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# Max Horkheimer's early critical theory, and critical ELT research

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## Introduction

Critical English language teaching (ELT) is an area of study in which scholars draw from various theoretical traditions to produce work which is, broadly speaking, aimed at emancipatory transformation of the field of ELT. Theoretically, some researchers draw on Marxist theory in their work (for example Holborow, 1999; Phillipson, 1992), while others look more to postmodern and poststructuralist ideas regarding the explication of power relations (see Lawrence and Nagashima, 2020, for example). In much work there seems to be an unspoken meshing of these ideas, with the investigation and exposure of unequal power relations used as a way of achieving emancipatory political change. This phenomenon has been remarked upon in critical sociology generally (see Hammersley, 1992), with criticisms made that it uncomfortably stiches together ideas from both structuralism and poststructuralism, despite these being philosophically contradictory. Within ELT, O'Regan (2014) has argued that this is a 'productive' tension, a position with which it is hard to disagree, given the fruitful critical work carried out in the last few decades. However, what critical ELT research has gained through this somewhat stochastic approach, it has also potentially lost in terms of a concrete program of research. Rather than working towards a shared philosophical future vision for the field, various scholars under the critical banner are busily mining different seams of research with a general eye on emancipatory change, but without necessarily holding to a shared set of guiding principles.

In this essay, I will explore how the early, programmatic model of critical theory developed by the philosopher Max Horkheimer could be applied to critical ELT, and discuss whether such a model would be beneficial. Max Horkheimer was the second director of the Institute for Social Research (commonly known as the Frankfurt School), and, along with his colleague Erich Fromm, developed an early version of

critical theory which sought to combine Marxist philosophy with psychoanalysis. Using interdisciplinary empirical social research, Horkheimer aimed to discover the ideologies which prevented the working class from acting towards emancipatory social change. This should not be confused with the later formulation of critical theory developed by Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, the starting point of which is the famous *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944/2002). This version of critical theory undertook a broader critique of enlightenment thought and reason as being an instrument of bourgeoise domination, and Horkheimer became entrenched in pessimism about the possibility of critical theory producing any positive political change (see Bottomore, 2002 for a summary of this period). While there are some threads connecting this work with Horkheimer's early program, it is, as Abromeit (2011) argues, more accurately described as a continuation of Adorno's work from the 1920s and 1930s. Therefore, when describing Horkheimer's early critical theory in this essay, unless explicitly stated otherwise, I am referring to the ideas developed from the late 1920s to the late 1930s, perhaps most fully expressed in the famous essay *Traditional and Critical Theory* (1937/1972).

Following a brief outline of Horkheimer's biography, I will describe his basic framework of early critical theory. I will then suggest some ways in which this may be applied to critical ELT research, in order to develop a concrete, coherent, emancipatory research program. I will also highlight some of the weaknesses of such an approach towards the end of the paper.

## Max Horkheimer: A biographical sketch

Max Horkheimer was born in 1895, and undertook his university studies in Frankfurt, where he became acquainted with the socialist movement. Horkheimer studied both psychology and philosophy, but opted to focus on the former for his doctorate. Unfortunately, just prior to finishing his dissertation a Danish researcher published a study on the same topic with the same results, leading the university to reject Horkheimer's work. He instead accepted an offer to complete a degree in philosophy under Hans Cornelius, and quickly produced a habilitation focusing on Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (Abromeit, 2011). Graduating in 1926, Horkheimer soon joined the recently established Institute for Social Research (popularly known as the Frankfurt School), a Marxist research institute founded by Felix Weil, the son of a wealthy grain merchant. In 1930, following the retirement of Carl Grünberg, Horkheimer became director of the institute, a position in which he remained until 1953, at which time he was succeeded by Adorno (Jay, 1973). Under Grünberg's

leadership, the institute focused on orthodox research topics such as the collection of labour statistics. However, Horkheimer attempted to implement a rather more ambitious plan for the institute which was intended to lead to the creation of a 'critical theory' of society.

