

Teaching Social Justice in English for Academic Purposes Classrooms: Perspectives from Turkish Universities

Enseñanza de la justicia social en aulas universitarias de inglés académico: perspectivas de universidades turcas

Onur Özkaynak

The Ohio State University, Columbus, USA

Merve Şanal

Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Türkiye

Zeynep Arslan

The Ohio State University, Columbus, USA

This multiple-case study explores how university-level English for academic purposes instructors conceptualize and implement social justice pedagogy in the Turkish higher education context. The research questions focus on how four instructors define social justice, translate it into classroom practice, and navigate related challenges. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed through interpretive coding. Findings revealed a spectrum of pedagogical approaches ranging from proactive critical integration to reactive avoidance, shaped by the instructors' theoretical backgrounds and institutional constraints. The study concludes that effective social justice pedagogy in English for academic purposes requires both individual teacher commitment and systematic institutional support that addresses the complex political nature of language teaching.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, English for academic purposes, higher education, social justice, Türkiye

Este estudio de caso múltiple explora cómo docentes universitarios de inglés con fines académicos en Turquía conceptualizan e implementan la pedagogía de la justicia social y afrontan los desafíos asociados. Los datos se recopilaban mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas y se analizaron mediante codificación interpretativa. Los hallazgos revelan un espectro de enfoques pedagógicos que van desde una integración crítica proactiva hasta una evasión reactiva, moldeados por los conocimientos teóricos de los docentes y por las limitaciones institucionales. Se concluye que una pedagogía eficaz de la justicia social en los cursos de inglés con fines académicos requiere tanto el compromiso individual del profesorado como un apoyo institucional sistemático que reconozca la naturaleza política y compleja de la enseñanza de idiomas.

Palabras clave: educación superior, inglés con fines académicos, justicia social, pedagogía crítica, Turquía

Onur Özkaynak  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9239-581X> • Email: ozkaynak.2@osu.edu

Merve Şanal  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7937-9866> • Email: msanal@metu.edu.tr

Zeynep Arslan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7347-7606> • Email: arslanozkaynak.1@osu.edu

How to cite this article (APA, 7th ed.): Özkaynak, O., Şanal, M., & Arslan, Z. (2026). Teaching social justice in English for academic purposes classrooms: Perspectives from Turkish universities. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, 28(2), 103–118. <https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v28n2.120998>

This article was received on June 23, 2025 and accepted on April 8, 2026.

This is an Open Access text distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons license Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. Consultation is possible at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Introduction

The field of English for academic purposes (EAP), which can be broadly defined as “teaching English specifically to help learners study or research using English” (Hamp-Lyons, 2011, p. 89), has long been assumed to be neutral and pragmatic due to the instrumental and functional role of English it presupposes (Benesch, 2001). Drawing on Benesch’s (2001) critique of traditional EAP, this view reduces English to a tool for carrying out academic endeavors while sidelining core concerns such as power, legitimacy, and access in language education. Within such an understanding of language teaching, instructors are positioned as technicians, expected to teach academic conventions through ostensibly apolitical content rather than to engage with sociopolitical issues in their classrooms. However, teaching and learning (academic) English is never merely about the transmission or acquisition of a certain set of language skills (see Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Pennycook, 2021). It also includes so-called “norms” shaped by colonial histories and linguistic hierarchies (Canagarajah, 2022). Similarly, work in academic literacy argues that the conventions of academic English, often framed as neutral skills, function to reproduce particular power-laden literacy norms rather than simply transmit value-free linguistic competencies (Henderson & Hirst, 2007). In this respect, what counts as “good English,” which voices are deemed “academic,” whose knowledge is treated as “legitimate,” and what content is “suitable” for the classroom are all ideological constructions that are far from being neutral. The challenge, then, is not to complement EAP syllabi by including critical content, but to reframe EAP instruction as a fundamentally political endeavor and challenge the reproduction of social hierarchies through language teaching.

Although scholars have critiqued the ideological nature of EAP (Benesch, 2001; Canagarajah, 2022; Henderson & Hirst, 2007), we still know little about how instructors themselves interpret and negotiate social

justice in their day-to-day teaching, particularly in the Turkish higher-education context. This paper addresses that gap by focusing on the Turkish context, where English-as-a-medium-of-instruction (EMI) programs in higher education—including EAP classes—have been increasing. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with university-level EAP instructors, the study explores the participants’ conceptualizations of social justice, the ways they attempt to enact it in classroom practice, and the challenges they encounter as they negotiate what is possible within their institutional contexts.

Literature Review

Critical Pedagogy, Social Justice, and the “Neutrality” of Academic English

Critical pedagogy (Freire, 1968/2000) suggests that education is never neutral; it is always political. It either sustains or disrupts social hierarchies. He further argues that this oppressive function is maintained through the banking model of education, in which teachers deposit knowledge into students. To counter such a model, he promoted a problem-posing approach grounded in dialogue, reciprocity, and the co-construction of knowledge, in which teachers and students become co-investigators in the pursuit of critical consciousness (*conscientização*). In this equation, teachers are seen as public intellectuals, rather than “high-level technicians carrying out dictates and objectives decided by experts far removed from the everyday realities of classroom life” (Giroux, 2024, p. 115).

