

Exploring Language as a Means of Evidence: Forensic Linguistics in English Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual article explores the pedagogical benefits of integrating forensic linguistics into English Language Teaching (ELT). Traditionally confined to legal contexts, forensic linguistics is increasingly relevant to contemporary education. Drawing on current scholarship in inquiry-based learning and critical literacy, this paper demonstrates how forensic practices can help intermediate ELT learners develop analytical reading and writing skills, enhance digital literacy, and foster critical language awareness. The article outlines key applications—including authorship analysis, ambiguity interpretation, digital discourse evaluation, and simulated investigative tasks—and provides concrete classroom strategies tailored to intermediate proficiency levels. These methods transform passive language consumption into active, evidence-based inquiry. While highlighting the motivational and cognitive advantages of such tasks, the discussion also addresses practical implementation challenges, including teacher training and resource constraints. Ultimately, the article argues that forensic linguistics effectively bridges linguistic theory and real-world communication, empowering students to view language as dynamic evidence that shapes and reflects social interaction.

KEYWORDS: Forensic linguistics; ELT; Critical literacy; Digital discourse; Inquiry-based learning

INTRODUCTION

ELT has evolved from teaching language through grammar to teaching communication with critical and digital literacy. Modern language learners are expected not only to produce accurate language, but also to decipher meaning, evaluate veracity and use language responsibly in more and more complex social and digital contexts. This leads ELT research to seek new interdisciplinary approaches that might bridge the gap between language learning in class and language use outside it.

One interesting, pedagogically relevant discipline could be forensic linguistics. The study of the linguistic dimension in legal contexts, broadly known as forensic linguistics, analyses the role of language as evidence in various real-life situations like authorship attribution, courtroom communication, police interrogation, threatening messages, anonymous communication or digital discourse (Coulthard & Johnson, 2007). Although it emerged in the legal or criminal field, recent papers reveal its potential value in educational contexts (Morelato et al., 2023).

The roots of this discipline are in Jan Svartvik's linguistic analysis of Timothy Evans's questionable confession in the sixties. He showed inconsistencies

in police testimonies and how linguistic analysis could influence interpretation (Toghuj, 2021). Since then, Coulthard, Shuy and Gibbons, and many other linguists have developed the discipline further, looking into courtroom interactions, authorship issues or linguistic interpretations, while the digital revolution pushed this field towards the analysis of emails, social networks, online threats, and others (Perkins, 2018).

Forensic linguistics seems relevant for the ELT because it focuses on meaning and interpretation of texts, not on production. In doing so, forensic approaches require students to analyse the textual details of any communication they deal with, locate ambiguity, infer meaning and draw conclusions on intent, thus engaging them in the interpretation and critical analysis skills of contemporary ELT. Interpreting context and textual evidence may deepen learners' understanding of language (Karabacak, 2021). In addition, focusing on text construction processes and social and pragmatic meanings has been seen as central to communication-oriented approaches to ELT (Ghafar, 2023).

Educational scholars have shown interest in using forensic techniques to enhance classroom learning in

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recent years. The discipline has been considered “a great classroom motivator” because it encourages an investigative approach and fosters students’ curiosity (Clayton, 2025). Students working on forensic-type tasks are often said to engage in joint inquiry, develop critical interpretive reasoning, and build evidence-based decision-making abilities, which closely align with communicative and task-based language teaching principles (Morelato et al., 2023).

This paper introduces forensic linguistics as a potential framework for integrating language use in ELT in a critical manner. To this end, the article explores three major issues:

1. How can forensic linguistics principles be adapted to English language classrooms?
2. What are the potential pedagogical outcomes derived from forensic language analysis tasks?
3. How can forensic methods facilitate critical literacy and digital communication awareness?

By summarising current research and providing concrete examples of classroom applications, the article supports the idea that forensic linguistics can be a relevant source for innovative and engaging language teaching in the 21st century.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Development of Forensic Linguistics

Forensic linguistics developed as a discipline of linguistic investigation, and its primary concerns have always been addressing legal and investigative problems through applied linguistic analysis. In its infancy, Forensic Linguistics largely concentrated on analysis of courtroom discourse, police confessions, and legal interpretation. Coulthard, Johnson, and Wright (2007) detail how forensic linguistic discourse expanded from courtroom interactions to other forms of communication involved in the law, such as anonymous letters, digital communication, and discourse related to cybercrime investigations.

