

Learning by Decrease: Daoist Wu Wei and Freirean Critical Pedagogy in the English Language Classroom

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Abstract

The rapid global shift of English language teaching (ELT) to online and blended platforms, significantly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has been celebrated as a modernisation, but the pedagogy applied to these platforms has been predominantly didactic. Internationally, English language learners acquired functional skills in mobilising, navigating, and submitting digital work, but received little instruction in the critical assessment, ethical engagement, and transformative use of digital and target-language expression. This article is a conversation between two traditions seldom brought together on this issue: Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, itself rooted in adult literacy teaching, and the educational philosophy expressed in the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi. The argument is that both traditions diagnose the same aspect — education, including language education, as mere accumulation and storage — and prescribe methods of unlearning. This includes Freire's problem-posing dialogue and conscientização, and Daoism's “daily decrease” (Daodejing 48), mental fasting (xinzhai), and cultivated scepticism toward instrumental devices as exemplified by Zhuangzi's “machine heart.” After examining the similarities and authentic differences between the two traditions, the article proposes a Daoist–Freirean model of critical digital literacy for the English language classroom, combining shared digital and language-learning practices — source evaluation, machine-translation and AI-writing-tool use, multimodal composition — with critical-pedagogical and Daoist interpretative perspectives, and describes classroom implementations in global ELT contexts. This article argues that Daoism offers a contemplative perspective on the language learner's engagement with technology that is absent in contemporary critical digital pedagogy and largely undertheorized in the CALL (computer-assisted language learning) literature.

Keywords: Daoism, Daodejing, Zhuangzi, wu wei, Paulo Freire, critical pedagogy, digital literacy, English language teaching, second language literacy, comparative philosophy of education

Introduction

Learning did not stop but changed with the closure of educational institutions around the world for about 1.5 billion students due to the COVID-19 pandemic (UNESCO 2020). But what happened was rarely thought of as online education in any principled way. It was called “emergency remote teaching” by Hodges et al. (2020): the swift conversion of face-to-face education to any platform open to educators and students. For English language teaching specifically, in-person conversation classes, oral assessment, and the immersion activities that anchor communicative language teaching were transposed, often clumsily, onto video-conferencing software and learning management systems built for content delivery rather than language use. Five years on, the platforms remain, now joined by generative artificial intelligence and machine translation, and digital mediation has become a fixture of language classrooms everywhere, from university English-for-academic-purposes programmes to smartphone-based EFL instruction in the Global South.

Yet a concerning imbalance permeates this transformation, especially in language classrooms. Learners and educators developed practical skills of joining video calls, submitting recorded speaking tasks, uploading written work, and running text through translation and grammar-checking software. The least systematically educated

competencies were the ability to assess the truth of English-language online content, the ability to identify ideology and bias in the digital source material used for research and academic writing, the ability to engage ethically in target-language online communities, and the ability to use digital expression for social purposes in a second or foreign language. The two are often confused in language-education discourse, where progress in operational digital fluency is mistaken for achievement in critical digital and linguistic judgement.

This article attempts to remedy that with an unusual pairing, developed here specifically for the English language classroom. One participant is an expert on educational theory: Paulo Freire. In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire identified transmissive education as a “banking” relationship in which knowledge is deposited in passive students. His own literacy campaigns among adult learners in 1960s Brazil were, in effect, first- and second-language literacy projects, which makes his framework a natural, if underused, resource for language pedagogy (cf. Pennycook 2001). The other participant is familiar in Daoist studies but almost entirely absent from language-education literature: the classical Daoist texts, in particular the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*, whose thoughts on knowledge, language, skill, and technology constitute — this article argues — a nuanced pedagogy of unlearning with direct relevance to how learners come to inhabit a second language. The comparative hypothesis is that these traditions agree on a common conception of education as a process of accumulation, with different but instructive solutions, and that their integration yields a more complete view of critical digital literacy in ELT than either tradition, or the existing CALL literature calling for such literacy (Kern 2000; Godwin-Jones, 2015), has developed independently. Critical pedagogy, developed before the rise of the attention economy and applied only unevenly to language teaching, generally lacks a reflective perspective on the learner–technology interaction that is often critiqued by Daoist quietism as lacking a socio-political dimension, a dimension that Freire offers.

The article is structured in five sections. First, the thesis analyses how international research on digital literacy in language education has differentiated between operational and critical competencies. It then re-reads Freire's critique of banking education, with attention to its applied-linguistic reception, before turning to Daoist texts as educational materials for the language classroom. A part compares and contrasts similarities and differences. The final sections propose a Daoist–Freirean model for critical digital literacy in ELT and its implementation in language classrooms worldwide.

