Innovative Research Journal of Sociology and Humanities

ISSN(print 3050-6867, ISSN(online): 3050-6875

Volume 03 Issue 02 February 2026

DOI: 10.58806/irijsh.2026.v3i2n06

Page No: 112 - 122

Enhancing Critical and Creative Thinking Skills of Pre-Service Teachers Through Drama Integration in ELT Within the 21st Century Learning Framework

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ABSTRACT

Integrating drama into English Language Teaching (ELT) has gained growing attention as a pedagogical approach aligned with 21st-century learning frameworks that emphasize critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration. However, limited research has explored how drama-based pedagogy shapes the cognitive and professional development of pre-service English teachers. This study examines how integrating drama-based activities into an ELT elective course influences pre-service teachers' critical thinking, creative thinking, pedagogical awareness, and reflective capacities. Adopting a qualitative single-case study design, the research was conducted with 32 second-year pre-service ELT teachers enrolled in a "Drama in ELT" elective course at a foundation university in Istanbul, Türkiye, over eight weeks. Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured focus group interviews with ten purposively selected participants. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed four themes: enhanced critical thinking, development of creative thinking, increased pedagogical awareness and empathy, and strengthened reflective thinking and professional identity. Participants demonstrated improved reasoning, greater imaginative flexibility, heightened sensitivity to learner-centered practices, and deeper metacognitive reflection. The study concludes that drama functions as a transformative pedagogical tool that supports holistic teacher development and the integration of 21st-century skills in ELT teacher education.

ARTICLE DETAILS

Published On:
18 February 2026

Available on:
https://irijsh.com/

KEYWORDS: Drama in ELT, critical thinking, creative thinking, pre-service teachers, 21st-century skills, qualitative case study.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapidly evolving social, technological, and economic landscape of the twenty-first century has fundamentally transformed expectations from education systems and teacher preparation programs. Contemporary educational paradigms increasingly prioritize learner agency, reflective inquiry, and higher-order thinking over rote memorization and transmission-based instruction. Within this shift, international policy frameworks such as the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21) highlight critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration—the 4Cs as essential competencies for educators and learners alike (Trilling & Fadel, 2009; P21, 2019). Similarly, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Education 2030 framework emphasizes transformative competencies, including critical reflection, ethical reasoning, and innovative problem-solving, as key attributes for navigating complex global challenges (Howells, 2018). These perspectives position teachers not merely as knowledge transmitters but as facilitators of intellectual, social, and creative development.

Within this broader educational transformation, English Language Teaching (ELT) occupies a distinctive and strategic role. Language learning is inherently interactive, dialogic, and context-dependent, making it a fertile space for cultivating 21st-century skills. However, in many contexts, including Türkiye, traditional ELT practices have historically emphasized grammatical accuracy, standardized testing, and teacher-centered pedagogy at the expense of critical inquiry and creative expression (Külekçi, 2025). This tension between policy aspirations and classroom realities raises important questions about whether pre-service English teachers are sufficiently prepared to enact learner-centered, reflective, and innovation-oriented teaching practices (Bedir, 2019).

In response to these challenges, drama-based pedagogy has emerged as a promising approach for bridging cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of learning in teacher education. Grounded in sociocultural theory, drama positions learning as a socially mediated

process in which meaning is co-constructed through dialogue, interaction, and shared activity (Vygotsky, 1978). Likewise, experiential learning theory suggests that knowledge is deepened through concrete experience, reflective observation, and active experimentation—processes that are central to drama-based instruction (Kolb, 1984). By engaging learners in role-play, improvisation, and collaborative performance, drama situates language use within authentic communicative contexts that require real-time negotiation of meaning, perspective-taking, and creative problem-solving (Kao & O'Neill, 1998).

Empirical research indicates that drama not only supports linguistic development but also fosters broader cognitive and socio-emotional growth. Studies have demonstrated that drama-based activities enhance learner motivation, engagement, and communicative confidence while promoting empathy and collaborative competence (Winston, 2012; Schewe, 2013). More recently, experimental research outside ELT contexts has shown that structured creative drama can significantly improve critical thinking skills and dispositions, particularly in areas such as analysis, inference, and open-minded reasoning (Saçlı Uzunöz & Demirhan, 2017). These findings suggest that drama functions as more than a pedagogical technique; it operates as a cognitively stimulating environment that integrates reasoning, imagination, and embodied meaning-making.

In parallel, scholarship on creativity underscores its centrality to twenty-first century education. Creativity is increasingly conceptualized not as an innate talent but as a developable capacity involving divergent thinking, flexibility, originality, and reflective evaluation (Runco, 2004). Within teacher education, fostering creativity is crucial, as teachers' own creative dispositions directly influence their instructional choices and their ability to design engaging, innovative learning experiences. Drama-based pedagogy offers a particularly fertile space for cultivating creative thinking by encouraging experimentation, risk-taking, and imaginative exploration in low-stakes, collaborative settings.

