional methods and classroom dynamics. The evolution of English education is traced from early 20th-century progressive education, characterized by John Dewey's advocacy for experiential learning and critical thinking, to contemporary movements such as constructivism, critical pedagogy, and postmodernism. Moreover, Constructivism emphasizes the active role of learners in constructing knowledge through experiences, advocating for student-centered learning environments. Critical pedagogy challenges traditional educational models, promoting dialogue and empowerment among students, thereby fostering social justice and equity in the classroom. Postmodernism questions absolute truths and encourages the exploration of diverse meanings in texts, advocating for a curriculum that reflects a multiplicity of voices and perspectives. The implications of these philosophical frameworks for teaching practice are significant. Educators are encouraged to adopt collaborative and authentic assessment strategies that reflect students' interests and experiences. Furthermore, creating safe spaces for dialogue and embracing complexity in texts can enhance critical thinking skills and promote inclusivity. Ultimately, the philosophy of English education serves as a vital foundation for effective teaching, encouraging educators to reflect on their practices and the broader implications for fostering a rich and engaging learning environment. This study underscores the importance of a philosophical framework in shaping English education, suggesting that a deeper understanding of these theories can lead to more effective and equitable teaching practices.

**Keywords:** Philosophy of Education; English Education; Critical Pedagogy; Constructivism; Postmodernism; Teaching Practices; Curriculum Design; Student Engagement

## 1. Introduction

The philosophy of English education is a multifaceted field that encompasses a variety of theoretical perspectives, each contributing to the ways in which language and literature are taught and understood in classrooms globally. As the educational landscape continues to evolve, understanding the philosophical underpinnings of English education becomes increasingly vital for educators aiming to create meaningful and effective learning experiences (Ugwuzor, 2020). This paper endeavors to explore the historical development of English education, focusing on key philosophical frameworks such as constructivism, critical pedagogy, and postmodernism. These frameworks offer unique insights into the teaching and learning process, influencing curriculum design, assessment strategies, and classroom practices. By examining these philosophies, we can better understand their implications for fostering student engagement, promoting inclusivity, and developing critical thinking skills in the English classroom.

Furthermore, our philosophy of English education is not static; it is a dynamic and evolving discipline that reflects broader societal changes and educational trends. The historical context of English education reveals how various philosophical movements have shaped the ways in which educators approach the teaching of language and literature. From the early 20th century's progressive education movement, which emphasized experiential learning and student-centered approaches, to the mid to late 20th century's emergence of constructivism and critical pedagogy, the field has continuously adapted to new theoretical insights and pedagogical innovations. In the contemporary era, the influence of postmodernism has further expanded the scope of English education, encouraging educators to embrace diverse narratives and challenge traditional power structures.

This paper will begin with a historical overview of English education, tracing its evolution and the emergence of various philosophical movements. This historical context is crucial for understanding how current practices have developed and why certain philosophical frameworks have gained prominence. By examining the progression from progressive education to constructivism, critical pedagogy, and postmodernism, we can see the shifting priorities and values that have influenced English education over time.

Following the historical overview, we will delve into the key philosophical frameworks that have significantly shaped English education: constructivism, critical pedagogy, and postmodernism. Each of these frameworks offers unique perspectives on the teaching and learning process. Constructivism, for example, emphasizes the active role of learners in constructing their own knowledge and understanding, advocating for student-centered and inquiry-based approaches. Critical pedagogy, on the other hand, focuses on social justice and equity, encouraging students to critically engage with texts and societal issues. Postmodernism challenges traditional narratives and encourages the inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives in the curriculum.

For each philosophical framework, we will provide specific examples of how they can be applied in the English classroom. These examples will illustrate the practical implications of each philosophy, demonstrating how they can be integrated into curriculum design, assessment strategies, and classroom practices. By doing so, we aim to provide educators with concrete strategies for implementing these philosophies in their teaching.

Finally, we will discuss the implications of these philosophies for teaching practice, addressing potential challenges and offering suggestions for future research and reflection. Implementing these philosophical frameworks in the English classroom is not without its challenges, as educators may face resistance to change, curriculum constraints, and the need to navigate sensitive topics. However, by understanding these challenges and considering strategies for overcoming them, educators can more effectively apply these philosophies to enhance student engagement, promote inclusivity, and develop critical thinking skills.