Digital Literacy in English Language Teaching: From Operational Skill to Social Practice

The idea of digital literacy was first introduced by Gilster (1997) to refer to the ability to understand and employ information from diverse digital sources, and it has since undergone significant development within language education specifically. Kern (2000) argued that literacy in a second language is not the separable skills of reading and writing but a broader discourse competence — the ability to interpret and critically evaluate a wide variety of written and spoken texts — and proposed literacy as an organising principle for language curricula rather than an add-on to grammar instruction. Godwin-Jones (2015) extended this argument into the digital domain, arguing that language learners now contribute, create, and curate content across multilingual online spaces and that digital literacy for language learners must be taught as such, not assumed as a by-product of exposure. Buckingham (2007) argues, more broadly, that digital literacy should embrace the critical analysis of representation, ideology and power in digital media as well as practical questions of technology use, while Warschauer (2004) states that the digital divide is not between those who have access and those who do not, but between those who have access to create and critique and those who have access only to consume — a divide that falls with particular weight on multilingual and under-resourced language learners.

This trajectory provides a differentiation that organises the current article. Between operational digital literacy in ELT — abilities related to access, navigation, communication, and content dissemination in the target language — and critical digital literacy, the ability to analyse digital texts and contexts as ideological and linguistic frameworks (Ávila & Pandya, 2013; Pangrazio, 2016). Pangrazio (2016) argues that students move beyond just using platforms to analytically critiquing them when they combine personal, creative, and analytical interactions with digital texts; in the language classroom, this analytical layer must additionally reckon with whose English, and whose variety of English, a given digital text represents. The international record of language education during the pandemic is mainly a record of the operational end of this continuum: the delivery of grammar lectures, the assignment of vocabulary worksheets, and the administration of standardised online reading and listening tests that mimicked classroom instruction in remote settings from North America to East Asia to sub-Saharan Africa. The rise of generative AI and freely available neural machine translation has heightened the sense of urgency in language classrooms, specifically, bringing questions of integrity, authorship, and

dependability that operational training cannot articulate (Selwyn, 2019; Groves & Mundt, 2015). The infrequency of crossing the critical threshold requires normative resources that the digital-literacy-in-ELT literature, by design, does not fully provide. The next two sections consider two traditions that offer them.

Freire: Banking Education and Problem-Posing Dialogue

Freire's central argument targets what he called the banking model of education, in which the teacher deposits information into learners conceived as empty receptacles. For Freire, banking education is not only ineffective; it reproduces the relations of domination which education should challenge, training learners in passivity before authoritative texts and voices (Freire 1970). He counterposed it to problem-posing education, a dialogical relation in which teachers and students together name the world, become conscious of its contradictions, and intervene in it. Its practices involve questioning rather than answering; contesting authority, including the authority of texts and teachers; co-constructing knowledge in democratic classrooms; and cultivating conscientização, the critical consciousness through which learners come to read both the word and the world.

These themes have been developed through a wide literature: Giroux (1988) recast teachers as transformative intellectuals rather than technicians; Shor (1992) operationalised critical pedagogy as empowering classroom practice; Hooks (1994) extended it toward education as the practice of freedom; and Pennycook (2001) carried its concerns directly into applied linguistics, showing that language teaching is never a neutral transfer of grammar and vocabulary but is imbued with power, identity, and ideology — that the global spread of English-language classrooms itself instantiates relations of linguistic and cultural domination that banking pedagogy tends to reproduce uncritically rather than interrogate. Applied to the digital turn in ELT, Freire poses a piercing diagnostic question: has digitally mediated language teaching been dialogic or merely transmissive? Globally, the evidence overwhelmingly points to the latter. The live vocabulary drill on a video call, the uploaded grammar worksheet, and the auto-graded reading-comprehension quiz are a digital re-enactment of banking education in the language classroom specifically — deposits of vocabulary and syntax made at a distance, with better bandwidth.