Although Horkheimer is best known for his work with Adorno on later elaborations of critical theory, his early formulation of the approach, influenced by his close relationship with the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, is often overlooked (Abromeit, 2011). This is unfortunate, as Horkheimer's early critical theory contains not only important insights into the relationship between science and human progress, but also promising suggestions for how critical researchers can ground their work in a pluralistic research program oriented towards a positive vision of a future society.

## Horkheimer's early critical theory

Horkheimer's early model for developing a critical theory comprised three key elements, each of which was important for understanding the direction of his research plan. Horkheimer's philosophy was complex, and I do not have space to explore every aspect of his thinking here; I intend rather to outline the three key points which would be applicable to a critical program of ELT research. For a full description of Horkheimer's conception of critical theory, I would direct the reader to Abromeit (2011). I will outline each of these three points one by one, with as much detail as I feel is necessary for my purposes here.

### Normativity

Primarily, Horkheimer's early critical theory was normative; that is to say, he believed that a model of critical research should be grounded in a set of philosophical values about the kind of society the researchers would like to see develop. Horkheimer's critical theory was intended to aid in the transformation of society, and towards the construction of a rational world where people were freed from relations of domination, and in which the promises of the liberal order of freedom, equality, and justice could be realized. Horkheimer thus thought philosophy to be an essential component of critical theory. However, he also believed that critical theory should not be a purely intellectual exercise, but should instead be guided by a revolutionary politics (Held, 1980). This partnership between theory and practice was intended to be equal and reciprocal. As Abromeit (2011) puts it, "Horkheimer's insistence that critical theory play an active role in transforming society, that it take sides in contemporary political struggles, does not, however, translate into a

subordination of theory to praxis, or, at the opposite extreme, a belief that theory alone should determine the course of society" (p. 329).

For Horkheimer then, a program of critical research must be oriented based on a coherent philosophical vision of a future society, with the subtext (increasingly difficult to express in 1930s Germany), that this be some form of socialism. Horkheimer's socialism was more in keeping with the humanistic early Marx, and focused on the emancipatory promise of a socialist society (Held, 1980)[1] in which humans could be free from oppression, and social injustice eliminated. In Horkheimer's words, the goal was "man's emancipation from slavery" (Horkheimer, 1937/1972, p. 246). Each of the major figures associated with the Frankfurt school sought to ground their normative vision in a different way. For Horkheimer, the ultimate goal of the theory was to create a rational society organized towards the satisfaction of human needs rather than the pursuit of profit. He grounded this in the interests of the proletariat, who he considered to be a coherent class capable of revolutionary activity, and whose lived reality seemed contradictory to the values of the liberal societies in which they lived.

To summarize, Horkheimer's idea of a critical theory was one in which philosophers would plan out the empirical work to be done by scientists, acting in pursuit of social justice, and a future in which humans could be freed from relations of domination.

## Interdisciplinarity

The second characteristic of Horkheimer's theory is that it was interdisciplinary. Far from being against science at this time, Horkheimer insisted that a critical theory of society would draw on insights from the various branches of the physical and social sciences in order to construct a society which was able to create the conditions for maximizing human freedom. The early Horkheimer was of the belief that science was a neutral endeavour, and that technological advancement did not necessarily lead to social advancement, elaborating this in the following way:

> "…neither the achievements of science by themselves, nor the advance in industrial method, are immediately identical with the real progress of mankind. It is obvious that man may be mentally, emotionally, and

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[1] While Horkheimer moved away from this position, his collaborator at the time, Erich Fromm, retained an interest in the early Marx, and published the first English translation of his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (see Fromm, 1961).

intellectually impoverished at decisive points despite the progress of science and industry. Science and technology are only elements in an existing social totality, and it is quite possible that, despite all their achievements, other factors, including the totality itself, could be moving backwards, that man could become increasingly stunted and unhappy, that the individual could become ruined, and nations headed toward disaster." (Horkheimer, 1939/1972, p. 259)

Thus, Horkheimer believed that science could not be used to determine human values, and nor could technological and scientific development be relied upon to ensure the flourishing of societies. This position was *contra* to the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle[2], and was a stance Horkheimer strengthened later in his life, writing in 1947 that "the death factories in Europe cast as much significant light on the relations between science and cultural progress as does the manufacture of stockings out of air" (p. 75). This is not to be taken as necessarily a relativistic position – as we shall see in the next section, Horkheimer believed in the power of science – but should rather be understood as the appeal for science to be complemented by social and political philosophy, lest it become nothing more than an increasingly complex and efficient means for humans to dominate one another.