From this foundation, social justice education emerges as an extension of critical pedagogy. Like the concept of social justice itself, defining social justice education is a challenging task. It has no single definition; rather, its meanings shift across contexts and communities (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009). Bell (2016) conceptualizes social justice as a dual concept:

its *goal* is the full and equitable participation of all groups in society, and its *process* must be democratic, participatory, and affirming of human diversity and collective agency. In this sense, social justice education must enable individuals to identify unequal power relations that operate at both individual and structural levels, locate themselves within these structures, and think critically about the production and nature of knowledge itself (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

Social justice education and language education are inherently interconnected, as “language [as] a political instrument, means, and proof of power” (Baldwin, 1997, p. 5) is quite often used to oppress, colonize, and marginalize. However, the very political nature of language makes the language classroom a crucial site for examining these power dynamics and reclaiming language as a tool for liberation. These questions become particularly salient in EAP, which is a field often viewed as pragmatic and politically neutral (Benesch, 2001). However, just as no language is neutral, viewing language and its instruction as neutral means overlooking their potential to promote social justice. In particular, treating (academic) English in this way not only ignores the inherently situated and subjective nature of language but also contributes to the reproduction of dominant discourses and practices embedded in English (Canagarajah, 2022). For this reason, both the structural orientation and the content of academic English need to be reoriented, as this can create space for socially engaged and justice-oriented teaching. For instance, Mortenson’s (2022) classroom-based case study is a good example of how EAP lessons can critically engage with race, systemic inequity, and rhetorical agency through literature and reflective writing. Her study showed how academic literacies and activist sensibilities can be simultaneously developed through social justice-informed curricula.

Bringing critical pedagogy and social justice into EAP involves reimagining both what we teach and how

we teach it. It entails a shift from compliance to critique to transformation, opening up what Breen (2024) calls “a pathway of access for marginalised voices within an increasingly polarised and xenophobic world” (p. 2). This shift does not necessarily reject the teaching of “academic” skills, but recontextualizes them as part of a broader pedagogical project to equip students not only to succeed within existing systems, but to question and take action to dismantle them.

Social Justice in the Turkish Educational Context

Türkiye is ethnically, linguistically, religiously, and culturally diverse. Most of its population is ethnically Turkish, but it also includes many minority groups such as Kurds, Arabs, Circassians, Laz, Armenians, Greeks, Jews, and Assyrians. Recently, this diversity has grown with the arrival of Syrian, Afghan, and Ukrainian refugees.¹ Turkish is the only official language, but Kurdish, Arabic, Armenian, Lazuri, Syriac, and many others are also spoken across the country (Eberhard et al., 2023). Most of the population identifies as Muslim, mainly Sunni, but there is also a significant Alevi community, along with Christian, Jewish, Yazidi, and non-religious groups (KONDA website: <https://konda.com.tr/>).

Despite this level of diversity, Türkiye has never been a place where social justice has truly taken root. Since the founding of the Republic in 1923, state-led modernization efforts aimed at establishing a Western-oriented, secular nation-state have often marginalized communities that do not fit the linguistic, religious, or ethnic identity supported by the state. Efforts to build a unified national identity have come at the cost of suppressing minority identities. Even after the transition to multi-party democracy, citizens’ rights have been frequently restricted by repeated coups. Although

¹ According to the UN Refugee Agency (<https://www.unhcr.org/>), Türkiye is the second-largest host of refugees in the world, sheltering approximately 3.3 million people.

there was a brief period of democratic reform in the early 2000s, including modest expansions in linguistic, ethnic, and religious freedoms, these reforms were short-lived. Many have been hollowed out or later reversed as populist rhetoric and conservative nationalism have reasserted themselves. Today, many minority groups in Türkiye—including ethnic, linguistic, and religious minority groups, LGBTQ+ individuals, and refugees—continue to face systematic marginalization and pressure to assimilate (Aktoprak, 2024; Ince Yenilmez, 2021; Özkaynak, 2025).

It is possible to trace the roots of this marginalization and the lack of understanding of social justice in the country to the education system, with each level overseen by the state. For a long time, this structure excluded certain segments of society from education (see the Headscarf Ban in Türkiye). Although some exclusionary policies were recently abolished, the educational system has continued to promote a state-sanctioned, narrow vision of identity. For instance, the Inclusive Education Initiative, which seeks to integrate Syrian students, has been shown to reflect a Sunni-Islamic and nationalist framework that sidelines non-Sunni and non-Turkish groups (Toker, 2021). This approach is in stark contrast to the approach that previously sidelined religious people.

Despite this, there are efforts that push back against dominant narratives and explore more inclusive pedagogies. Initiatives such as *Social Justice in ELT* (<https://www.socialjusticeinelt.com>) have brought together pre-service teachers to develop lesson plans that address human rights issues, environmental justice, and inequality. The Critical ELT Materials platform, created by students at Middle East Technical University, offers freely accessible teaching resources as alternatives to commercial textbooks. Emerging research similarly highlights the value of affirming students' full linguistic and cultural identities in English classrooms. Şanal and Özkaynak (2023) found that when multilingual university students were encouraged to

draw on their entire linguistic repertoires, they engaged more meaningfully with social justice topics. Likewise, Şenbayrak and Ortaçtepe Hart (2024) suggest that informal spaces, like conversation clubs, can become sites of critical dialogue when facilitators intentionally foreground issues such as gender, ethnicity, and inequality. Özkan and Öz (2025) indicate that Turkish ELT and ELL teacher candidates conceptualize critical pedagogy as social justice but often struggle to enact it due to limited preparation and structural support. Finally, studies on technology and justice (e.g., Yılmaz & Söğüt, 2022) highlight the dual role of digital tools, which can expand critical awareness and participation but also reproduce inequities when access and policy structures fall short.

In sum, while Türkiye's diversity has the potential to serve as a foundation for inclusive and pluralistic education, the sociopolitical and educational landscape shaped by the historical and ongoing marginalization of different segments of society makes it difficult to implement such initiatives. However, within this constrained environment, there are meaningful efforts by teachers, students, and researchers to carve out spaces for critical engagement and social justice.