Through this comprehensive exploration of the philosophy of English education, we hope to provide a valuable resource for educators seeking to deepen their understanding of the theoretical foundations of their practice. By examining the historical development and key philosophical frameworks of English education, and by considering their practical applications and implications, we can contribute to a more informed and reflective approach to teaching language and literature.

## **2. Historical Overview of English Education**

### **2.1. Early 20th Century: Progressive Education**

The early 20th century marked a significant shift in educational philosophy, characterized by the rise of progressive education. This movement was heavily influenced by thinkers such as John Dewey, who emphasized the importance of experiential learning, critical thinking, and the student's voice in the learning process. Dewey argued that education should not merely be about the transmission of knowledge but rather about fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills. He believed that students learn best by engaging with real-world issues and participating in activities that allow them to construct their own understanding (Wilkinson, 2022). Dewey's philosophy was rooted in the belief that education should be a democratic process, where students are actively involved in their learning and encouraged to think critically about the world around them. His ideas challenged the traditional, teacher-centered models of education, advocating instead for a more interactive and collaborative approach (Nasir et al., 2022). Dewey's emphasis on the student's role in their own education laid the groundwork for later educational theories, such as constructivism, which would continue to build on the principles of active learning and student engagement.

Progressive education also placed a strong emphasis on the role of literature in addressing social issues. Teachers began to incorporate texts that dealt with themes of social justice, encouraging students to engage with complex societal themes and develop a sense of empathy and understanding. This approach to teaching literature became central to the curriculum, reflecting a broader shift towards education that prepares students to be active participants in society. Literature was seen as a powerful tool for fostering empathy and critical thinking, as it

allowed students to explore different perspectives and experiences. By engaging with texts that addressed social issues, students were encouraged to reflect on their own beliefs and values, and to consider how they could contribute to positive social change (Tesar, 2021). This focus on social justice in the English curriculum was a key aspect of the progressive education movement, highlighting the importance of education in promoting a more just and equitable society.

In practice, this meant that English classrooms began to include works by authors who wrote about social issues, such as Charles Dickens, whose novels often critiqued the social conditions of his time. Teachers used these texts to spark discussions about inequality, poverty, and other social injustices, encouraging students to think critically about these issues and to consider their own roles in addressing them. This approach to literature not only enriched students' understanding of the world but also empowered them to become agents of change (Krasny and Slattery, 2021). The progressive education movement's emphasis on social justice and critical engagement with literature set the stage for later developments in English education, influencing the ways in which educators approached the teaching of language and literature in subsequent decades.

## **2.2. Mid to Late 20th Century: Constructivism and Critical Pedagogy**

In the mid to late 20th century, two significant philosophical frameworks emerged in English education: constructivism and critical pedagogy. Constructivism, rooted in the work of theorists such as Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, emphasizes the learner-centered approach to education. According to constructivist theory, learners construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiences and reflection. This framework encourages teachers to facilitate learning environments that promote student inquiry and collaboration (Stewart, 2021).

Critical pedagogy, on the other hand, was heavily influenced by Paulo Freire and his concept of "conscientization," or the process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality. This framework challenges traditional educational models by promoting social justice and equity in the classroom. Critical pedagogy encourages students to question societal norms and power structures, and to use education as a means of empowering themselves and others (Cui et al., 2024).

During this period, English educators began to integrate constructivist and critical pedagogy approaches into their teaching practices. For example, project-based learning became a popular method for engaging students in the construction of knowledge, while the analysis of media representations of marginalized groups became a key component of the curriculum.

## **2.3. Contemporary Developments: Postmodernism and Beyond**

As we move into the late 20th and early 21st centuries, postmodernism has emerged as a significant influence on English education. Postmodernism challenges the notion of absolute truths and emphasizes the importance of multiple perspectives and diverse narratives (Asmus and Gonzalez, 2020). This framework encourages educators to incorporate a wide range of literary texts, including those from marginalized voices, and to foster an environment where students are encouraged to question and deconstruct traditional narratives.

The integration of technology has also played a crucial role in the evolution of English education. Digital tools and platforms have opened up new possibilities for teaching and learning,

allowing for the exploration of multimedia texts and the development of digital literacy skills. As English education continues to evolve, it is essential for educators to remain responsive to these changes and to adapt their practices accordingly.