Forensic linguistics has treated language as evidence since its inception. Linguists seek to identify Authorship and interpret disputed communications through the examination of stylistic features, choice of words, and grammatical structures, as well as pragmatics. These techniques have been successfully employed in several notorious cases, including those relating to the Unabomber and the Jack the Ripper letters (Lyons, 2018).

The recent explosion in technological capabilities has shaped forensic linguistics more dramatically than any other recent development; online communication is perhaps the main focus of modern Forensic

Linguistics research. The area now primarily concerns the analysis of discourse produced during digital communication such as emails, texts, and online chat logs (Perkins, 2018), and digital forensic analysis has become an intrinsic part of forensic investigation (Klasn, Fock, and Forchheimer, 2024).

These two aspects of Forensic Linguistics’ development – the focus on the legal aspects of linguistic analysis and the significant increase in technological capabilities – are important considerations when applied to an educational context, as contemporary communication is almost entirely digital in nature. Therefore, by exposing learners to methods of analysis prevalent in Forensic Linguistics, students will develop critical insights into discourse.

Forensic Linguistics and the Educational Context

While linguistic analysis in legal settings has a long history, applying forensic linguistics in education is relatively new. Morelato et al. (2023) studied Forensic Intelligence instruction in higher education, finding that hands-on, investigative pedagogical activities facilitated critical thinking, collaborative reasoning, and analytical skill development, and that students benefited more from authentic or simulated data than from purely theoretical instruction. Similarly, Krishnamurthy (2024) concluded that interactive, inquiry-based instruction of Forensic Science concepts greatly enhanced students’ interest and learning outcomes, with the students’ motivation, engagement, and analytical abilities increasing throughout the activity. Rubins (2024) found that performing authentic Forensic Assessment activities fostered stronger critical reflection and communication.

These findings align with modern approaches such as task-based learning, which prioritize effective, communicative language use and emphasize learner interaction and problem-solving activities. Forensic style activities can meet these criteria by encouraging language learners to engage with communication critically and collaboratively as they identify authorship and meaning in presented data. Clayton (2025) also posits that Forensic Linguistics tasks can enhance motivation through the analysis of “language puzzles,” which can promote engagement with language tasks that require authentic linguistic analysis through the study of evidence that would appear in the context of actual investigative work.

Critical Literacy and Digital Discourse

The application of Forensic Linguistics in an ELT context is tied to concerns around Critical Literacy. Critical Literacy is defined as examining how power and identity are inscribed in language and recognising that all text is subject to interpretation. Ghafar (2023) argues that studying discourse in language education promotes critical insights into the relationship between language, society, ideology, and social structure. Similarly, Cotterill (2002) demonstrated that language, in a legal context, is central to interpretation and authority. These points are particularly relevant to contemporary education, given the increasing number of false or biased communications and pervasive instances of cyberbullying and other problematic online exchanges, all of which will be more common in the discourse analysis classroom, where critical awareness can be explicitly fostered.

Digital Discourse analysis has thus proven to be an area for much successful pedagogical exploration. Within the context of digital discourse, students encounter a plethora of abbreviated language and stylistic devices, indirect meanings, and socially complex constructions of selfhood. Jain et al. (2024) note that forensic linguistics analysis focuses on understanding patterns in digital discourse to ascertain Authorship and communicative intent.

Therefore, the pedagogical value of applying forensic linguistic tools to digital discourse seems evident. By allowing students to analyse online communication linguistically, students may be more inclined to question authorship and critically analyse intended and inferred meaning, and be able to analyse what is being said in digital contexts effectively. Adyatna, Juliari, and Putra (2025) noted that technology-enhanced language learning provides an avenue to connect language learning knowledge with pedagogical practices through interaction with genuine language and communication, with students interacting critically with their communication, thus fostering critical literacy. Malik et al. (2024) stated that recent Forensic linguistic analysis research predominantly focuses on systematic pattern detection using machine learning in the analysis of online discourse to discern communicative intention.

Pedagogical Applications in ELT

By applying forensic linguistics to ELT, teachers are not necessarily encouraged to turn classrooms into legal clinics. Instead, some pedagogical techniques can be modified and used in communication and inquiry-based language activities that involve the four skills and promote critical thinking. Table 1 below provides a structured overview of these applications, highlighting their core focus, targeted language skills, and key pedagogical benefits.

