



Philosophical ELT: Critical Study of the Conceptual Presuppositions Within the Field

Jassem Fathabadi¹

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Abstract

Philosophy, in its technical sense, includes the critical study of both conceptual and methodological presuppositions of human practices. It means that every field of study, coupled with philosophy, has the potential to beget two interdisciplinary fields signified by “philosophical” and “philosophy of”: the former would be an ontological venture, while the latter stands for an epistemological discipline. Therefore, ELT as the systematic study of everything related to the process of teaching and learning English as an additional language could bring about Philosophical ELT and Philosophy of ELT. This study aims at introducing the former as the critical study of conceptual presuppositions of ELT through examining two of the most prominent concepts in the field. The ultimate objective of such new outlook on ELT is to make practitioners in the field aware of their conceptual presuppositions which could easily lead to inviting different kinds of biases into their work, neglecting differences, and closing the door on new possibilities.

Keywords Philosophy · ELT · Philosophical ELT · Conceptual presuppositions

Introduction

The distinguished philosopher John Searle once wrote, “Everyone is a philosopher. Not everyone is good at it.” What he, most probably, means is that all humans grapple with philosophical questions, and what differentiates them is how effectively they approach and try to resolve them. More often than not, the answers they find for these questions of philosophical nature could change the whole trajectory of their lives. Searle, in his statement, used philosophy in its general sense which, derived from the Latin word “philosophia” means the love of wisdom (Mitchell, 2018). Since it is the oldest and most comprehensive approach toward practically everything, one could hardly dispute the fact that all fields within humanities and social sciences, as well as natural sciences, are rooted in philosophy. After all, as Cicero put it, philosophy is the mother of all science.

✉ Jassem Fathabadi
jassem.fathabadi@gmail.com

¹ Department of English Language and Literature, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran

In its technical sense, philosophy has been luminously introduced as “the critical study of the conceptual and methodological presuppositions of human practices” (Harre, 2006, p. 225). Simply stated, a critical study, through a multi/cross-disciplinary lens, strives to challenge established conceptual standpoints within humanities and social sciences. The provided definition of philosophy consists of two essential and academically path-breaking components as presented in Fig. 1.

The critical investigation of conceptual presuppositions is the concern of a branch of metaphysics called “ontology.” Metaphysics refers to “the philosophical investigation of the nature, constitution, and structure of reality” which is broader and more fundamental than science since “it investigates questions science does not address but the answers to which it presupposes” (Audi, 2015, p. 661). Ontology is the branch of metaphysics that most directly deals with and thus affects human-related concepts and theories. To put it into a nutshell, ontology is concerned with philosophical questions which target the nature of being, purpose of existence, and meaning of life (Effingham, 2013; Willig, 2014).

The second component, i.e., the critical investigation of methodological presuppositions, on the other hand, is the main concern of epistemology. It is derived from Greek *episteme* (knowledge) and *logos* (explanation), and refers to “the study of the nature of knowledge and justification; specifically, the study of (a) the defining features, (b) the substantive conditions or sources, and (c) the limits of knowledge and justification” (Audi, 2015, p. 315). Simply stated, while ontology deals with “what there is to know” in the world, epistemology addresses “how to know” or methods of obtaining knowledge within every field of study (Littlejohn & Carter, 2021).

The logical implication of the provided definition is that there exist two potential interdisciplinary fields in a merger between every academic discipline and philosophy in its technical sense. The first one, which would be ontological in nature and signified by the adjective “philosophical,” will critically investigate the concepts of concern in the target field. Having an epistemological essence, the second interdisciplinary field would be marked by “philosophy of” and critically study the methods of investigations in the field. For example, two interdisciplinary fields of “philosophical sociology” and “philosophy of sociology” could emerge from the coming together of philosophy and sociology.

Learning and teaching of a language (mostly English) other than one’s mother tongue has been theorized and investigated under various titles: Second Language Acquisition (SLA), L2 Learning, English Language Teaching (ELT), Foreign Language Learning (FLL), etc. Most authors have used SLA as an umbrella term to include all such fields of study under one field (e.g., Ellis, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2019). ELT is a field of study within SLA, which focuses on the processes, strategies, and techniques involved in teaching and learning English as an additional language (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Following the aforementioned logical implication in the previous section, ELT could branch out to two interdisciplinary fields in combination with philosophy: Philosophical ELT (PELT) and Philosophy of ELT. While the latter will be a quest to critically examine the methods of