Method

This study adopts a multiple-case design framed by an interpretive approach (Thomas, 2021). Each case represents a bounded instance of EAP instruction within its institutional and sociopolitical context. Using Thomas's (2021) distinction between object and subject in case study research, the overall object of this study is instructors' engagement with social justice in EAP classrooms, while the cases are individual instructors working in distinct institutional environments. A multiple-case design was selected because examining several instructors enables a richer understanding of how justice-oriented teaching is interpreted and enacted across differing institutional and ideological conditions. Data were collected through semi-struc-

tured interviews conducted in Turkish. The interviews lasted 60–90 minutes, were video-recorded on Zoom, and followed a protocol co-developed by the research team (see Appendix A). Data analysis followed an iterative approach. All authors participated in developing and refining the codebook through open coding, inter-coder comparison, and consensus building (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Once agreement was reached, transcripts were coded in English, translated excerpts were prepared for presentation, and codes were organized into broader categories (see Appendix B for a sample codebook).

In line with this design, we formulated the following research questions:

1. How do EAP instructors in Türkiye conceptualize and enact social justice in their teaching?
2. What contextual and institutional factors shape instructors' possibilities and constraints for social-justice-oriented pedagogy?

Positionality Statement

We, the authors of this paper, were all born and raised in Türkiye and educated in public schools within sociocultural and institutional contexts similar to those of our participants. Our own socioeconomic, cultural, and educational experiences have exposed us to various forms of social injustice in the country. Like the instructors in this study, we did not receive formal training on social justice in our teacher education programs. Over time, however, our teaching experiences with diverse student populations and our engagement with critical scholarship have deepened our awareness

of these issues. We do not approach this study with the aim of critiquing instructors for what they lack; rather, we hope to contribute to a broader conversation about the challenges of teaching for justice in constrained environments. Writing this paper has required us to reflect on our own positions throughout, recognizing how our perspectives are shaped by similar limitations, and approaching our participants' narratives not from a distance but with empathy and shared experience.

Context and Participants

We conducted this study with four EAP instructors working at four Turkish universities. For the participant selection, we first identified the universities that offer EMI programs. Subsequently, we selected five of these universities randomly and reached out to the chairs of the relevant departments that offer EAP courses to distribute our participant recruitment flyer to their instructors. Four instructors responded to our invitation and agreed to take part in the interviews (see Table 1 for demographics). Cemre and Ebru were working in large public universities in Ankara and Istanbul, respectively. Selen and Ozan were employed in large private universities in Ankara and Izmir, respectively. All four instructors were teaching first- and second-year EAP courses. They had linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms, including students from varied regional and international backgrounds. The instructors teaching in public schools also had refugee-background students; however, the instructors working in private institutions mostly had local and international students.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Teaching experience	Institution	Graduate education
Cemre	Female	36	8 years	Public	MA, ELT, & PhD (ongoing)
Selen	Female	35	4 years	Private	MA, ELT
Ebru	Female	38	11 years	Public	MA, ELT
Ozan	Male	38	4 years	Private	MA, Curriculum & Instruction

Public universities in Türkiye are tuition-free. The private ones, on the other hand, are known for their hefty tuition. Although instructors can enjoy a limited degree of agency in course content creation and materials selection, they must follow a centralized curriculum mandated by the Council of Higher Education. Institutional cultures, public and private alike, often emphasize apolitical professionalism and nationalist ideologies while viewing the English language as a marketable asset that their students need to acquire to thrive nationally and internationally (Özkaynak & Arslan, in press). These features shape instructors' possibilities and constraints for integrating social-justice-oriented inquiry into EAP, influencing what topics are taken up, how they are framed, and how far discussions can proceed within institutional dynamics.

Findings

In this section, we present the findings as four case portraits that trace how instructors conceptualize and enact social justice in EAP within their local institutional conditions. Each vignette narrates the instructor's stance, practices, and moments of interaction. We conclude with a cross-case synthesis that highlights recurring constraints and openings across sites.

Cemre: Embedded Critical Literacy

At the time of data collection, Cemre was teaching first- and second-year EAP courses at a large public university with mixed local and international cohorts, including refugee-background students, mostly from Syria. When asked about her views on social justice, she based them on her graduate school coursework. She mentioned that she had taken critical theory courses that included readings by various critical scholars. She was particularly impressed by Freire's concepts of the oppressed and the oppressor. Those concepts gave her a way to name dynamics she had long sensed but not been able to pinpoint. She had come to realize that

"equity is not sameness" and started to read schooling as a space where normalized routines can slide from being oppressed to unintentionally reproducing oppression. She said: "I realized that throughout my education, I was always the oppressed . . . at some point, people normalize it so much that they themselves start becoming the oppressor."

That stance eventually translated into the design of courses and materials. Working with her colleagues, Cemre co-authored reading and writing materials that embedded social justice questions into the genres students were expected to study. The materials invited students to analyze public discourse (e.g., Black Lives Matter, MeToo Movement) while they were practicing summarizing text, synthesizing information, and developing their arguments. Cemre described this as *disciplinary literacy* with a social justice purpose: "While [students] think they're just writing essays for academic writing, they end up discussing these very topics."

As one of the challenges of integrating social justice into her lessons, Cemre mentioned occasional heated moments when some local students were unable to relate to the experiences of refugee-background students. She stated that those students were particularly sensitive to topics related to national identity and migration. For instance, some of them tended to begin classroom discussions with what she framed as an *ethnocentric stance*: "At first, they're like, '[This is] my country, my land...I should be the one getting the jobs...but [immigrants] are the ones finding jobs,' and so on."