Despite these theoretical and empirical advances, significant gaps remain in the literature. First, much of the existing research on drama in language education has focused primarily on young learners, with comparatively limited attention to pre-service English teachers. Second, while several studies have explored teachers' attitudes toward drama or its impact on general pedagogical skills, few investigations explicitly examine how drama integration in ELT shapes both critical and creative thinking within a clearly articulated 21st-century learning framework. This represents a notable omission, given that teachers' cognitive dispositions and beliefs play a decisive role in shaping classroom practices and educational outcomes (Facione, 2011).

To address this gap, the present study examines the integration of drama-based activities within a Drama in ELT elective course and explores how this experience influences pre-service English teachers' critical thinking, creative thinking, and reflective pedagogical awareness. Situated within the P21 21st-century learning framework, this research conceptualizes drama not simply as a language teaching method but as a transformative pedagogical tool that supports the development of reflective, creative, and critically engaged English teachers prepared for the complexities of contemporary education.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

Grounded in the P21 21st-century learning framework, which foregrounds critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration as core competencies for contemporary educators, this study aims to investigate how the integration of drama-based pedagogy into an ELT elective course contributes to the cognitive, professional, and reflective development of pre-service English teachers.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

- Examine how participation in drama-based learning experiences influences pre-service teachers' critical reasoning, analytical thinking, and problem-solving abilities, particularly in relation to classroom decision-making, perspective-taking, and pedagogical judgment. (Aligned with P21: Critical Thinking & Problem Solving)
- Explore the ways in which drama-based activities foster creative thinking, imaginative expression, and spontaneous language use, enabling pre-service teachers to design and enact more innovative, flexible, and learner-centered instructional practices. (Aligned with P21: Creativity & Innovation)
- Investigate how sustained engagement in drama-based ELT practices shapes pre-service teachers' professional identity formation, including their self-perceptions as reflective, confident, and collaborative educators within a 21st-century learning paradigm. (Aligned with P21: Communication & Collaboration)
- Analyze how drama-based experiences inform and transform pre-service teachers' reflective practices and learner-centered teaching beliefs, particularly in relation to classroom interaction, inclusive pedagogy, and collaborative learning environments. (Aligned with P21: Metacognition & Collaboration)

Methodologically, this purpose is pursued through a single-case qualitative study centered on a cohort of pre-service teachers enrolled in a Drama in ELT elective course. Data were generated through open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured focus-group interviews, allowing for an in-depth exploration of participants' evolving understandings of critical and creative thinking, professional identity, and reflective pedagogy within a drama-integrated ELT context.

By integrating the P21 framework with experiential drama pedagogy and qualitative inquiry, this study seeks to conceptualize drama not merely as a language teaching technique, but as a transformative professional learning tool that prepares pre-service English teachers to enact 21st-century pedagogical principles in diverse and dynamic classroom settings.

1.2 Research Questions

1. How does drama integration in ELT influence pre-service teachers' critical thinking skills?
2. In what ways does drama-based pedagogy enhance pre-service teachers' creative thinking abilities?
3. How do pre-service teachers perceive the role of drama in their professional development?
4. How does participation in drama-based activities shape their reflective teaching practices?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Drama in ELT and Experiential Learning

Drama-based pedagogy in language education is strongly grounded in experiential learning theory, which conceptualizes learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 2014). Within this framework, drama offers learners opportunities to experience language in meaningful contexts, reflect on communicative interactions, conceptualize linguistic and social meanings, and apply new understandings through subsequent performance or dialogue (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). In ELT settings, this experiential cycle becomes particularly powerful because language is learned not as isolated rules but as socially situated action.

Process drama, in particular, has been widely recognized as a pedagogical approach that aligns with experiential and sociocultural perspectives on language learning. By engaging learners in improvised role-play, narrative building, and collaborative meaning-making, process drama creates immersive communicative environments in which participants must negotiate meaning, assume different perspectives, and respond spontaneously to evolving scenarios (Kao & O'Neill, 1998). This mode of learning mirrors real-life communication, where meaning is co-constructed through interaction rather than transmitted unidirectionally from teacher to student.

Empirical studies in applied linguistics suggest that drama-based instruction supports both linguistic and cognitive development. Liu (2002) found that drama activities foster greater learner engagement and deeper linguistic processing by encouraging learners to connect language with emotion, movement, and context. Similarly, Schewe (2013) argues that drama enables learners to inhabit multiple identities and voices, which expands their pragmatic awareness and interactional competence in the target language. Such findings indicate that drama does not merely enhance fluency but also cultivates metalinguistic and metacommunicative awareness.