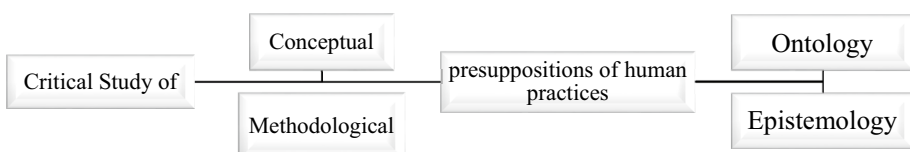


Fig. 1 The definition of philosophy as a field

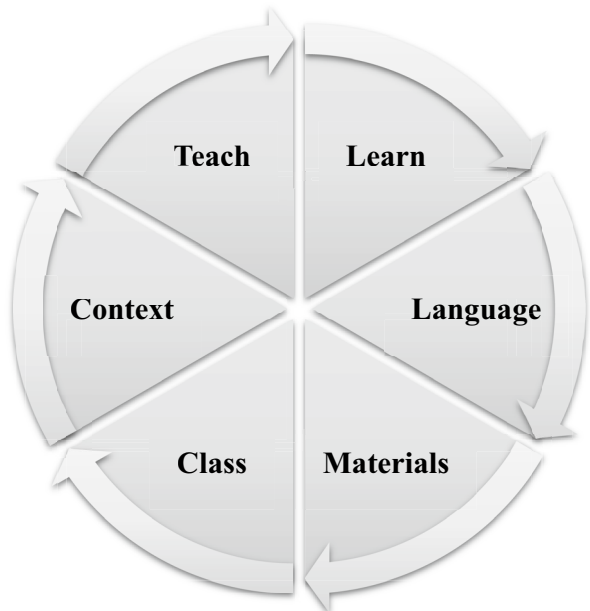
investigations within ELT through an epistemological lens, the former will be the critical study of conceptual presuppositions within the field using an ontological outlook. The purpose of this article is to provide an introductory account of PELT for the language teaching and learning community. To this end, the main focuses of enquiry in ELT are briefly presented, followed by an exposition on PELT through a comprehensive examination of one primary concept within the field.

ELT

The field of ELT has attended to a wide variety of concepts deemed influential to the process of language teaching and learning. As presented in Fig. 2, crucial factors of interest in the field could be roughly classified under six headings: teach, learn, language, materials, class, and context. It should be noted that this classification is in no way definite, and the categories are not mutually exclusive. In reality, these categories are highly interrelated and intertwined so that they can be easily merged or even further subdivided into more specific categories.

The first heading includes every factor or concepts that stems from the verb “teach” such as teacher and teaching methods. Different methods of teaching English have emerged throughout the history of the field, and many scholars have discussed their merits and weaknesses (e.g., Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Some practitioners came to the conclusion that, since they all have their own advantages, adopting an eclectic method is the wisest choice (e.g., Rivers, 1981). Another group of scholars, taking a completely different stance, have advocated a composite of post-method and against-method stance (e.g., Feraria, 2020; Kumaravadivelu, 2006). As the agent of this process, teacher is deemed to be one of the most important determinants of the

Fig. 2 Areas of concern in ELT



outcomes in any teaching-learning process simply because, as a human being, he/she has particular characteristics, styles, strategies, motives, etc. (Nguyen, 2019). Consequently, teacher has always been a critical topic in the field and has been subjected to investigation under various topics such as teacher education and characteristics of successful teachers (e.g., Lindahl & Yazan, 2022; Walsh, 2022).

Learn, as the second heading, contains the learning process and learners as the main components, both of which have been hot, and perhaps the most researched, topics in the field. There exist two main perspectives with regard to the process of language learning: one of them (following Piaget) conceptualizes it similar to learning other skills, while the other one (following Chomsky) considers it a unique skill for which there is a special capacity in the human brain (Piatelli-Palmarini, 1980). The literature on the topic is so vast that it led to the emergence of an interdisciplinary field called psycholinguistics which targets the mental processes involved in language understanding as well as production (e.g., Traxler, 2019; Walter, 2023). It is believed that understanding these processes have both theoretical and empirical benefits (Mitchell et al., 2019). The centrality of learner, as the most crucial agent in the learning process, has resulted in an extensive literature on the concept under general topics such as “the psychology of language learner” and “individual differences in language acquisition” (e.g., Dornyei and Ryan, 2015; Griffiths and Soruc, 2020). Conceptualized as decisive factors in language learning, individual differences have been studied through a variety of concepts such as personality, aptitude, motivation, learning and cognitive styles, learning strategies, self-regulation, anxiety, creativity, self-esteem, and willingness to communicate (Dornyei & Ryan, 2015; Pawlak, 2021).