Table 1 Forensic-Inspired Pedagogical Applications in ELT

Application	Sample Classroom Activity	Targeted Language Skills	Key Pedagogical Benefits
Authorship Analysis	Comparing anonymous texts (e.g., emails, social media comments, diary entries) to identify stylistic, lexical, and syntactic patterns	Reading, Writing	Enhances close reading, stylistic awareness, audience awareness, register, and textual coherence
Ambiguity & Interpretation	Analysing pragmatically unclear sentences (e.g., “Employees must report incidents immediately”) to explore multiple contextual meanings	Reading, Speaking, Pragmatic Competence	Develops precision, contextual awareness, and advanced comprehension; mirrors real-world communication challenges
Digital Discourse Analysis	Evaluating fabricated online posts or messages for tone, sarcasm, misinformation, and rhetorical strategies	Reading, Critical Thinking, Digital Literacy	Strengthens critical evaluation of digital content, increases relevance/engagement, and promotes ethical communication
Simulated Investigative Tasks	Collaborative case studies analysing witness statements, emails, or reports to reconstruct events and identify contradictions	Speaking, Writing, Collaboration, Critical Reasoning	Fosters evidence-based justification, problem-solving, and purposeful, communicative language use

Authorship analysis tasks

The first type of task is authorship analysis. These activities involve comparing a set of texts and having students identify language features connected to a writing style, including vocabulary, punctuation, and grammatical patterns. Learners analyse texts like emails, internet comments, diaries, or witness testimonies. For instance, students have to determine whether a series of anonymously written messages was written by one person. Throughout the activity, students reflect upon consistency in style, word repetition, tone, and sentence structure. The activities help students develop attention to language detail and careful reading.

Another benefit of authorship analysis tasks is developing writing skills. After seeing how certain features help identify authors and how language style communicates about identity and intent, students become more sensitive to their own writing practices. The task enhances the students' awareness of the audience, coherence and register.

Ambiguity and interpretation tasks

The analysis of ambiguous language is the second area where forensic language activities can be useful. The teacher presents a number of sentences with ambiguous meaning and asks students to generate as many possible interpretations as possible. Examples could be "Employees must report incidents immediately" or "Let him have it," and these utterances create a great opportunity for the students to explore the different interpretations depending on the context and communicative intention.

These activities are related to forensic linguistics in the sense that they touch upon a central problem in court-ambiguity may influence legal interpretation and ultimately the judgment given. Filipovic & Gascon (2018) observed that misunderstandings in a police interview may occur as a result of varying interpretations and differences in meaning as communicated by words, the speaker's intent, and context. In ELT contexts, these activities raise students' awareness of the need for precision and context dependency. The students pay more attention to word choice, sentence construction and how their language is perceived by an audience. The tasks are beneficial for developing pragmatic competence and advanced reading skills.

Digital discourse analysis

A further useful area for teaching forensic linguistics-style activities is digital communication. Teachers could present a number of fabricated posts on the

Internet (such as on social networking sites), emails, or text messages that contain ambiguity, mis/disinformation, hidden meaning, or a certain pragmatic effect, and ask students to analyse tone, communicative intent, or the ethical dimension of the discourse. For example, students compare two posts on the same topic that present different stances and attitudes because of specific linguistic choices. While working on the task, students discuss the function of the linguistic features they are analysing.

These tasks raise students' awareness of the critical analysis of digital communication, and they learn to approach it not as a transparent, value-free communication channel. Digital discourse analysis can also bring relevance into the classroom and enhance motivation and engagement, as students encounter this kind of communication regularly.

Simulated investigative tasks

Investigative tasks that mimic real situations and allow for a combination of language skills in group work may also be adopted. Teachers can draw inspiration from existing forensic intelligence training materials and design a simplified investigation task with a set of clues such as witness statements, emails or reports, which will then serve as a source of language data for students. Students would then work collaboratively to gather linguistic evidence and piece together a coherent story to reconstruct events. While doing so, they negotiate their interpretations, summarise information, and report their findings in speech or writing.

These activities would contribute to the enhancement of students' communicative competence by requiring them to justify their interpretations with evidence from the text. They would promote students' problem-solving skills and encourage critical thinking. The main value of these activities is to shift learners' perception of language learning from an end in itself to a tool for active, purposeful discovery.