As a student, Horkheimer had been encouraged to attend lectures on both the physical and social sciences, and gained an appreciation for the power of scientific investigation (Abromeit, 2011). While the later Horkheimer became disillusioned with science, believing the scientific method only served to articulate surface representations of phenomena, and thereby misunderstand the phenomena themselves (Horkheimer, 1947), the early Horkheimer believed that science and theory were inseparable, and that advancements in science, if used in the service of theoretical goals, could contribute to human emancipation. However, this was not intended to subordinate scientific findings to theory, nor to suggest that the outcomes of scientific work only held true if they worked in the service of his philosophy (or vice versa). He believed, in other words, that developments in theory must be checked against developments in the appropriate branches of the sciences, or as Held (1980) puts it "every theoretical claim must 'submit' itself to, or 'subordinate' itself to, the results of relevant, individual empirical sciences" (p. 187).

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[2] A group of philosophers who sought to reduce all knowledge to sets of logically coherent and empirically testable propositions, who Horkheimer derisively referred to as 'savants' in his work of the 1930s.

Following a Marxist philosophy of internal relations (Ollman, 2003), Horkheimer believed in a productive unity of theory and research that would lead to the ultimate goal of human emancipation. Reflecting this, many of the institute's early research projects drew on a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, particularly from the field of psychology.

## Ideology critique and psychoanalysis

Finally, Horkheimer's model supplemented Marxism with psychoanalysis in order to investigate and critique dominant ideology in society. Like many Marxists, Horkheimer had expected a revolution to take place which would lead to a socialist society in which people could freely develop their human capacities. Instead, he saw the emergence of totalitarian movements which were supported by large swathes of the working class, despite such movements seemingly being against the working class' own best interests. As such, Horkheimer felt an important primary task of critical theory was to understand these ideologies, and suggested doing so through Freudian psychoanalytical research into the beliefs and attitudes of German workers. Horkheimer argued in favour of the now rather unfashionable 'false consciousness' view of ideology, which considers ideologies to be sets of beliefs created and disseminated through society in order to uphold the interests of the dominant class (i.e., the bourgeoisie). This can be found expressed at numerous points in his collection of aphorisms published as *Dämmerung* (1926, reproduced in Horkheimer, 1978), and his essay *A new concept of ideology?* (Horkheimer, 1930/1993). In particular, Horkheimer thought that a dialectical investigation of the contradictions inherent in liberal society, and the resolution of these contradictions, would gradually lead to a more rational society, though he refused to predict what such a society would look like.

While other branches of socialism at this time were focused primarily on the economic 'base', and on how this created the necessary illusions which sustained capitalist relations, Horkheimer thought it necessary to look at the mutual influence between the base and the 'superstructure'; that is, the complex web of legal, political, cultural, and social relations which constitute society. For Marx, there had been no mechanism for investigating ideology, however, for Horkheimer, psychoanalysis appeared an ideal mediating mode of inquiry. Through analysis of the psychological structure of attitudes and beliefs held by the general population, Horkheimer believed that it would be possible to uncover the ideologies which prevented the

working classes from realising their class position and acting in their own best interests. Thus, many of the institute's early projects, though remaining incomplete due to the advent of war, attempted to critique the ideology of the German workers through the psychoanalytic investigation of various social structures and institutions. The most famous of these is the *Studies in Authority and the Family*, which aimed to investigate how personalities liable to submit to authoritarian dominance could be nurtured within the family structure (see Horkheimer, 1936/1972). As Held (1980) puts it, "for the early Horkheimer, as for Lukacs, the practical role of the theorist was to articulate and help develop latent class consciousness" (p. 25). Horkheimer believed that the role of philosophy in critical theory was to ruthlessly interrogate the current social order and the ideological assumptions on which it lay, stating that "philosophy has set itself against mere tradition and resignation in the decisive problems of existence, and it has shouldered the unpleasant task of throwing the light of consciousness even upon those human relations and modes of reaction which have become so deeply rooted that they seem natural, immutable, and eternal" (Horkheimer, 1939/1972, p. 257).