In such moments, Cemre intervened and tried to employ dialogic scaffolding strategies by asking perspective-taking questions. For instance, she explicitly asked her students whether they had even been forced to leave their own countries because of war or other coercive factors. Through such dialogic questions, she aimed to help students surface their assumptions and reevaluate their interpretations about other people's lives.

Emotionally charged stories told by some of her students also posed significant challenges to Cemre's social justice teaching. For instance, she recalled a moment when a Syrian student shared her traumatic wartime experience in class:

She told us that she was holding her baby, dying in her arms, while her two children were tugging at her skirt... everyone froze. I'm usually a cheerful person, but that day I didn't know what to do for a moment.

Cemre stated that it was a very difficult moment for her, as she had to contain her emotions as well. However, she handled the situation tactfully and implicitly wove the story into a classroom activity, as she had with other topics previously. To do so, she paused the activity before the break and acknowledged the emotional weight of what had been shared. After the break, she shifted to a short reflective freewriting activity on "respectful and compassionate listening." By doing so, she linked the students' lived experiences to a tangible classroom practice that, according to her, promoted empathy.

Another challenge was discussing religion and politics, which Cemre tried to avoid in class. She did so because she believed those topics had the potential to derail class objectives: "We'd just lose focus, honestly. Such topics take the discussion somewhere totally different, and then it's just time down the drain."

Cemre's case showed how she tried to translate a critical social justice framework into concrete pedagogical practice. She was able to navigate emotionally charged and ethnocentric tensions through embedding challenging topics into academic tasks and using dialogic scaffolding. As a result, she could position her EAP classroom as a space for developing academic writing skills and fostering critical empathy.

Ebru: Reactive Student-Led Openness

Ebru was also working at a large public university, teaching first- and second-year EAP classes. Her social

justice stance was more of an *ethical inclusiveness* that extended beyond human concerns. When asked how she would define social justice, she proposed that it is not only for human beings but, in her words, "it should apply to animals and plants whose rights must be equally protected, too."

Regarding her enactment of social justice in her classroom, she believed her approach fostered an atmosphere of openness and responsiveness. For instance, instead of deliberately planning social justice units, she tried to make space for those conversations when her students brought them up. Then, she guided the discussion "in a completely neutral way," which she suggested welcomed different views and ensured that everyone felt safe participating. As a result, the common pattern in her social justice pedagogy was student-led emergence.

However, Ebru's student-led emergence strategy did not always effectively prevent tense moments from arising. On one occasion, she recalled that a Pakistani male student's comments about religion were met with a strong reaction from a Turkish female student: "It was about religion, I think... something that linked language and faith. A Pakistani student shared his view, and then a female student responded with 'that's wrong!', and suddenly there was conflict."

Then, Ebru's neutrality shifted, and she felt the need to intervene to calm the students. As a result, she changed her approach and decided to state the discussion norms and what *could* and *could not* be discussed in class, including religion. This approach eased the tension but showed a reactive, not proactive, way of handling tough conversations.

Ebru also mentioned several constraints that limited her ability to integrate social justice topics. She contextualized this by explaining that the nature of classroom discussions has changed over her career, stating that "7–8 years ago, students themselves used to open up these topics and enjoyed debating them." However, she observed a significant decline in this

willingness, noting mutual avoidance between her and her students regarding sensitive issues, which she attributed in part to a broader societal trend of self-censorship. She explained this dynamic by saying,

[The student-led emergence of sensitive and social justice-related discussions] has decreased very, very much. Even if I want to open it up by asking, I hesitate because I worry they will feel bad and avoid it. I don't want to put them under pressure [to speak]. They also hesitate in the same way. There is a mutual avoidance.

Furthermore, she felt pressure to cover the mandated curriculum, which led to anxiety about falling behind schedule. She expressed that this “coverage anxiety” often took precedence over planning deliberate social justice lessons, despite her personal interest in critical pedagogy, particularly after her graduate school coursework. As a result, instead of creating full units with clear justice goals, she added quick prompts connected to the day's text or genre.

Ebru's approach showed both the promise and the limits of student-led emergence in social justice pedagogy. While her openness fostered inclusivity, the lack of proactive structures left her navigating tensions reactively and constrained by curricular pressures.

Selen: Acknowledged but Absent

Selen was a graduate student and an EAP instructor at a large private university, teaching academic English to classes of 25–30 students, who were predominantly engineering students. Her approach to social justice was characterized by deliberate caution and a primary focus on maintaining a safe, conflict-free classroom environment.

Selen defined social justice in terms of contemporary issues affecting specific groups, mentioning “wars, the country's economic situation...how these affect people,” and specifically cited “women or minority groups, and LGBT.” However, this conceptual awareness did not translate into proactive

integration in her teaching. She explicitly stated a preference for avoiding politically charged topics: “Frankly, I prefer my students not to be too political. I ask this of them.”

Her strategy was one of containment; she would permit student-initiated comments only if they were directly relevant to the lesson topic, such as a discussion on travel, but would quickly intervene against any discourse perceived as hostile.

This cautious approach stemmed from several factors. First, Selen expressed a lack of confidence in her own knowledge to facilitate discussions on complex social issues. When gender equality was discussed, it was often because her engineering students raised concerns about the field's male-dominated nature. In these moments, she relied on eliciting student perspectives rather than guiding the discourse: “Because I don't have much knowledge about these topics myself, I feel the need to ask them.”

Second, she identified a lack of institutional support, noting that the prescribed curriculum and textbook provided minimal material on social justice. Therefore, her primary strategy for inclusive teaching was to treat all students equally and maintain individual communication, but she did not employ specific pedagogical methods to critically engage with systems of power or inequality.