### **3. Key Philosophical Frameworks**

#### **3.1. Constructivism**

Constructivism is a philosophical framework that emphasizes the active role of learners in constructing their own understanding and knowledge of the world. According to constructivist theory, knowledge is not simply transmitted from teacher to student but is instead built through experiences and interactions with the environment (Baker-Bell, 2020). This approach to learning encourages teachers to create classroom environments that promote student inquiry, collaboration, and reflection. Constructivism posits that learners build new knowledge upon the foundation of their existing knowledge, meaning that each learner's understanding is unique and shaped by their prior experiences and interactions. This theory is rooted in the work of educational theorists such as Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, who both emphasized the importance of learners actively engaging with their learning environment to develop their understanding.

In the English classroom, constructivism can be applied through various teaching strategies. For example, student-led inquiry projects allow students to explore a topic of interest, gather information, and construct their own understanding of the subject. These projects might involve students choosing a particular theme or issue within a piece of literature and conducting research to deepen their understanding of it. By allowing students to follow their curiosity and engage with topics that resonate with them, teachers foster a sense of ownership and motivation in the learning process (Peters, 2021). This approach also encourages critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as students must navigate the complexities of their chosen topic and draw their own conclusions.

Collaborative activities, such as group discussions and peer feedback, also promote the construction of knowledge by encouraging students to share their perspectives and learn from one another. In a constructivist English classroom, students might engage in literature circles, where small groups discuss a text, share their interpretations, and explore different viewpoints. This not only helps students to deepen their understanding of the text but also develops their communication and listening skills. Peer feedback sessions, where students review and critique each other's work, further enhance the learning process by allowing students to see their writing from another perspective and refine their ideas based on constructive input.

Another effective constructivist strategy in the English classroom is the use of reflective journals. These journals provide a space for students to record their thoughts, questions, and insights about the texts they are reading. By regularly engaging in reflection, students can track their own learning journey, identify areas where they need more understanding, and develop a deeper connection to the material. Reflective journals also encourage metacognition, helping students to become more aware of their own learning processes and strategies (Rodriguez, 2021).

Constructivism in the English classroom shifts the focus from the teacher as the sole source of knowledge to the student as an active participant in their own learning. By implementing strategies that promote inquiry, collaboration, and reflection, teachers can create a dynamic learning environment where students are empowered to construct their own understanding and develop essential skills for lifelong learning.

### 3.2. Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is a philosophical framework that challenges traditional educational models by promoting social justice and equity in the classroom. Rooted in the work of Paulo Freire, critical pedagogy encourages students to develop a critical awareness of their social reality and to use education as a means of empowering themselves and others. This framework emphasizes the importance of questioning societal norms and power structures, and of engaging with texts that address issues of social justice. Freire's seminal work, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," argues that education should be a liberating force, transforming students from passive recipients of knowledge into active participants in their own learning and in the struggle for social change. Critical pedagogy seeks to dismantle oppressive educational practices and to foster an environment where students can critically engage with the world around them (Wan and Cui, 2024).

In the English classroom, critical pedagogy can be applied through various teaching strategies. For example, analyzing media representations of marginalized groups can help students develop a critical understanding of how power and privilege operate in society. By examining advertisements, films, and news stories, students can uncover the often-subtle ways in which certain groups are stereotyped, marginalized, or excluded. This process of critical media analysis encourages students to question the narratives they are presented with and to consider the impact of these narratives on social perceptions and attitudes (Wang et al., 2024). Teachers can facilitate discussions and activities that prompt students to reflect on their own biases and to challenge the status quo, fostering a deeper understanding of how media shapes our understanding of the world. Moreover, Engaging with literature that explores themes of social justice can also encourage students to reflect on their own experiences and to develop a sense of empathy and solidarity with others. Texts such as "To Kill a Mockingbird" by Harper Lee, "The Color Purple" by Alice Walker, or "The Hate U Give" by Angie Thomas can serve as powerful tools for examining issues of race, class, gender, and inequality. Through close reading and discussion, students can explore the perspectives of characters who face oppression and injustice, gaining insights into their struggles and resilience. This engagement with literature not only deepens students' understanding of social issues but also encourages them to think critically about how these issues manifest in their own lives and communities (Pere, 2023).