Horkheimer's early critical theory can thus be summarized as being normatively oriented, methodologically interdisciplinary, and focused on ideology critique in order to bring about social justice and the emancipation of humanity from oppressive conditions and relations of domination; a program he described as "the anthropology of the bourgeois epoch" (Horkheimer 1936/1993, p. 49). However, this formulation of critical theory should not be understood as static. Horkheimer was very clear in arguing that a critical theory of society must be reflective of its material and social conditions. Horkheimer believed that all theory and science was part of a social totality, and could only be understood fully if considered as part of the society in which it was produced. The theory must be continually recreated to suit the inexorably changing and shifting conditions of the society surrounding it.

## Applying Horkheimer's model to critical ELT

With this understanding of Horkheimer's early model of critical theory in place, I will now explore the ways in which this model could be applied to critical research in the field of English language teaching. I will present this discussion in terms of the three key points of Horkheimer's theory outlined above.

## Normativity

Some elements of the theory already seem to be in place in most critical ELT research, at least implicitly. Perhaps the most obvious of these is the emancipatory function of critical research. The study of topics such as linguistic imperialism, native-speakerism, and English as a Lingua Franca all aim to free humans from relations of domination regarding language learning, teaching, and use. The work of Robert Phillipson (1992) on linguistic imperialism takes a rather structural approach to this, focusing on the ways in which the 'periphery' is dominated by the 'center' in the field of language teaching, and how this domination is sustained by the dissemination of 'fallacies' about language learning and teaching throughout the profession. Research on English as a Lingua Franca (Mauranen, 2018) has the goal of democratizing language use by shifting the focus away from the language norms of powerful Western countries, and instead examining and valuing the English produced by those that make up the majority of its users, i.e., those living in the outer and expanding circles (Kachru, 1985). Native-speakerism is understood as a widespread ideology in ELT which privileges the models, methods, and institutions of the West in conversations around English language teaching (Aboshiha, 2015; Holliday, 2006; Kabel, 2009), and Others the teachers, students, and education systems of non-Western countries. Research in these areas thus generally seems to have an emancipatory function, putting it in line with Horkheimer's early model of critical theory.

Certainly, this emancipatory focus is important, though it is not always clearly articulated or plainly stated that this is the goal of such research. Critical researchers utilize a variety of theoretical lenses through which to examine their work. Some draw on concepts in social justice, with a focus on the emancipation of specific identity groups. This research includes focuses on gender in language teaching (Nagatomo, 2016), LGBTQ+ issues (Nelson, 2009), and issues of race and racism (Ramjattan, 2019; Gerald, 2020). Other work examines the field through a postcolonial lens, taking a broader view of the struggles of formerly colonized peoples against the imposition of Western 'expertise' in language teaching (Canagarajah, 1999) or Western language models (Motha, 2014). However, these different focuses are not always conceived of as being part of a common struggle towards a more equitable future for ELT. Some researchers (such as those working in the field of ELF) may not even see their work as directly political at all, though they may acknowledge that it has political implications. Indeed, one problem that has faced critical theorists for close to a century is how to ground their normative

beliefs. For Horkheimer, as mentioned earlier, this was accomplished by appealing to the coherent class interests of the proletariat, however no such coherent class does (or possibly could) exist in a field as globally spread and fractured as ELT. One tentative proposal is that we may ground our critical enterprise in the varied interests of the marginalized groups outlined above. In other words, we may build our foundation on "the interests of those who are placed outside of any specific power structure" (Evenson, 2013, p. 12).

I would suggest that one way of applying a Horkheimerian perspective to critical ELT research would be to recognize the common goal underpinning all these strands of research; human emancipation from the conditions which prevent them from living in a state of freedom and self-determination. By doing so, we may gain a stronger sense of a shared goal, and a more united front in the struggle for political transformation in our field.