Daoist Pedagogy: Learning by Decrease

There is no curriculum in the classical texts of Daoism, and Daoism is not commonly read as an educational philosophy. But the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi are full of reflections about how knowing, skill, and transformation actually take place — and of suspicion toward the accumulative model of learning that Freire would later call banking, a suspicion with an unexpected resonance for the language learner, whose accumulation of vocabulary lists and grammar rules so often outpaces genuine fluency. The difference is expressed with epigrammatic force in chapter 48 of the Daodejing: in pursuing learning, something is gained every day; in pursuing dao, something is dropped every day (Daodejing 48; Ames & Hall, 2003). This passage is not a denial of learning, but a relativization of accumulation, for in the further and deeper movement — unlearning, simplification, discarding of acquired contrivance — lies authentic transformation. Such passages, according to Moeller (2006), can be read as a sustained critique of artificiality. The sage goes back to the uncarved block, a state preceding the imposition of socially manufactured categories.

Teaching without Words, Leading without Domination

The Daodejing repeatedly praises “the teaching that is without words” (Daodejing 2, 43) — not a refusal to speak but a refusal to make verbal deposit the paradigm of instruction. The exemplary leader of chapter 17 is one of whose existence the people are barely aware; when the work is accomplished, they say they did it themselves. Transposed to the language classroom, this is a radical account of non-coercive facilitation: the teacher's success is measured by learners' sense of their own emerging voice in the target language, not by the visibility of the teacher's corrections. Wu wei, the “effortless action” that Slingerland (2003) has analyzed as both conceptual metaphor and spiritual ideal, names the mode of such teaching: acting without forcing, guiding without dominating, in responsive attunement to what is already unfolding in the learner's developing interlanguage.

Wheelwright Bian: The Critique of Textual Deposit

The Zhuangzi radicalizes this suspicion of transmission. In the celebrated anecdote of Wheelwright Bian (Zhuangzi 13; Watson, 2013), the artisan interrupts Duke Huan's reading to declare that the books of the sages

are merely the leftover residue of the ancients: the knack of wheel-making — neither too slow nor too hurried — cannot be put into words, cannot be taught even to his own son, and must be gotten in the hand and felt in the body. The story is, *avant la lettre*, a critique of banking education more uncompromising than Freire's own: what matters most in knowing cannot be deposited at all. The knack Bian describes resonates suggestively with the language learner's own experience of fluency: no grammar rule, however precisely stated, transfers the tacit, embodied timing of when to use it in real speech. Its positive counterpart is Cook Ding (Zhuangzi 3; Ziporyn, 2020), whose blade stays sharp for nineteen years because his skill has matured beyond technique to responsive attunement with the natural structure of the ox. Thus, learning is cultivation, not accumulation. It is a transformation of the knower, not a transfer of content, in language learning as in wheelwrighting.

The Machine Heart: A Daoist Hermeneutic of Technology

What is most impressive about the digital age today is the well-sweep narrative of Zhuangzi 12. A gardener waters his garden with a bucket. A Confucian disciple, Zigong, suggests a simple machine, the well-sweep, which will multiply his efficiency a hundredfold. The gardener is furious: where clever devices exist, clever dealings exist, and out of clever dealings comes a “machine heart” (*ji xin*) — a cunning, calculating nature that disrupts the unadulterated simplicity in which the *dao* can reside (Zhuangzi 12; Watson 2013). What is being underscored is not a Luddite ban; elsewhere the Zhuangzi praises the masterful use of tools in the stories of Cook Ding and the cicada-catcher. The point is phenomenological: instruments are not neutral tools but shaping contexts that influence users' tendencies. The same question applies with particular force to the language learner reaching for a translation app or an AI writing assistant: does the tool extend the learner's own emerging voice in the target language, or does frictionless output pre-empt the very struggle through which competence and voice are formed? The Zhuangzi offered the key insight of today's critiques of the attention economy, twenty-three centuries before recommendation algorithms and infinite scrolling: the question we should be asking about any technology is what kind of heart-mind it cultivates in us. The Daoist techniques of negative self-cultivation, “fasting of the mind” (*xinzhai*) in Zhuangzi 4 and “sitting in oblivion” (*zuowang*) in Zhuangzi 6, are specific methods for clearing the conditioned, mechanised heart and returning to a state of receptive openness (Kohn, 2010). In later religious and meditative developments, the Daoist tradition made attention training fundamental to refined existence (Kohn, 2009).

Convergences and Divergences

The convergences between Freire and the Daoist sources are substantial and, given their utterly independent origins, remarkable. Both diagnose transmissive accumulation as a deformation of learning: banking education and the “daily increase” of Daodejing 48 name the same accumulative paradigm, whether the deposited content is a critical vocabulary or an English vocabulary list. Both locate genuine learning in the learner's lived situation rather than in authoritative text — Freire through generative themes drawn from learners' worlds, Zhuangzi through the embodied knack that no book, and no textbook dialogue, can carry. Both conceive education as a form of de-conditioning: *conscientização* unmasks the internalized ideology of the oppressor, while *xinzhai* empties the acquired contrivances of the socialized heart-mind. And both issues in an ideal of the self-directing learner: Freire's subject who names the world, and the people of Daodejing 17 who say “we did it ourselves.”