Despite her personal avoidance, Selen believed that social justice topics *should* play a more significant role in EAP. She argued that for students to write effective opinion essays, “these topics should not be taboo.” She acknowledged the limitations of her own practice, stating that her classes probably did not foster social change because she did not dedicate enough space to such topics. Furthermore, she expressed a willingness to participate in professional development on the subject, contingent on tangible institutional support. She suggested that “if there were financial support, people would approach it more willingly,” indicating that dedicated resources and prepared materials are necessary

prerequisites for many instructors to engage effectively in social justice pedagogy.

Selen's case portrayed an instructor who, while conceptually acknowledging the value of social justice, practices a pedagogy of avoidance. Her teaching is shaped by a perceived lack of personal expertise and a scarcity of curricular guidance, which ultimately positions social justice as a desirable but logistically infeasible endeavor.

Ozan: Procedural Equity Pragmatism

Ozan was an EAP instructor who had been teaching for a year and a half at a private university with a diverse, multinational student body. His approach to social justice was pragmatic and cautious, which was summed up by his motto, "everyone's life is their own." He tied this understanding to gender equality and inclusivity, which formed the basis of his conceptualization of social justice.

Regarding the implementation of social justice pedagogy, Ozan stated that he avoided initiating discussions on politically or religiously sensitive subjects. He explained that "this is Türkiye, after all; we sometimes can't predict where a topic might lead."

His primary concern was navigating the unpredictable nature of such discussions. However, he made a significant and deliberate exception regarding gender equality. Noting the male-dominated demographics of his engineering classes, he actively worked to counter gender stereotypes. He reported explicitly telling students, "There is no such thing as a 'man's job' or a 'woman's job.'"

He translated this belief into concrete pedagogical actions and sought to ensure gender-balanced project teams by creating mixed-gender groups to challenge preconceived gender roles. These practices demonstrated a targeted, context-driven approach to one specific social justice issue.

Beyond gender, however, Ozan's strategy was largely reactive and preventative. He gathered infor-

mation on student backgrounds to "prevent anything that could potentially create a problem." When minor tensions arose, his intervention was low-key, aiming to de-escalate without derailing the lesson. He believed that exposure to diversity itself was a primary educator, suggesting that students in a multicultural environment naturally become more accustomed to difference over time.

As the most important challenge to integrating social justice pedagogy into EAP courses, he recognized the lack of professional development and institutional support. He argued that the EAP classroom could serve as a vital space for cultivating social justice with structured, purposeful support. Thus, he expressed a clear desire for professional development in social justice, believing that teachers should not be forceful persuaders but rather socially just models, a goal that could be achieved through such development.

Cross-Case Synthesis

As Thomas (2021) notes, "in a multiple case study, because there are several subjects, each individual subject is less important in itself than the comparison each offers with the others" (p. 186). It is through this comparative lens that the significance of the four present cases emerges, revealing a spectrum of approaches to social justice pedagogy in EAP contexts. These are shaped by the interplay between the instructors' conceptual framework, their pedagogical strategies, and the institutional and societal constraints they navigate. At one end of this spectrum, Cemre exemplifies a proactive, critical-literacy approach, systematically embedding social justice into curriculum design and using dialogic scaffolding to transform tense moments into teachable opportunities for critical empathy. In contrast, Ebru and Ozan represent variations of a pragmatic, reactive approach, though with different emphases. Ebru's initial strategy of student-led emergence, grounded in ethical inclusiveness, proved fragile in the face of conflict. Ozan

demonstrated a more targeted pragmatism, actively promoting gender equity through procedural measures while systematically avoiding other sensitive topics to maintain classroom harmony. Finally, Selen embodies a pedagogy of avoidance, in which a conceptual belief in social justice is stifled by a perceived lack of expertise and institutional support, and by a primary focus on maintaining a conflict-free zone.

Despite these differing approaches, common, significant challenges emerge across all cases. These include navigating intense emotional disclosures and managing student conflicts arising from deeply held beliefs. Furthermore, a palpable sense of caution permeates the instructors' practice, stemming from the unpredictable nature of discussions in the Turkish sociopolitical context and a lack of structured institutional support or professional development.

Discussion

While each instructor showed a commitment to social justice to some extent, their interpretations of it often remained within "mainstream standpoints," such as individual fairness, equal treatment, and respect in general (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Each participant discussed aspects of social justice that were distinct from one another. For instance, Cemre framed social justice structurally, citing "equity is not sameness" as a lens for naming oppression. Ebru described it as ethical inclusiveness extending to humans, animals, and plants. And Selen emphasized awareness of contemporary harms affecting specific groups, whereas Ozan defined it in terms of personal freedom and procedural fairness with particular reference to gender equality. This conceptual diversity is consistent with the definitional complexity of social justice (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009). As social justice has a difficult-to-define concept and can be perceived in diverse ways by various populations, instructors' seemingly very different definitions should not be interpreted as a lack of understanding of social justice; rather, as a reflection

of the concept's inherent complexity and context dependency.