The third category, i.e., language, includes target language (which is English in this case), native language of any learner, and interlanguage which, coined by Selinker (1972), refers to the version of the target language produced by the learners as a developing system in its own right. There exist different views on the nature of language, all of which describe and explain it as a “complex communication system which must be analyzed on a number of levels: phonology, syntax, morphology, lexis, semantics, pragmatics, [and] discourse” (Mitchell et al., p. 6). Also, two dominant models of language exist based on their view of language as a system. While formalist models view language as a set of elements which can be tied together according to specific rules and procedures, functionalist models focus on its communicative function and advocate a structural explanation as a reflection of meaning making (Thomas, 2021). Regarding English as a language with its own features, an ongoing point of controversy has been on deciding which features must be taught and emphasized on structural levels, in what order, and how (VanPatten et al., 2020). Learners’ mother tongue and its impact on learning another language has also been a controversial issue which has led to completely different views on how it plays out in language learning process (Greaves & De Mattia-Vivies, 2022). A group of scholars believe that since every person is equipped with a language acquisition device (they differ on the level of access to it), native language hardly hinders the learning process (Ambridge et al., 2018; Newport, 2020). Another group, on the other hand, signify the centrality of mother tongue based on its similarities and differences with the target language (Cook, 2016; Cummins, 2000). This stance resulted in the emergence of contrastive analysis as an approach to discover the areas of difficulty in language learning (James, 2016). Subsequently, the proponents of learner language and the fact that it is truly systematic advocated the investigation of interlanguage through methods such as error analysis as the right approach (Richards, 2014). Finally, there exist various approaches which provide critical perspectives on language. Such critical outlooks challenge well-established conceptualizations of linguistic meaning and power by signifying the arbitrariness of language and the role of discourse in the

construction of reality (poststructuralist approach), or its utilization as a tool of oppression and colonization (decolonial theory) (e.g., Fanon, 1963; Foucault, 1972).

Materials, the fourth heading, stands for anything that teachers and learners could utilize to facilitate language learning. They may be in various forms (linguistic, auditory, visual) and presented in different formats (Norton & Buchanan, 2022). The most prominent types of materials are coursebooks, the designs of which are highly affected by the viewpoints of their developers regarding nature of language, learning process, and the main purpose of language learning. This view is supported by multiple studies that have engaged in coursebook evaluation by investigating content, structures, and aims of such books within different social and cultural contexts (e.g., Ellis and Shintani, 2014; Holliday, 2005; Tomlinson, 2013). Generally speaking, they can be ranged from those which solely focus on structures of the language to the ones targeting the development of communicative competence through negotiation of meaning. The advance of technology, especially the advent of internet and social media, has greatly broadened the horizons of materials feasibility for teachers and learners (Chapelle & Sauro, 2019). Most coursebooks also provide learners with additional content and material via CDs or available websites or even apps. All forms of materials and the role they play in teaching and learning have been studied by practitioners within the field under various topics such as curriculum development (Richards, 2017).

The next main heading, class or classroom stands for both physical features of the learning environment and the collection of learners as a whole. The material characteristics of a class such as its size, classroom layout, and the number of students have found support as influential factors in interrelated processes of teaching and learning in ELT e.g., seating arrangement (Gibson & Brown, 2009), lighting and temperature regulation (Knezek & Christensen, 2018), and adequate acoustics (Higgins & Tierney, 2018). However, the main topics in this category have emerged out of the view of learners as a group which can hinder or facilitate this complex endeavor. Class, in this view, have been studied through classroom dynamics targeting the patterns of interactions among learners (e.g., Vosburg, 2017), classroom climate attending to the affective dimensions of a class (e.g., Reyes et al., 2012), classroom interaction focusing on occurring social relationships among learners (Pianta et al., 2012), classroom management (e.g., Scrivener, 2012), group work (Garcia-Mayo, 2021), peer interaction (e.g., Sato and Ballinger, 2016), etc. What such studies have in common is the belief that a class as a group, whether homogeneous or heterogeneous, affects what and hows of language teaching and learning.