## Interdisciplinarity

A more difficult topic to find common ground on concerns method. While the emancipatory purpose of critical research is generally shared, there is less solid agreement about the means by which such research should be carried out. There appears to be a focus among many involved in this subfield (myself included) on qualitative studies, as these can help to penetrate the hidden assumptions of the field, and the personal effects of these assumptions, through a close analysis of discourses and personal experiences that are available in a research setting. Furthermore, it is felt that interpretative, qualitative work can help to deconstruct the grand narratives that are present in the field, through which identity is ossified, and people are ascribed roles and characteristics which prevent them from freely developing their capacities.

Quantitative work is often seen as something like an enemy of the critical mission because, echoing the late Horkheimer, it is felt to obscure the true nature of society by presenting only a surface-level interpretation of phenomena, and failing to recognize the deeper, more hidden ideological assumptions which run beneath the object of study (Holliday & Macdonald, 2020). Indeed, for those taking influence from a postmodern perspective, quantitative approaches may even be seen as dangerous because they serve to help construct the very grand narratives that many critical researchers view as being repressive. I share these concerns, and in fact have suggested elsewhere that the value of radically interpretive research methods such

as duoethnography lies in the power they have for deconstructing the grand narratives of the field (Lawrence & Lowe, 2020).

However, I am not as skeptical of quantitative methods as some other critical researchers, and believe that they have useful insights to offer for scholars in this area. In my literature reviews, for example, I often find myself citing research such as survey data regarding the desire for 'native speaker' teachers among directors of EAP programs (Mahboob et al., 2004), and the prevalence of terms such as 'native speaker' in job advertisements (Mahboob & Golden, 2013). Work from a quantitative perspective has also shown imbalances along racial and gender lines among speakers invited to give featured or plenary talks at applied linguistics conferences (Bhattacharya, Jiang & Canagarajah, 2019). For those who are interested in critical research, this kind of quantitative work should be of value, as it highlights structural imbalances and trends which can justify more in-depth qualitative work. Of course, such quantitative research should not be taken at face value; the perspective that this work can serve to create or strengthen existing grand narratives is one with which I am very sympathetic. Rather, I am suggesting that quantitative work be a starting point for qualitative work, and that observations in qualitative work could be made more robust through well-designed quantitative studies. I am advocating, in other words, for a productive dialogue between these two approaches which will allow each to strengthen the other. It should be cautioned, however, that this does not imply the subordination of one to the other (as in the common perception that qualitative work is simply 'filling in the gaps' of quantitative work). Rather, they should be seen as equal partners, with the results from both accepted as of equal value in theory building.

Further, taking an approach based on Horkheimer's early critical theory implies that critical researchers should draw on a variety of disciplines in their work. Horkheimer advocated for the incorporation of the best results from different fields in creating a critical theory of society that is robust and rigorous. Critical researchers in ELT are often skeptical of work in fields such as Second Language Acquisition (SLA), as it is seen as contributing to the domination of non-Western contexts through the exporting of Western expertise around the world (Holliday, 2005; Phillipson, 1992). Again, this is a point with which I have some sympathy, but it seems to me that the problem here is not necessarily with SLA research as such, but rather with the way the research is applied. In my own work, I have shown how the deviation of accepted ELT methods from the most robust findings of SLA research helps to reveal the

ideological nature of what is accepted as best practice in the field (Lowe, 2020). Equally, a rejection of findings in SLA and related fields as inherently biased and problematic makes it difficult to coherently understand what is happening when scholars and teachers in the periphery find value in and adopt these findings. It would seem antithetical to the goals of a critical theory of ELT to suggest that a particular group of people were rationally incapable of adopting the findings of science, or that in doing so they revealed themselves to be under an ideological spell. Of course, the possibility that these people are under a false consciousness of some kind should be considered, but it should not be taken as a given. A false consciousness, in Horkheimer's terms, can be shown by contrasting a group's professed ideals with the state of reality in which they live. I would suggest that assigning a false consciousness to a group is not something that should be done lightly, and must be backed up with evidence of oppression. It is not immediately obvious that all use of SLA findings is inherently oppressive, and any claim that they are should be carefully considered and evidentially supported. While critical scholars are quite right to be skeptical of this kind of research, and to be aware of the goals it may unconsciously serve, awareness of the potential benefits of such research for emancipatory or critical ends should also be taken into account.