The divergences are equally instructive, and a comparative argument that suppressed them would be untrustworthy. Freire's pedagogy is irreducibly verbal and dialogical — the word, spoken between equals, is his instrument of liberation — whereas the Daodejing distrusts language's capacity to carry what matters most and commends teaching without words. Freire's *telos* is activist transformation of unjust structures; the Daoist texts are wary of deliberate campaigns of transformation, which smell of the contrivance (*wei*) that *wu wei* renounces. Freire presumes conflict between oppressor and oppressed; the Daodejing's political imagination favors non-contention (*bu zheng*), the water that overcomes by yielding (Daodejing 8, 78). These are real tensions, not misunderstandings. But they are also complementary correctives. Freirean praxis guards Daoist-inflected pedagogy against quietist withdrawal from questions of power — a standing worry about Daoist political thought. Daoist non-coercion and linguistic humility guard critical pedagogy against its own occupational hazards: the militancy that hardens dialogue into indoctrination, and the wordiness that mistakes critical vocabulary for critical transformation. In ELT specifically, this complementarity matters because English functions globally both as a medium of information and, per Pennycook (2001), as a vector of linguistic and economic power — a fact Daoist quietism alone would not register but that Freirean praxis foregrounds. In the digital domain, Freire without Daoism yields a critique of content and its ideologies but little account of the formative power of the medium itself, or of the translation and AI tools now mediating language production; Daoism without Freire yields

exquisite sensitivity to the medium but no program for contesting the political economy that shapes which languages, and whose English, that medium privileges. The framework that follows is built on this complementarity.

A Daoist–Freirean Framework for Critical Digital Literacy in ELT

This is made clearer in Table 1. Each row pairs a digital practice common to English language classrooms across the world with two analytical perspectives: one a Freirean perspective that politicizes the practice, and the other a Daoist perspective that attends to the disposition the practice cultivates. The design principle is intentionally low-key: the framework does not require new technologies or changes to the syllabus, only a shift in teaching intent within existing ELT practices – the same research task, the same social-media assignment, the same machine-translation-assisted draft. In the context of Freire's philosophy, each row transforms an act of consumption into a problem-posing experience; from the perspective of Daoism, each row transforms a moment of accumulation into a moment of insight and reduction.

Digital practice (ELT)	Freirean lens	Daoist lens
Researching in the target language	Evaluate credibility, currency, and bias; ask whose interests and whose variety of English a source serves	Practice “daily decrease” (Daodejing 48): discern and discard rather than accumulate; seek the constant amid informational flux
Reading English-language texts online	Identify ideology and representation; notice whose voices, and whose Englishes, are absent	Treat texts as traces, not truths, after Wheelwright Bian (Zhuangzi 13); question the fixity of words
Using social media in the target language	Analyze misinformation; practice digital ethics and civic responsibility across linguistic communities	Observe the “machine heart” (Zhuangzi 12): notice how the platform conditions dispositions; cultivate stillness amid noise
Creating digital content in a second language	Express informed positions on social issues; claim public voice in the target language	Compose with ziran (self-so naturalness): authentic, uncontrived expression rather than performance for metrics
Participating in L2 online discussion and exchange	Engage dialogically and respectfully with diverse perspectives across linguacultural boundaries	Emulate water (Daodejing 8, 78): non-contention (bu zheng), softness that outlasts hardness
Using machine translation and AI writing tools	Reflect on ethical, transparent, and accountable use; ask who is credited as author	Apply the well-sweep test: does the tool assist effortlessly (wu wei) or breed dependency and contrivance?

Two features of the framework are worth emphasising. First, the two lenses are not superfluous but complement one another: the Freirean perspective asks about the impact of a digital text or tool in the external, social and linguistic environment, and the Daoist perspective asks about its impact on the learner's own developing heart-mind. Learners may be adept at bias-detection checklists but remain obsessively hooked on the feed; they may cultivate calm detachment but remain politically clueless about the platforms, or the target languages, influence. Critical digital literacy in ELT, on the account defended here, is the integration of both. Second, the framework is portable across language-teaching contexts precisely because both of its anchoring traditions have proven globally mobile: Freirean pedagogy has been adapted from Latin America to every continent and into applied linguistics specifically (Pennycook, 2001), and Daoist thought and practice now circulate far beyond China (Kohn, 2009). The framework presupposes only learners, screens, a target language, and teachers willing to pose problems.