Last but not least, context signifies both the immediate context of learning and the broader social context in which the process takes place. Simply put, context refers to everything that surrounds something, including time, place, surroundings, and circumstances (Illes, 2020). Various studies have found support for the impact of immediate context of learning on learners' mental states such as motivation in language learning (Dornyei & Ryan, 2015; King, 2015). The other conceptualization of context which targets socio-cultural factors was neglected for decades in the field which was under the influence of different orientations such as behaviorism and cognitivism in psychology and structural and generative approaches in linguistics (Mitchell et al., 2019). However, it has been a long time since these broader factors have gained prominence in the field and are now an indispensable part of every theory regarding language learning. The social factors are believed to impact the attitudes and orientations learners adopt in relation to the target language community, the opportunities they have to communicate at their disposal, the mediated learning they can utilize, etc. (Lantolf et al., 2018). Additionally, ELT has been recently more concerned with issues of social inequality through the notion of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 2017). The main concern of this perspective is the domination of English over other languages and, by extension, cultures

by means of economic and political factors (Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1992). ELT has the potential to be utilized in promoting certain ideological values or social justice and inclusion (e.g., Kubota, 2016; Kumaravadivelu, 2008; Pennycook, 2017).

PELT

The previous section was an attempt to present the main concepts, topics, and areas of interest to theoreticians and practitioners within ELT. However, as is the case with every field within humanities and social sciences, the literature is so extensive that providing the whole picture at length is not feasible. Having said that, the goal was to signify the most prominent concepts of interest in ELT to pave the way for an introduction to PELT. The simplest way to provide an introductory account of PELT is through investigating one of the most crucial, if not the most crucial, concepts in ELT. To this end, the concept “teaching,” which actually exist in the title of the field, and its closest relative “teacher” were selected.

The Webster dictionary provides two main definitions for “teach” as a verb: to cause or help someone to help, and to give lessons to someone. Subsequently, it defines “learn” as to gain knowledge, or understanding of, or skill in something by study, instruction, or experience. It must be pointed out that the learning of concern in ELT is through instruction while learning through other means is attended to in SLA which is a more comprehensive field of study. Although the two provided definitions of teach might seem similar at first glance, they are built on completely separate presuppositions the adherence to which could potentially change the whole trajectory of any investigation of the concept.

In the first definition, the realization and occurrence of teaching as an act is contingent upon learning. In other words, if an instructor presents a set of English lessons, even using what might be considered the most sophisticated English teaching method by experts, unless pupils do not learn the subject, teaching has not taken place. In this sense of the word, a teacher is someone who makes learning happen and if it does not, he/she could not be called a teacher no matter how he conducts classes. Furthermore, an instructor might end up being a teacher in one session and fail to earn the title in the next one. To avoid confusion, “Teaching” and “Teacher” with capital T will be used to signify the concept in this sense of meaning, while their lowercased counterparts will represent them in the second sense which will be discussed now.

The second definition of teaching does not make any presuppositions with regard to learning of the subject. In this sense, teaching is an act of presenting lessons, and it almost sounds like being a teacher is a job which people do to get paid. A teacher in this sense might even provide lessons to empty seats provided that his/her employer asks for such a task to earn a salary. Since it is a job, perhaps the smartest plan for a teacher, as is the case in every business, is to spend the least amount of energy and get the best results. The previous statement resembles neoliberal orientation that prioritizes efficiency, competition, and productivity at the expense of revered ethical considerations such as meaningful learning experiences, student-centered pedagogy, and critical thinking. and students (Block, 2013; Canagarajah, 2018). The coveted and requested outcome is mostly some kind of a score which in most cases is assigned to students by teachers. The worst-case scenario could be a teacher who attends classes, spends the least amount of energy to present the lessons, and reward the students with good scores whether they deserve it or not. However, in some crucial occasions such as when students need to get international certifications through standardized tests (e.g., IELTS and TOEFL), the

teacher might resort to teaching the test. Simply put, this type of teaching refers to any method or orientation in teaching whose syllabus and schedule solely focus on training students to take standardized tests (Gilliland & Pella, 2017). In such cases, getting high scores does not necessarily mean the test-takers have learned English and/or could successfully function in an English-speaking environment in all four main skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), even though they are tested in all four of them. The problems many non-native students with high scores in IELTS or TOEFL face in English-speaking countries or institutions is a testament to this claim.

