Arab World English Journal
INTERNATIONAL PEER REVIEWED JOURNAL ISSN: 2229-9327

Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Volume 17. Number 1, March 2026 Pp. 371-378
DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol17no1.23

# Generative AI as a New Social Actor in ESL/EFL Context: A Critical Perspective

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Received:12/31/2025 Accepted:03/10/2026 Published:03/15/2026

**Abstract**
Generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools are becoming a new social reality with a growing impact on human lives. The traditional concept of 'social actor' in discourse analysis does not apply to generative AI, being a non-human agent or a computational language model. The profound influence of Generative AI on public discourse requires redefining the concept of 'social actor' within the theoretical framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA). This conceptual article argues for framing Generative AI as a 'social actor', to enable critiquing its potentially biased discourse using CDA. The English as a second and foreign language (ESL/EFL) education context is used here as a case to demonstrate how learners can be empowered to use Generative AI tools wisely while not accepting AI-generated content uncritically. This study contributes to the growing research on ESL/EFL contexts that calls for addressing the negative impact of Generative AI on learners' critical capacity.
***Keywords:*** Critical discourse analysis, English as a foreign language, Generative Artificial Intelligence, social actor

**How to cite:** Hamdi, S. A. (2026). Generative AI as a New Social Actor in ESL/EFL Context: A Critical Perspective. *Arab World English Journal*, *17*(1): 371-378. https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol17no1.23

## Introduction

The emergence of Generative AI tools has influenced several aspects of our lives. Generative AI offers a range of tools and services that support diverse users, including students and academics (van Niekerk et al., 2025). These tools have revolutionized the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge (Wang et al., 2024). Content creation, brainstorming, and summarization are a few examples of the tasks users perform through AI tools (Al-kfairy et al., 2024). One of the key strengths of Generative AI tools is their ability to enable users to communicate through intuitive natural-language prompts. The ease of access and interaction, along with the perceived quality of the output, have encouraged many users to rely on AI tools in their everyday work (van Niekerk et al., 2025). However, such reliance on AI tools raises serious concerns about ethical practices and intellectual property rights (Al-kfairy et al., 2024). Furthermore, AI-generated content may be false, misleading, or ideologically loaded. As machine-generated content, the discourse on evaluating or criticizing it is not directed toward a social being or a human. This situation brings the notion of 'social actor' in CDA to the discussion.

Traditionally, the concept of 'social actor' in CDA involves human-to-human discursive interaction and seeks to explore how participants are affected by social practices. Fairclough defines social actors as "typically animate (human) beings" (2003, p. 145), distinguishing them from inanimate elements. van Leeuwen (1996) draws attention to the representational ways of 'social actors' in discourse, such as passivation, assimilation, nomination, and categorization. The defining characteristics of a 'social actor' in CDA are human agency and the capacity to exert power on social participants within discursive practice. Although Generative AI is non-human, it can generate persuasive texts that can influence public discourse.

This conceptual article addresses the emerging challenge of AI in the ESL/EFL contexts by framing AI as a social reality. It also posits AI as a new social actor whose generated content warrants scrutiny and critique. Accordingly, it suggests adapting critical discourse analysis for ESL/EFL contexts to account for AI's growing influence on public discourse and to acknowledge its impact on language learning and teaching.

## Literature Review

The literature on the use of Generative AI in the ESL/EFL context is generally concerned with the positive and negative impacts on language learning and teaching. On the other hand, emerging research is starting to address generative AI's discursive agency, recognizing its capacity to influence public discourse. This growing capacity urges researchers to treat Generative AI as a social being, which, in turn, calls for expanding the concept of 'social actor' within CDA. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there is no prior research that argues for conceptualizing Generative AI as a 'social actor' within CDA. Relevant literature largely conceptualizes Generative AI as a pedagogical tool rather than as a discursive agent, leaving a theoretical gap regarding AI's status as a social actor.

Following the mainstream, students at schools and colleges are also utilizing Generative AI tools for academic purposes. In the context of ESL and EFL teaching and learning, AI tools can assist with proofreading, editing, and translation tasks, which are instrumental for learners. Existing research on Generative AI in ESL and EFL contexts can be grouped into three strands: pedagogical affordances (Li et al., 2025; Lo et al., 2024), teacher perceptions of and pedagogical practices with AI tools (Tsai et al., 2024; Ulla et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2025). Also, language skills development, particularly writing, has been investigated by several studies (Khairi et al.,

2024; Mahapatra, 2024; Nelson, 2025). The relevant literature highlights the benefits of Generative AI tools for improving learners' autonomy and language skills while acknowledging their associated risks, including dependency, agency, and impacts on creativity (Aljuaid, 2024).