Pedagogical Applications for the English Language Classroom

Five families of classroom practice translate the framework into use; each integrates a Freirean and a Daoist element, and each is drawn from tasks already familiar in ELT.

Fact-checking as discernment in research-based writing. In English-for-academic-purposes and research-writing courses, learners verify claims found in English-language sources cited in their own essays and annotated bibliographies, writing brief verification notes rather than accepting sources at face value. The Freirean element is the interrogation of interests — who benefits from this claim's circulation, and in whose English is it written? The Daoist element reframes the exercise as daily decrease: the goal is not to gather more citations but to discard the false and the noisy, practicing the subtractive movement of Daodejing 48 on one's own source list.

Media bias analysis as cross-linguistic reading of traces. Learners analyse how English-language outlets and outlets in their first language report the same event, comparing headlines, framing, and sourcing across languages (Buckingham, 2007). The governing metaphor is from Wheelwright Bian: all narratives, in any language, are residues of happenings they cannot fully represent, and the reader's task is to treat even 'authoritative' English-language texts as traces, not deposits, rather than assuming the target language confers extra objectivity.

Cognitive fasting as a way to focus attention on extensive reading. Structured periods of digital silence — no gadgets, no pop-up translation, no switching tabs, no skimming — accompany sustained silent reading of a long English text, framed not as punishment but as a beneficial exercise of mental decluttering that restores the sustained attention on which second-language reading fluency depends (Kohn, 2010). Learners then pledge to write reflectively, in whichever language they are most skilled in, about what the experience revealed about their ingrained reading and translating habits: the mechanistic reflex of reaching for a dictionary app laid bare to itself.

The well-sweep debate on machine translation and AI writing tools. Formal classroom debates place Zigong's efficiency argument against the gardener's warning, applied specifically to Google Translate, DeepL, and AI writing assistants in language production (Groves & Mundt, 2015). Students argue both sides of the tools they already use for homework and exams, raising Freirean questions of integrity, authorship, and equity of access (Selwyn, 2019) alongside the Daoist question of dependency: does this tool assist my emerging competence in the manner of wu wei, or does it hollow the very skill — composing a sentence, choosing a word — it replaces?

Digital storytelling as ziran. Learners produce short multimodal narratives in the target language about issues in their own communities, using only the devices they possess (Godwin-Jones 2015). The Freirean element is voice — learners as producers, not consumers, of English-language digital texts about their own world. The Daoist element is a compositional ethic of ziran: expression that is self-so and uncontrived, made for the matter at hand and for the learner's own developing voice rather than for the platform's metrics or for an idealized native-speaker standard.

Two conditions govern implementation everywhere. Teacher education must itself model these practices — language educators cannot cultivate in students a critical and contemplative relation to the digital and to the target language that they have never been given room to develop themselves. And assessment must make room for them, through portfolios, projects, and rubrics that reward evaluation, argument, and reflection in the target language rather than only accuracy; what is never assessed is, in most systems, never taught.

Conclusion

The worldwide digitalization of language education has proven that classrooms can move online with astonishing speed; it has not proven that they can think critically, in the target language, there. The deficit, this article has argued, is not primarily infrastructural but conceptual: digital literacy in ELT remains imagined as a technical and linguistic skill when it needs to be reimagined as a socio-political and contemplative competence. Freire supplies half of the needed reimagination — the diagnosis of transmission as banking and the program of problem-posing dialogue, already carried into applied linguistics by scholars such as Pennycook (2001) and into digital language literacy by Kern (2000) and Godwin-Jones (2015). Classical Daoism, read as a pedagogy of unlearning, supplies the other half: the subtractive discipline of daily decrease, the critique of textual deposit in Wheelwright Bian, the non-coercive teaching of the Daodejing, and, in the figure of the machine heart, a hermeneutic of technology — including translation and AI writing technology — of startling contemporary relevance to the language classroom. Between the uncarved block and the networked screen, there is no simple opposition; there is a

pedagogical task. The Daoist–Freirean framework proposed here is one map of that task for English language teaching: from operating platforms to interrogating them, from accumulating vocabulary to discerning it, and from being formed by our translation tools to asking, together and out loud, in whatever language we share, what kind of heart-mind, and what kind of voice, we wish them to form.

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