Ethical awareness and responsibility regarding language

An added benefit of Forensic linguistics activities is the development of the students' ethical awareness. Students learn how language choices might impact other people's interpretation, how one can be less/more credible and what the social consequences of particular language use may be. Misinformation, linguistic manipulation or biased communication are common themes that would lead to reflection on responsible language use.

Cotterill (2002) suggests that language itself is constitutive of power and institutional relations and that the courtroom is one such institution where the power of language has a significant bearing on how meanings are negotiated and actions performed. Thus, it makes sense to increase the awareness of the social function and impact of language in ELT classrooms.

In today's highly globalised and digitalised world, this awareness is particularly important. Students have to navigate communication settings that influence public opinion, individual identities and social interactions. Forensic language approaches help raise students' language proficiency as well as their responsible participation in society.

DISCUSSION

In ELT, incorporating forensic linguistics into the classroom has various significant benefits. To begin with, forensic-style activities promote an active role in learning. Unlike traditional grammar-focused drills where students are given language input they will learn later on, investigation tasks require active listening, analysis and prediction. Instead of being passive recipients, learners become active agents-investigators who need to find clues and piece them together. Secondly, forensic linguistic activities foster critical literacy. Language learners are forced to analyse how meanings are conveyed through different linguistic choices, contextual interpretation and communicative purposes. These skills are vital to deal with information from various sources online today, which often involves manipulation and persuasive intent. Thirdly, forensic approaches lend themselves well to an authentic use of language. Most classroom activities have failed to address the authentic use of language by basing activities on artificial textbook dialogues which bear no relation to real-life communication. The use of authentic or semi-authentic material, such as e-mails, instant messages and witness testimonies, in forensic linguistic tasks promotes learner motivation and offers a genuine learning environment. Fourthly, forensic activities promote cooperative learning. Investigating cases and testing theories requires the negotiation of meanings and evaluation of hypotheses with other students, thus following principles of communicative language teaching.

Despite the merits above, there are some practical concerns to address:

1. A lack of familiarity with forensic linguistic concepts requires the provision of staff training

and instructional support,

2. the selection of appropriate materials that are suitable for learners' age, language level and cultural backgrounds must be carefully planned.
3. Constraints such as 'time available' may also affect the choice of activities since 'inquiry-based tasks may demand more interactive time and more preparatory work than traditional tasks'.
4. The teaching context will have to decide on and be prepared to adopt adaptable frameworks for integrating forensic activities.
5. Lastly, ethical issues should also be given serious consideration since the material may well involve 'graphic and morbid content which may not be suitable for young students'.

Teachers need to ensure that the lessons are focused on linguistic and critical reasoning rather than sensationalism. However, these shortcomings do not outweigh the value of integrating forensic language studies in English language teaching. Forensic style activities can be particularly stimulating when designed in an appropriate way and in such a manner that students will realise that language is not a static concept to be mastered but, rather, a dynamic means of effective communication.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the use of forensic linguistics in English Language Teaching. Through use of research on the forensic study of language, inquiry-based learning and critical literacy, the article has presented evidence that forensic methods could greatly enhance language teaching. It was shown how forensic linguistic tasks (e.g., analysis of authorship; analysis of ambiguity; analysis of digital discourse; hypothetical investigations) can develop learners' ability in reading, their understanding of writing; how they can foster critical thinking and develop digital literacy; and how they can promote the understanding of language not merely as a linguistic system but as evidence that is socially produced and socially meaningful. The paper further highlighted the congruity of forensic forms of inquiry with the principles of communicative language teaching, explaining how inquiry is by nature interactive, interpretive and genuinely communicative. Such approaches can help raise learners' ethical consciousness by allowing them to observe how communication impacts meaning and social interaction. Although this article has presented theoretical insights, it lays the groundwork for

research and pedagogical experiments in the future. For instance, the effect that these forensic activities can have on the development of learner motivation, writing ability or critical literacy, and digital communication awareness can be explored more extensively in future empirical studies in various learning settings. Ultimately, forensic linguistics presents ELT educators with a subject that connects linguistics theory to communication in the real world. In an age where digital discourse and complex information streams are pervasive, developing our learners' critical awareness of language should perhaps be the most crucial aspect of their learning.

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