The rapid proliferation and advancement of Generative AI tools are creating a social reality that influences people's perceptions, thoughts, and behaviors (Storey et al., 2025; Volpe et al., 2025). The profound impact of AI on people's thoughts, behaviors, and lives positions it as a new social actor in modern society (Ma H et al., 2025; Volpe et al., 2025). Although issues of ethical practices and intellectual property rights are legitimate to question (Al-kfairy et al., 2024; García-López & Trujillo-Liñán, 2025), AI-generated content may also be associated with inaccuracy, bias, and fabrication (Al-kfairy et al., 2024; Zhai et al., 2024). Such content may go unnoticed amid the vast flow of information circulated among users and affect public discourse. The situation becomes complex for ESL and EFL learners, who are developing their language skills, rendering them vulnerable (Zhai et al., 2024). Naturally, assessing the quality of AI-generated content requires a critical perspective that is yet to be developed among ESL and EFL learners, as it is necessary for their academic and intellectual growth (Melisa et al., 2025). Recent research indicates that ESL and EFL learners tend to accept AI-generated content uncritically (Zhai et al., 2024). This situation requires interventions from the stakeholders (García-López & Trujillo-Liñán, 2025; Melisa et al., 2025).

## Theoretical Framework

The present research is informed by critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a theory and method. CDA views language as a form of social practice that contributes to the construction and maintenance of power relations and ideology. It further challenges the abuse of power and dominating ideology**.** CDA employs a range of tools and discursive strategies to analyze language use and expose how power dynamics and ideological control shape social structure and perpetuate social inequality**.** CDA scholars **(**Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2001) emphasize that education should foster students' critical perspectives, with language serving as a key tool for this goal**.**

Research in CDA has led to several approaches, most prominently the Dialectical-Relational (Fairclough, 1995), the Socio-Cognitive (van Dijk, 2015), the Discourse-Historical approach (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001), and the Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies approach (Partington, 2004; Baker, 2006). These approaches share a focus on examining language use as a social practice within its broader social context. Language teaching and learning are also forms of social practices. This means that knowledge acquisition and dissemination are subject to power and access to certain discourses. Recognizing this concept, a substantial body of research studies has employed one or more of the previously mentioned approaches. For instance, several studies applied the Dialectical-Relational approach to critique EFL textbooks (Alshammari, 2023), teacher talk (Tian & Dumloa, 2020), and learners' writing (Rahimi & Sahragard, 2020). Another strand of research (Hamdi, 2023) utilized the Socio-Cognitive approach to explore how van Dijk's (2011) concept of 'ideological square' helps EFL learners identify bias and improve critical thinking. Using the Discourse-Historical approach, other researchers examined the constructions of identity and gender in EFL textbooks within their historical and political contexts (Huda et al., 2025). Across CDA approaches, research applications in ESL/EFL contexts are characterized by a focus on critiquing teaching materials, calls for pedagogical interventions, and the empowering of non-native learners' critical capacity to question power. The following section builds on these foundations to propose a conceptual reframing.

## Conceptual Reframing: Generative AI as Social Actor

Central to CDA is the analysis of power relations and ideology in language use. CDA's primary goal is to challenge power abuse and ideological domination that perpetuates social inequality. Power is exerted at individual, group, or institutional levels, shaping social structures and relationships. The exercise of power in discourse involves human or inhuman agency (e.g., institutions, concepts, or objects acting as agents). In this article, a social actor is defined as an entity that 1) exerts discursive influence, 2) participates in the reproduction of ideology, and 3) shapes social cognition through language production. The concept of 'social actor' in CDA includes individuals, groups, and abstract entities such as councils or committees, implying agency in discourse. CDA applications in various contexts, including second and foreign language education, focus on critiquing power relations between dominant and dominated social actors - whether individuals, groups, or institutions.