In short, an approach to critical ELT research based on Horkheimer's early critical theory would try to consider and integrate the results of both quantitative and qualitative work, and seek a productive and critical dialogue between the two, without putting one in a position of superiority over the other. It would also seek to be interdisciplinary in that it would acknowledge the most robust findings from different fields of research in ELT and use them towards its emancipatory goal. This approach would, however, need to be marked by a constant skepticism towards the theory it was building, to avoid the creation of grand narratives which serve to recreate or reinforce social injustice or relations of domination within the field.

## Ideology critique

The final element of Horkheimer's theory which would need to be paramount in a form of critical ELT is the focus on ideology critique. There are many studies in ELT research which are based around the critique of ideology. Most often this is in the form of Critical Discourse Analysis, an approach to textual analysis which looks for hidden political and social beliefs 'between the lines' of texts. My own small contribution to ideology critique in ELT is the idea of ethnographic frame analysis, which examines the perceptual frames of participants through the collection of

ethnographic data in order to uncover the hidden ideologies which inform those frames (Lowe, 2021). In a model of critical ELT research based on Horkheimer's early critical theory, ideology critique would be of central concern.

As mentioned earlier, Horkheimer's understanding of ideology was close to an orthodox Marxist definition of false consciousness; or a set of beliefs disseminated through society in order to uphold the power of the ruling class. Within ELT, Marxist scholars such as Phillipson (1992) have suggested that powerful ELT institutions have been engaged in just such a propagandistic effort, through the creation and promotion of 'fallacies' in the field. Given that most people working in ELT are 'non-native speakers' from periphery countries, it seems clear that such beliefs serve to disenfranchise them. Despite this, such beliefs are commonly held by teachers of English around the world, and thus seem to represent a false consciousness which makes these teachers complicit in their own marginalisation. Ideology critique would, on this understanding, aim to uncover the ways in which these ideologies are embedded in the everyday beliefs and practices of teachers and institutions, and how they come to be so firmly entrenched in these contexts.

For Horkheimer, the study of ideology could be given greater depth and rigor if carried out through psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis was seen as having the potential to investigate the psychological mechanisms which mediated the transfer of knowledge between society and the individual (Abromeit, 2011). Thus, psychoanalysis was key to investigating how ideology spreads, and how people become convinced of ideas which lead to their own subjugation. Psychoanalysis is a contentious topic, and while there are many who would defend it, a program of ELT based in part on psychoanalysis would struggle to find many adherents. However, I would suggest that the focus on ideology critique could be retained, while a variety of different approaches such as critical discourse analysis, critical ethnography, and (in a nod to Horkheimer) social psychology could be used to investigate and critique ideology within the field. Through the analysis of ideology, critical ELT researchers could uncover the hidden presuppositions of teachers, students, and others involved in the field which prevent them from moving towards an emancipatory model of ELT. Of course, the uncovering of ideology does not necessarily mean one will act against it (a point made by Žižek, 1989), but dialogue and critical reflection are necessary preconditions for action towards emancipatory change, as later scholars of critical theory such as Habermas (1971) suggest.

## Issues and concerns

In the preceding sections I have outlined what a model of critical ELT based on the early critical theory of Max Horkheimer might look like. I believe that there are many potential benefits of adopting such a program, such as the unity of critical researchers towards a shared vision, the ability to take advantage of scientific findings from a variety of disciplines, and the opportunity to investigate the conditions which prevent the realization of a new socially conscious ELT. However, I do not want to suggest that adoption of this framework would be without problems, some of which I shall briefly outline here.

One key concern with adopting this program of research is the elitism implied by notion that philosophers should plan out the empirical work to be done by scientists. I would suggest that while the relationship between philosophy and empirical work should be strengthened, a research program should have a reciprocal relationship with local concerns and issues in the pursuit of a shared normative goal. I think a more dialogic approach to the planning of research is necessary not only to democratize the process, but also in recognition of the myriad complex local factors at play in each setting in which English is taught.