Another key aspect of critical pedagogy in the English classroom is the use of dialogue and collaborative learning. Freire emphasized the importance of dialogue as a means of fostering critical consciousness and mutual respect. In the classroom, this can take the form of student-led discussions, where students are encouraged to share their thoughts and listen to the perspectives of their peers. By creating a space for open and respectful dialogue, teachers can help students develop a deeper understanding of social issues and cultivate the skills needed to challenge



injustice. Collaborative projects, such as group presentations or community action initiatives, further reinforce the principles of critical pedagogy by encouraging students to work together to address real-world problems (Roth, 2023).

Critical pedagogy also involves encouraging students to take action beyond the classroom. This might involve participating in community service projects, advocating for social change, or engaging in activism. By connecting their learning to real-world issues, students can see the relevance of their education and develop a sense of agency and empowerment. Teachers can support this process by providing resources and opportunities for students to engage with their communities, helping them to translate their critical awareness into meaningful action.

Critical pedagogy in the English classroom involves a multifaceted approach to teaching that emphasizes critical thinking, social justice, and empowerment. By analyzing media, engaging with literature, fostering dialogue, and encouraging action, teachers can help students develop a critical awareness of their social reality and use education as a tool for positive change. This framework not only enhances students' learning experiences but also prepares them to be active and informed participants in society.

### **3.3. Postmodernism**

Postmodernism is a philosophical framework that challenges the notion of absolute truths and emphasizes the importance of multiple perspectives and diverse narratives. In the context of English education, postmodernism encourages educators to incorporate a wide range of literary texts, including those from marginalized voices, and to foster an environment where students are encouraged to question and deconstruct traditional narratives (Ullah et al., 2020).

In the English classroom, postmodernism can be applied through various teaching strategies. For example, encouraging students to explore multiple interpretations of a text can help them develop a deeper understanding of the complexities of language and meaning. Incorporating diverse texts, such as those from different cultural and historical contexts, can also help students appreciate the richness and diversity of human experience.

## **4. Implications for Teaching Practice**

### **4.1. Student Engagement**

One of the key implications of these philosophical frameworks for teaching practice is their potential to enhance student engagement. By creating learning environments that encourage student inquiry, collaboration, and reflection, educators can foster a sense of ownership and agency in the learning process. For example, literature circles, where students engage in small group discussions about a text, can promote active participation and critical thinking.

Another example of enhancing student engagement is through the use of digital storytelling. Students can create multimedia projects that allow them to explore and express their understanding of a text in a creative and engaging way. This approach not only enhances student engagement but also develops digital literacy skills.

## **4.2. Curriculum Design**

These philosophical frameworks also have significant implications for curriculum design. By incorporating diverse perspectives and promoting inclusivity, educators can create curricula that reflect the realities and experiences of all students. For example, a unit on dystopian literature could include texts from different cultural and historical contexts, encouraging students to explore the ways in which power and oppression are represented in different societies.

Another aspect of curriculum design influenced by these frameworks is the integration of interdisciplinary approaches. By connecting English with other subjects such as history, social studies, or science, educators can create a more holistic learning experience that encourages students to make connections across disciplines.

## **4.3. Assessment Strategies**

The philosophical frameworks discussed in this paper also have important implications for assessment strategies. By aligning assessments with the principles of constructivism, critical pedagogy, and postmodernism, educators can create opportunities for students to demonstrate their understanding and critical thinking skills in meaningful ways. For example, portfolios, where students compile a collection of their work over time, can provide a comprehensive picture of their learning and growth. Critical essays and multimodal projects can also encourage students to engage with texts in a deeper and more reflective way.

Another innovative assessment strategy is the use of peer and self-assessment. By encouraging students to reflect on their own work and provide feedback to their peers, educators can foster a culture of reflection and continuous improvement.

## **5. Case Studies and Practical Applications**

### **5.1. Implementing Constructivist Approaches**

One practical application of constructivism in the English classroom is through the use of project-based learning. For example, in a middle school English class, students might be tasked with creating a multimedia presentation based on a novel they have read. This project would allow students to explore the themes and characters of the novel in depth, while also developing their digital literacy skills. By engaging in this type of project, students are able to construct their own understanding of the text and to share their insights with their peers.