The rise of Generative AI poses a challenge to the concept of 'social actor' in CDA, as AI does not fit the traditional assumption of a human agent (Fairclough, 2003; van Leeuwen, 1996). This prompts a reevaluation of what constitutes a social actor in discourse and calls for expanding or redefining the concept to accommodate non-human agents that influence social reality. Unlike human social actors, Generative AI is a machine trained on vast data to generate content in response to user prompts. In other words, Generative AI content is a synthesis of large volumes of human data circulated among users. Thus, it is subject to reproducing biases and ideologically loaded discourse hidden in the source data. Typical CDA questions about social actors (role, source of authority, ideology, access to resources/power) may not apply directly to generative AI. However, AI's growing influence and content acceptance reflect a form of power exertion that highlights a shift in how power dynamics are understood in discourse. The increasing influence of Generative AI on public discourse raises risks of uncritical acceptance of its outputs and highlights the need for intervention.

It is timely to reconsider Generative AI as a special case of a social actor in CDA. Recognizing AI as a social actor acknowledges its growing impact on human cognition and evolving social reality. This redefinition enables researchers from CDA and other relevant domains to question and critique AI's discourse and restore human critical capacity. ESL/EFL learners are social members who influence and are influenced by Generative AI content. However, with proper training, ESL/EFL learners can be empowered to respond to potential risks.

## Discussion

Recognizing non-human social actors in CDA acknowledges a new form of agency and encourages direct engagement with Generative AI's discourses. This recognition allows CDA-oriented research to address power abuse and ideological bias recycled through Generative AI content. However, it also requires expanding the theoretical concept of 'social actor' in CDA, which is often limited to humans (Fairclough, 2003; van Leeuwen, 1996). This means, among other things, a partial shift of power from humans to non-human agents mediated by algorithms, without eliminating human institutions and corporations that design and train these systems. The counterargument that non-human discourse lacks intentionality is countered by viewing AI discourse as an aggregate synthesis of human discourse capacity to exert large-scale power.

The pedagogical implications of understanding Generative AI as a social actor in ESL/EFL contexts should address the needs of learners, instructors, and teaching materials. These

implications can be activated by using one or more of the existing frameworks that have been developed to address the critical aspects of language learning and teaching such as critical language awareness (Fairclough, 1992), critical literacy (Luke & Freebody, 1997), critical approaches to language policy (Philipson, 1992), critical sociolinguistics (Eades, 2010), and critical applied linguistics (Pennycook, 2001). Other frameworks are more tailored to second- and foreign-language education (Canagarajah, 1999; Norton, 2000), to critical pedagogy and second-language education (Morgan, 1998; Norton & Toohey, 2011), to critical English for academic purposes (Benesch, 2001), and to critical bilingualism (Walsh, 1991).

The Critical Language Awareness (CLA) framework, described as the "pedagogical application of Critical Discourse Analysis" (Wallace, 2003, p. 28), is particularly appropriate for examining the complexities of ESL/EFL contexts. CLA links language learning to social meaning and power relations, prompting learners to question unexamined assumptions (Leeman, 2018). In practice, ESL/EFL learners can be encouraged to use Generative AI tools for proofreading and translation, while also adhering to ethical practices. The responsible use of Generative AI tools can enhance language skills indirectly by improving vocabulary, writing quality, and reading comprehension.

Instructors can raise learners' awareness of the potential bias and inaccuracy of Generative AI by framing it as a social actor capable of influencing human perception and worldviews. To do so, instructors can design teaching materials and in-class activities that use flawed or biased AI content and ask learners to analyze using one of CDA's approaches. The instructor's role is pivotal in guiding learners and providing immediate feedback that helps detect biased discourse or flawed content. It should be reiterated that instructors require adequate training to execute such specialized activities; nevertheless, institutional intervention is necessary to empower them. The overall goal is for learners and instructors to use Generative AI tools responsibly and be aware of the potential risks and biased discourse.

## Conclusion

This conceptual article addressed 'social actor' as a fundamental concept in CDA that requires re-evaluation in light of the influence of Generative AI on human critical capacity and public discourse. The call to expand or redefine the concept of 'social actor' to include non-human agents would allow for greater room to question and critique generative AI, potentially biased discourse, or flawed content. As social members who may be unconsciously affected by the potential risks of generative AI, ESL/EFL learners should be empowered to detect bias and discrimination throughout their language learning. CDA-based approaches, in general, and CLA in particular, are effective in the ESL/EFL context for connecting language form to ideological embeddings. This article did not examine empirical data on Generative AI bias, leaving this as a limitation for further empirical studies. Future empirical research may examine real instances of biased or ideologically laden discourse generated by Generative AI and assess how ESL/EFL learners respond to it.

**Funding:** This research is not funded.
**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflicts of interest.
**Authenticity:** This manuscript is an original work.
**Artificial Intelligence Statement:** AI tools assisted with proofreading and referencing to improve readability and language.

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