A second issue concerns the definition of ideology at play. The false consciousness definition of ideology is often considered to be patronizing, and to remove agency from the people said to be under its influence. Alternative definitions such as that by van Dijk (2006) avoid this by depicting ideologies as sets of political beliefs held by groups which are locked in struggles for dominance. I share the concern regarding the problems of the false consciousness definition, but equally I feel that a definition more along the lines of van Dijk's fails to capture the structural nature of ideology laid out in the previous section. I think it is completely possible for people to be in some sense tricked by a dominant ideology, and also to come to recognize and act against that ideology. I would suggest then that an updated version of Horkheimer's early critical theory should move towards a definition which retains the power of the false consciousness definition, but allows for a greater level of agency on the part of social actors in challenging these ideological beliefs. My own work on framing and counter-framing suggests a path towards this (Lowe, 2021), but it is up to the reader to judge if this is successful.

A third issue is how such a critical approach could be normatively grounded. This is, as noted earlier, a problem that each major figure in the Frankfurt school has

approached differently, and that none have convincingly resolved (Held, 1980). I have tentatively suggested that rather than appealing to a coherent class interest, as Horkheimer did, we could instead ground our work in the interests of various marginalized groups. This would mean building our house on uneven and shifting foundations, but this is better than having no foundation at all. It would also mean constantly renovating and reconstructing the house, but given Horkheimer's insistence that such a theory must be continuously remade to suit its historical settings, this could be seen more as an opportunity than a problem.

Finally, adopting a unified model of ELT along the lines described herein could reasonably be rejected on the grounds that critical ELT is working perfectly well as it stands, and that in fact the lack of unanimity among researchers has led to the discovery of opportunities for emancipation in unexpected places. A more rigid program along the lines of Horkheimer's might stunt possibilities for the emergence of this kind of creative and productive work. This is a powerful objection, and I find myself largely in agreement. There would certainly be something of a trade-off here, and it would be important for theorists and researchers to consider these issues critically before committing to any program.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have explored how Max Horkheimer's early model of critical theory could be used as a basis to construct a more unified program of critical ELT research than the rather eclectic approach currently taken. I have argued that such an approach would have both advantages and disadvantages. In terms of benefits, it would offer the possibility for a solid, unified research program which could take advantage of the best of our research methods to develop something like a critical anthropology of ELT (in my own view, an 'anthropology of the native-speakerist epoch'). This could potentially add a level of convincing power and energy to bring about the kind of positive changes such a program would be aiming for. However, as outlined in the previous section there are also numerous drawbacks, both practical and moral. Chiefly, a concern could be raised that such a program could be elitist, restrictive, and deny opportunities for individual initiative and experimentation.

These are legitimate concerns, and the purpose of this essay is not to draw a strong conclusion, nor to convince readers of the necessary superiority of this position. Rather, I have aimed to sketch out the borders of a possible future path critical research may take, and the destination to which such a path may lead. However, I

have also warned of pitfalls that may be encountered on the way, and acknowledged that the current direction is not without merit. Nevertheless, the possibility of a unified approach that a model of critical ELT research based on Horkheimer's theory may offer is one I believe the field should consider, due to the possibilities it holds for unifying our collective critical vision, and thereby leading more concretely to emancipatory change in the field of English language teaching.

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## Abstract

Max Horkheimer was the second director of the Institute for Social Research, otherwise known as the Frankfurt School. Between 1926 and 1940, Horkheimer, along with his colleagues at the Institute, developed the principles of the first iteration of Critical Theory. This early model of critical theory drew on elements of Marxism and psychoanalysis to create an interdisciplinary approach to social research which had the normative goal of transforming society and freeing human being from relations of domination. This paper attempts to apply Horkheimer's early model of critical theory to ELT, and presents a case for what a critical approach to ELT research would look like if it were to adopt this model. After first providing some background on Horkheimer, the paper sketches the broad outline of his early version of critical theory in terms of it's normative grounding, it's use of interdisciplinary research, and its focus on ideology critique. Following this, the paper examines current critical ELT research to see what elements of this framework already exist within it, and which could be applied in the future. The paper argues that a critical approach to ELT research along these lines might add a much-needed unity to the research program of critical scholars in ELT.

Keywords: Max Horkheimer, Critical theory, Frankfurt School, Critical applied linguistics, Critical English language teaching