Similar to their diverse ways of conceptualizing social justice, the instructors' translation of their understanding of the concept into classroom practices also varied considerably. Cemre's Freire-informed stance translated into purposeful curricular design, where social justice themes were embedded in genre work and academic literacies. This aligns with the EAP scholarship that deliberately retools materials and assessments to pair writing development with critical inquiry (Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025; Mortenson, 2022). On the other hand, Ebru's reliance on student-led emergence, coupled with a deliberate "neutral" facilitation stance, left her reacting to conflict, culminating in a ban on religion as a topic of discussion after a tense exchange. From a parallel stance and sensitive to even the possibility that a topic might become contentious, Selen limited the discussion to what was demonstrably pertinent to the course material, with an eye toward avoiding conflict. Similarly, Ozan steered clear of religious and political topics due to the unpredictability of Türkiye's political climate, highlighting the complexity of integrating social justice into the class. The tension that unfolded in Ebru's class and the decision she ultimately made, as well as Selen and Ozan's cautiousness, illustrate that high-salience topics often escalate or derail unless instructors pre-establish purposes, ground rules, and scaffolds that connect viewpoints to evidence and to broader social structures (Pace, 2021).

As Freire (1968/2000) reminds us,

The dialogical character of education as the practice of freedom does not begin when the teacher-student meets with the students-teachers in a pedagogical situation, but rather when the former first asks herself or himself *what* she or he will dialogue with the latter *about*. (p. 93, emphasis in the original)

In risk-averse EAP settings, such as those in which our participants teach, justice-oriented talk depends

on planned, context-specific scaffolds and institutional backing so that instructors can feel confident enough to move from conflict avoidance to sustained critical inquiry. These moments align with Boler's (1999) pedagogy of discomfort, which "begins by inviting educators and students to engage in critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs, and to examine constructed self-images in relation to how one has learned to perceive others" (p. 176). While such encounters can open transformative possibilities, they also demand pedagogical tools and institutional support that instructors often lack, a shortfall our participants explicitly noted. Additionally, fears of escalation or loss of classroom control, as expressed by Ozan and Ebru, often led instructors to avoid certain topics altogether. This avoidance frequently stemmed from what Kumashiro (2024) critiques as "common-sense" teaching: the prioritization of classroom order over critical disruption.

Taken together, each participant's case reveals that while personal commitment is absolutely necessary, it is unfortunately insufficient to enact transformative pedagogy. Across the cases, instructors' hesitations were shaped less by ideological apathy than by affective exhaustion, anticipated conflict, and tacit institutional constraints. As Hawkins (2011) argues, social justice work in language teacher education is necessarily "long-term, situated, and relational" (p. 122); it cannot be reduced to one course or conversation. The findings, therefore, note the need for more than isolated interventions: justice-oriented pedagogy must be supported by systemic attention to the institutional, emotional, and political conditions that shape what is possible in EAP classrooms.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings reveal grounded, context-responsive efforts by EAP instructors to engage justice in varied ways. Building on these emergent practices, future work can deepen attention to structural conditions,

teacher positionality, and institutional support without losing the care and inclusion already present.

One implication concerns the need to reimagine teacher education, not merely as a site for educating teachers as technicians who "accept and enact predetermined requirements" about academic English (Benesch, 2001, p. xvii), but as a space for what Hawkins (2011) calls "meta-awareness of social justice issues" (p. 120) and for constructing teachers' sense of themselves as potential agents of social change. Building such awareness requires more than a one-off workshop or a single critical reading; it requires programmatic coherence, iterative inquiry, and ethical attentiveness to the conditions under which teachers work. Instructors in this study, similar to the preservice ones in the study conducted by Özkan and Öz (2025), often expressed uncertainty about how to *do* social justice in ways that felt both pedagogically sound and professionally safe, which indicates the lack of structural scaffolding that might help them name, navigate, and resist the constraints they encounter.

The absence of sustained scaffolding around social justice has significant implications for TESOL teacher education in Türkiye. Currently, all higher education institutions are governed by the country's Council of Higher Education. The Council is also responsible for preparing teacher education curricula, which universities must follow. The only course that explicitly addresses topics such as gender, social justice, and equity is called *Comparative Education* (YÖK, 2018), which includes these themes as one of many comparative topics rather than as a central curricular focus. While this course introduces important global perspectives, its treatment of justice-related issues remains cursory and insufficiently connected to the practical realities of ELT. Social justice content cannot remain confined to isolated units or be mentioned briefly in broader courses. Instead, it must be woven throughout the curriculum as a methodological and epistemological stance that shapes how future teachers understand

language, power, and their own positionalities. This integration requires teacher educators to engage in sustained, critical reflection about whose knowledge is legitimized, whose discomfort is accommodated, and what forms of resistance are expected or foreclosed in their classrooms. Without such systemic rethinking, the burden of social justice work will continue to fall unevenly on individual instructors navigating these tensions alone.

Another important implication involves the need to reimagine the design and purpose of EAP courses themselves. Currently, these courses are often structured around technical goals, without clear attention to the sociopolitical dimensions of language and discourse (Benesch, 2001). While linguistic and rhetorical skills remain important, treating academic English as a neutral, purely functional subject limits its transformative potential. The findings from this study suggest that EAP syllabi could be more intentionally structured to integrate real-world social issues, critical inquiry, and reflective writing that challenge students to think about their positionalities and the power relations embedded in academic communication (Canagarajah, 2022). This would require not only curricular redesign but also institutional recognition that language teaching is never apolitical.

Additionally, institutions must reckon with the emotional and professional risks instructors face when they attempt to bring critical questions of race, ethnicity, language, or power into their teaching. The participants described navigating difficult classroom dynamics, administrative pressures, or student pushback when introducing even mild forms of critical inquiry. As such, social justice pedagogy cannot be a matter of individual will alone; it demands an institutional culture that creates space for difficult conversations and protects those who take them up.

Finally, this study underscores the importance of rethinking success not as immediate mastery of critical teaching, but as a process of “locating the current

position of the travelers” (Hawkins, 2011, p. 122). Social justice teaching is iterative, relational, and deeply situated. It should not be standardized or rushed. Instead, educators, administrators, and researchers must embrace the long-term, unfinished work of building communities of practice that can hold complexity, support vulnerability, and cultivate the kind of pedagogical imagination that justice demands.