The above discussion is in no way an attempt to slander English teaching in this sense because, to be perfectly honest, it has become a matter of business (the commercialization of education, however, is a complex topic which could be the focus of another philosophically oriented study). In such profit-oriented endeavors, the procedure is quite simple: spending the least amount of resources and getting the most amount of profit possible. However, such a motto could justify the recruitment of less sophisticated instructors provided that they could get the acceptable results which are not necessarily in line with true learning. Putting the provided discussions across the main definitions together, a teacher is not necessarily a Teacher, or might be at some occasions and fail to be at others, and Teaching and teaching are not necessarily the same thing.

A similar type of critical investigation of conceptual presuppositions could be conducted for “learner” as a concept. While being a learner requires gaining knowledge or understanding of something, the term is used to signify anyone who is attending the classes. Once again, although it might seem as nitpicking, the changes such presuppositions induce on the whole trajectory of theory and practice are immense. The problem with most theories and works within ELT is that they make crucial presuppositions, which are mostly with regard to Teaching, Teacher, and Learner as someone who gains knowledge and understanding, while the orientation of instructors and students might be completely different (Fathabadi, 2023).

Hardly any theory targeting different factors of importance in the process of teaching and learning seems to be presupposing teaching rather than Teaching as the main concept. The same thing could be said about almost all factors of concern in the field of ELT. An exception to this trend of under-differentiation is the work by Fathabadi et al. (2021), who recreating motivation as a concept through a Deleuzian ontological outlook, proposed a social theory of motivated behavior. In this theory, motivated behavior, with regards to the congruency of one’s goals and path toward them with pre-existing predominant goals and path of the same behavior in a particular society, can be of six types: structural, innovative, conforming, path-adopted, un-motivated, and agentic. Motivation is one of the most controversial and researched concepts in ELT for which many theories have been proposed (e.g. Clement, 1986; Dornyei et al., 2015; Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Giles and Byrne, 1982; Ushioda, 2015; Williams and Burden, 1997). The problem inherent in such works is that they are replete with presuppositions about learners. Simply put, they all view their target people as learners whose goal is to gain knowledge and understanding of English as conceptualized by their theories. The mentioned social theory of motivation, however, breaks with the prevailing presupposition and attempts to include all people attending classes. The main issue of the other theories is that they use some kinds of measures to evaluate students’ motivations and label them accordingly. Such measures are based on some presuppositions which are in line with their developers’ stance. This comes at the price of neglecting those who are in the class but do not coincide with the presuppositions. Such studies could easily lead to labels such as motivated, demotivated, or simply successful or unsuccessful language learners regardless of whether their presuppositions match the reality of the learners.

The same problem exists with labeling instructors as successful, unsuccessful, or burnt-out while they might just be doing the time to get paid. Perhaps, some instructors who have been identified as burnt-out are just lowercase “teachers” who run on the main motto of the business world. Should a boy who attends English classes to get his parents off his back, or because he has a crush on a girl who happens to be in that class, be called a Learner? Does it matter if he actually learns or not since it was not his real goal? No matter how advocates of most theories within ELT answer these questions, their works seldom differentiate teachers and learners outside of their own presuppositions.

Concluding Remarks

Following Heidegger, one would hardly argue the point that there is no presuppositionless representation of reality in any branch of science or any human-related statement (Guignon, 1999). Every theory within every field of study in humanities and social sciences deals with concepts which are built on some presuppositions. Whether the practitioners are aware of them or not, these presuppositions shape the whole trajectory of their endeavors regarding the concept at hand. This is actually the main reason behind the necessity of ontology as an important branch of philosophy. However, leaving the investigation of conceptual presuppositions to philosophy could not result in the desirable outcomes since there are too many concepts and it is not wise to assume that practitioners in other disciplines keep checking the findings of ontology before doing every study. One way to get around this issue is the emergence of interdisciplinary fields as an offspring of the combination of philosophy with any field of study. Embracing such an outlook, this study was an attempt to introduce PELT as the critical study of conceptual presuppositions within ELT with the hope of welcoming differences and possibilities. This attempt was built on the idea that there is always the possibility of the divergence between conceptual presuppositions, which once neglected, could contaminate the conclusions scholars reach at any point in their career. Consider a race in which *X* was the first person who passed the finished line. Following commonsense, everyone, not knowing that *X*'s goal was to finish second, sees him as the winner. Meanwhile, winning second place was very important to *X* and there actually was too much at stake. Simply put, *X* is a winner in everyone's eyes and a loser in his/her own.

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Author Contribution The whole manuscript was written and reviewed by one author.

Data Availability There was no data involved.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate Not applicable. There were no participants involved in this study.

Consent for Publication Not applicable

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

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