Another example of implementing constructivist approaches is through the use of inquiry-based learning. Students might be given a guiding question related to a text and encouraged to explore and research the topic, developing their own understanding and presenting their findings to the class.

### **5.2. Critical Pedagogy in Action**

Another practical application of critical pedagogy in the English classroom is through the analysis of contemporary social issues. For example, in a high school English class, students might be asked to analyze a piece of literature that addresses issues of race, class, or gender. By



engaging with this text, students can develop a critical understanding of the ways in which power and privilege operate in society, and can begin to develop strategies for challenging and changing these structures.

A specific example of this approach is the use of literature circles focused on social justice themes. Students can engage in small group discussions about a text, sharing their perspectives and insights, and developing a deeper understanding of the issues addressed in the literature.

### **5.3. Postmodern Textual Analysis**

A practical application of postmodernism in the English classroom is through the use of comparative textual analysis. For example, students might be asked to compare and contrast two different versions of a story, such as a traditional fairy tale and a modern retelling. By engaging in this type of analysis, students can explore the ways in which different authors and cultures interpret and represent the same narrative, and can develop a deeper understanding of the complexities of language and meaning.

Another example of postmodern textual analysis is the use of multimodal texts. Students can analyze and create multimedia projects that incorporate text, images, and sound, allowing them to explore the ways in which meaning is constructed and communicated in different media.

## **6. Challenges and Considerations**

### **6.1. Addressing Resistance to Change**

One of the main challenges in implementing these philosophical frameworks in the English classroom is addressing resistance to change. Teachers may be hesitant to adopt new pedagogical approaches, particularly if they feel that these approaches conflict with their existing beliefs and practices. To address this challenge, it is important for educators to engage in ongoing professional development and to collaborate with their colleagues in implementing these new approaches.

Another strategy for addressing resistance to change is to provide clear evidence of the effectiveness of these new approaches. By sharing research and case studies that demonstrate the positive impact of constructivism, critical pedagogy, and postmodernism on student learning and engagement, educators can build a compelling case for change.

### **6.2. Balancing Curriculum Demands**

Another challenge in implementing these philosophical frameworks is balancing the demands of the curriculum. Teachers may feel pressured to cover a certain amount of content within a given timeframe, which can make it difficult to incorporate more student-centered and inquiry-based approaches. To address this challenge, educators can work to integrate these new approaches into their existing curriculum, rather than trying to add them on top of their existing workload. One way to balance curriculum demands is to use thematic units that integrate multiple texts and activities around a central theme. This approach allows educators to cover required content while also providing opportunities for student inquiry and reflection.

### **6.3. Navigating Sensitive Topics**

A final challenge in implementing these philosophical frameworks is navigating sensitive topics. Engaging with issues of social justice and power can be emotionally challenging for both students and teachers, and can require careful facilitation and support. To address this challenge, educators can create safe spaces for dialogue and reflection, and can provide resources and support for students who may be struggling with these issues. One strategy for navigating sensitive topics is to use restorative practices, such as circles and restorative conferences, to facilitate open and respectful dialogue. These practices can help build a sense of community and trust in the classroom, creating a safe space for students to engage with challenging issues.

### **7. Conclusion**

Overall, the philosophy of English education is a rich and complex field that encompasses a variety of theoretical perspectives, each offering unique insights into the teaching and learning process. By understanding and applying these philosophical frameworks, educators can create meaningful and effective learning experiences that foster student engagement, promote inclusivity, and develop critical thinking skills. As the field of English education continues to evolve, it is essential for educators to remain reflective and responsive to the needs of their students, and to ground their practices in a solid philosophical foundation. Through this approach, teachers can contribute to a more equitable and engaging educational landscape, empowering students to become active and critical participants in society.

#### **Author Contributions:**

Conceptualization, B. X., J. C.; methodology, B. X., J. C.; software, B. X., J. C.; validation, B. X., J. C.; formal analysis, B. X., J. C.; investigation, B. X., J. C.; resources, B. X., J. C.; data curation, B. X., J. C.; writing—original draft preparation, B. X., J. C.; writing—review and editing, B. X., J. C.; visualization, B. X., J. C.; supervision, B. X., J. C.; project administration, B. X., J. C.; funding acquisition, B. X., J. C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

#### **Funding:**

Not applicable.

#### **Data Availability Statement:**

Not applicable.

#### **Conflict of Interest:**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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