Conclusion

This study has shown that integrating social justice into EAP requires navigating a landscape fraught with sociopolitical caution. The cases of Cemre, Ebru, Selen, and Ozan illustrate how the enactment of social justice pedagogy unfolds across a complex spectrum of negotiated stances, shaped by the dynamic interplay of personal conviction, pedagogical skill, and powerful institutional limitations. Although individual teachers’ isolated efforts to promote social justice are praiseworthy, they may be insufficient to resist and question systemic pressures. Therefore, institutional-level support is essential to move beyond reactive or avoidant approaches. This could be achieved through a justice-oriented EAP that requires programmatic coherence in teacher education, curricular designs that legitimize critical inquiry, and institutional cultures that provide the practical resources to engage with the discomfort of transformative pedagogy. Only then can EAP classrooms truly become sites where students learn not only to succeed within academic systems, but to critically examine and ethically engage with the world those systems reflect.

References

- Aktoprak, E. (2024). *Unveiling discrimination: Minorities in Türkiye*. Minority Rights Group. <http://bit.ly/3YJfnAK>
- Bakogiannis, A., & Papavasiliou, E. (2025). Exploring inclusive teaching practices of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in Higher Education (HE): Recommendations

- for practice. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 76, 101538. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2025.101538>
- Baldwin, J. (1997). If Black English isn't a language, then tell me, what is? *The Black Scholar*, 27(1), 5–6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.1997.11430831>
- Bell, L. A. (2016). Theoretical foundations for social justice education. In M. Adams, L. A. Bell, D. J. Goodman, & K. Y. Joshi (Eds.), *Teaching for diversity and social justice* (3rd ed., pp. 3–26). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003005759-2>
- Benesch, S. (2001). *Critical English for academic purposes: Theory, politics, and practice*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410601803>
- Boler, M. (1999). *Feeling power: Emotions and education*. Routledge.
- Breen, P. (2024). Introduction: A reflection upon social justice in EAP and ELT contexts. In P. Breen & M. Le Roux (Eds.), *Social justice in EAP and ELT contexts: Global higher education perspectives* (pp. 1–16). Bloomsbury Academic. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350351233.0008>
- Canagarajah, S. (2022). Language diversity in academic writing: Toward decolonizing scholarly publishing. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 17(2), 107–128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2022.2063873>
- Cochran-Smith, M., Shakman, K., Jong, C., Terrell, D. G., Barnatt, J., & McQuillan, P. (2009). Good and just teaching: The case for social justice in teacher education. *American Journal of Education*, 115(3), 347–377. <https://doi.org/10.1086/597493>
- Eberhard, D. M., Simons, G., & Fennig, C. (Eds.). (2023). *Ethnologue: Languages of the world* (26th ed.). SIL International. <https://www.ethnologue.com/ethnologue/welcome-26th-edition/>
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. Bergman Ramos, Trans.). Bloomsbury. (Original work published 1968)
- Giroux, H. A. (2024). *Teachers as intellectuals: Toward a critical pedagogy of learning* (1st ed). Bloomsbury Academic. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350458635>
- Hamp-Lyons, L. (2011). English for academic purposes. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (Vol. 2, pp. 89–105). Routledge.
- Hawkins, M. R. (2011). Dialogic determination: Constructing a social justice discourse in language teacher education. In M. R. Hawkins (Ed.), *Social justice language teacher education* (pp. 102–123). Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781847694249-008>
- Henderson, R., & Hirst, E. (2007). Reframing academic literacy: Re-examining a short-course for “disadvantaged” tertiary students. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 6(2), 25–38.
- Ince Yenilmez, M. (2021). LGBTQIs in Turkey: The challenges and resilience of this marginalized group. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 18(2), 440–449. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-020-00471-9>
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2006). Dangerous liaison: Globalization, empire and TESOL. In J. Edge (Ed.), *(Re-)Locating TESOL in an age of empire* (pp. 1–26). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kumashiro, K. K. (2024). *Against common sense: Teaching and learning toward social justice* (4th ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003442394>
- Mortenson, L. (2022). Integrating social justice-oriented content into English for academic purposes (EAP) instruction: A case study. *English for Specific Purposes*, 65, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2021.08.002>
- O'Connor, C., & Joffe, H. (2020). Intercoder reliability in qualitative research: Debates and practical guidelines. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919899220>
- Özkan, H., & Öz, G. (2025). Teacher candidates' perspectives on addressing social justice in English language and literature classes through critical pedagogy. In W. Wei & D. Chao (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of the sociopolitical context of language learning* (pp. 161–178). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003398172-12>
- Özkaynak, O. (2025). State monolingualism and its emotional impacts on multilingual identity construction: Insights from the Turkish context. *International Journal of Mul-*

- tilingualism*, 22(4), 2754–2769. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2025.2485178>
- Özkaynak, O., & Arslan, Z. (in press). Neoliberal visions, nationalist missions: A critical discourse analysis of English language teacher education in Türkiye. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*.
- Pace, J. L. (2021). How can educators prepare for teaching controversial issues? Cross-national lessons. *Social Education*, 85(4), 228–233.
- Pennycook, A. (2021). *Critical Applied Linguistics: A critical re-introduction* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003090571>
- Şanal, M., & Özkaynak, O. (2023). Raising multilingual learners' awareness of social justice through translating pedagogy. *Focus on ELT Journal*, 5(2), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.14744/felt.2023.5.2.1>
- Şenbayrak, M., & Ortaçtepe Hart, D. (2024). Exploring social justice dialogues in EFL conversation clubs: Discursive moves and affordances. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 37(3), 327–342. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2024.2339316>
- Sensoy, O., & DiAngelo, R. (2017). *Is everyone really equal? An introduction to key concepts in social justice education* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Thomas, G. (2021). *How to do your case study* (3rd ed.). SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781036232238>
- Toker, Ş. (2021). Subtle Islamization of teacher education: A critical discourse analysis of Turkey's "inclusive" education initiative for refugee integration. *Linguistics and Education*, 63, 100923. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2021.100923>
- Yılmaz, A., & Söğüt, S. (2022). Language education for social justice: Reproductions or disruptions through technology. *Computers & Education*, 187, 104535. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2022.104535>
- YÖK. (2018). *İngilizce öğretmenliği lisans programı müfredatı* [Curriculum for the bachelor's program in English language teaching]. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/4cgZkk8>

About the Authors

Onur Özkaynak holds a PhD in Multilingual Language Education from The Ohio State University (USA). He is currently a College Writing Instructor at Central Ohio Technical College. His research focuses on educational sociolinguistics and teacher education in TESOL.

Roles: conception of the research project; collection, analysis, and interpretation of data; major contribution of investigation materials; and drawing up the different text versions of the paper.

Merve Şanal holds an MA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language from Bilkent University (Türkiye). A Fulbright FLTA alumna and DELTA-certified educator, she currently teaches Academic English at Middle East Technical University and works as an item writer. Her academic interests include EAP, teaching for social justice, and sociolinguistics.

Roles: conception of the research project; development of methods; collection, analysis, and interpretation of data; major contribution of investigation materials; and drawing up the different text versions of the paper.

Zeynep Arslan is a PhD candidate in Multilingual Language Education at The Ohio State University (USA). Her research focuses on language teacher education, generative AI in language learning, and sociolinguistic ideologies in digital spaces. She also works as a graduate research assistant on early language and literacy interventions.

Roles: conception of the research project, analysis and interpretation of data, major contribution of investigation materials; and drawing up the different text versions of the paper.

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. Background and Teaching Context

- 1.1 Can you tell me about your current teaching role?
 - Courses you teach
 - Student demographics (e.g., majors, linguistic backgrounds)
- 1.2 How long have you been teaching EAP?

2. Conceptualizations of Social Justice

- 2.1 When you hear the term social justice, what does it mean to you?
- 2.2 How, if at all, do you see social justice relating to English language teaching or EAP?
- 2.3 Are there particular issues (e.g., gender, migration, inequality, discrimination) that you consider relevant to your teaching?

Follow-up probes:

- Where do you think your understanding comes from? (e.g., personal experience, graduate coursework, readings, colleagues)

3. Pedagogical Practices and Classroom Decision-Making

- 3.1 Do you integrate social justice topics or perspectives in your EAP classes?
 - If yes: How? Could you walk me through some recent examples?
 - If no: Why not?
- 3.2 How do you decide which topics are appropriate or inappropriate for your classroom?
- 3.3 Can you describe a moment when a socially sensitive or controversial topic came up in class?
 - How did you handle it?
 - What influenced your decisions in that moment?

4. Challenges, Constraints, and Emotional Dynamics

- 4.1 Have you ever encountered tension, conflict, or discomfort when discussing sensitive issues?
 - What happened?
 - How did you respond?
- 4.2 Are there institutional or program-level factors that shape what you feel you can or cannot address in class?
- 4.3 What concerns, if any, do you have about bringing social justice into EAP teaching?

5. Possibilities, Supports, and Professional Development

- 5.1 Have you received any formal preparation related to social justice in education?
- 5.2 What kinds of support would help you feel more confident in engaging with social justice topics?

6. Closing Questions

- 6.1 Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences, beliefs, or challenges regarding social justice in your EAP teaching?
- 6.2 Are there any examples from your practice that we did not discuss but you feel are important?

Appendix B: Sample Codebook

ID	Code label	Definition	Example	RQ
1.1	Critical/structural justice	Names power/ideology; equity vs. equality; systemic lenses	"Equity, not sameness." (Cemre)	1
1.2	Humanistic empathy	Justice as care/awareness without structural analysis	"What these people endure..." (Selen)	1
1.3	Liberal individualism	Justice as personal freedom/non-interference; apolitical stance	"As long as they don't infringe." (Ozan)	1
2.1	Curricular integration	Planned embedding of justice themes in tasks/materials/assessment	"Unit on inclusion/exclusion." (Cemre)	1
2.2	Dialogic scaffolding	Guided reframing/perspective-taking to engage sensitive topics	"Have you ever had to move?" (Cemre)	1
2.3	Reactive openness	Allows student-initiated topics without structured framing	"I leave it to the class." (Ebru)	1
2.5	Avoidance/deferral	Steers away from politicized/religious topics to keep order/time	"We'd lose focus." (Cemre)	1/2
3.1	Institutional risk aversion	Expectation of apolitical professionalism; implicit boundaries	"You know the boundaries." (Selen)	2
3.2	Standardized outcomes	Skills/accuracy/genre regimes narrowing curricular space	"Accuracy and efficiency focus." (Ozan)	2
3.5	Professional preparation	Presence/absence of critical coursework/mentoring shaping stance	"That course changed my view." (Cemre)	2
3.6	Emotional labor/trauma	Intense disclosures; teacher/peer affective load	"Everyone froze." (Cemre)	2
3.7	Student nationalism/polarization	Ethnocentric framings; heated conflict risk	"That's wrong!" moment. (Ebru class)	2