From a sociocultural perspective, drama can be viewed as a mediated activity that facilitates learning through social interaction and shared meaning-making. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is particularly relevant here, as collaborative drama tasks allow more capable peers or the teacher to scaffold learners' language use and critical reasoning in real time. Drama facilitates dialogic engagement, collaborative meaning-making, and shared problem-solving. Similarly, Gardner's (1999) theory of multiple intelligences suggests that drama activates linguistic, interpersonal, kinesthetic, and emotional domains, supporting holistic learning. Furthermore, through guided improvisation and collective problem-solving, participants gradually internalize new linguistic and cognitive strategies that they can later deploy independently (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Arts-based pedagogy, including drama, has also been linked to holistic learning that integrates cognitive, affective, and aesthetic dimensions of development. Fleming (2018) emphasizes that drama encourages learners to engage intellectually, emotionally, and physically with content, fostering deeper understanding and personal investment in learning. In ELT contexts, this holistic engagement is particularly valuable because affective factors such as anxiety, motivation, and confidence strongly influence language acquisition and classroom participation (Dörnyei, 2014).

Moreover, recent scholarship highlights the role of embodied cognition in language learning, suggesting that meaning is not only processed mentally but also enacted through gesture, movement, and spatial interaction. Drama-based activities inherently incorporate embodiment, allowing learners to connect linguistic expressions with physical action, emotional stance, and social positioning (Piazzoli, 2011). This embodied dimension enriches comprehension, memory, and communicative authenticity, making drama a pedagogically robust approach in ELT.

Taken together, the literature suggests that drama-based pedagogy aligns closely with experiential, sociocultural, and embodied theories of learning. By situating language use within meaningful, interactive, and reflective contexts, drama not only supports linguistic development but also fosters critical engagement, creative exploration, and collaborative learning—competencies that are central to twenty-first century education and teacher preparation.

2.2 Drama and Critical Thinking in Teacher Education

Critical thinking is widely recognized as a core competency for effective teaching in the twenty-first century, as educators are expected to analyze complex classroom situations, evaluate evidence, and make informed pedagogical decisions in dynamic contexts

(Facione, 2011). In teacher education, the development of critical thinking extends beyond subject knowledge to include reflective judgment, ethical reasoning, and the ability to interpret multiple perspectives in instructional settings (Ennis, 2018). However, traditional lecture-based teacher preparation programs often provide limited opportunities for pre-service teachers to engage in authentic, interactive problem-solving that requires deep reasoning and collaborative negotiation.

Drama-based pedagogy has been increasingly positioned as a powerful medium for fostering critical thinking in educational settings. Creative drama requires participants to interpret situations, assume roles, justify actions, and anticipate consequences within evolving narratives, thereby activating higher-order cognitive processes (Bolton, 1995). Through improvisation and role negotiation, learners must analyze social relationships, evaluate alternative viewpoints, and construct coherent responses in real time, which aligns closely with conceptual models of critical reasoning (Bailin & Siegel, 2003).

Empirical studies have demonstrated that structured drama experiences can significantly enhance critical thinking skills and dispositions among pre-service teachers. Saçlı Uzunöz and Demirhan (2017), for example, found that creative drama training led to measurable improvements in critical thinking abilities—particularly in analysis, inference, and open-minded reasoning—among pre-service physical education teachers. Their findings suggest that drama facilitates not only cognitive skill development but also a disposition toward reflective, evidence-based judgment.

Within language teacher education specifically, drama has been shown to support critical engagement by encouraging pre-service teachers to question assumptions about language use, classroom power relations, and learner diversity (Winston, 2012). By embodying different roles and perspectives, teachers-in-training become more attuned to issues of equity, communication barriers, and cultural responsiveness, all of which are integral to critical pedagogy in ELT (Crookes, 2013). Collectively, this body of research indicates that drama-based pedagogy can function as a catalytic space for critical inquiry in teacher education, enabling pre-service teachers to integrate cognitive reasoning with emotional and social awareness in pedagogically meaningful ways.

2.3 Drama and Creative Thinking in ELT

Creativity is increasingly conceptualized as a dynamic, developable capacity rather than an innate talent, encompassing divergent thinking, originality, flexibility, and reflective evaluation (Runco, 2004). In educational contexts, creative thinking is not limited to artistic expression but involves the ability to generate novel ideas, adapt strategies to new problems, and design innovative learning experiences (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). For language teachers, creativity is particularly significant, as it shapes how they design tasks, scaffold interaction, and respond to unpredictable classroom situations.

Drama-based pedagogy offers a fertile environment for cultivating creative thinking because it inherently values experimentation, risk-taking, and imaginative exploration. Through improvisation, role-play, and narrative construction, learners are encouraged to move beyond conventional patterns of thought and explore multiple interpretations of meaning (Fleming, 2018). This process aligns with Torrance's (1995) dimensions of creativity—fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration—by requiring participants to generate diverse responses and refine ideas through interaction.

In ELT, drama has been shown to stimulate spontaneous language use, creative expression, and communicative authenticity. Kao and O'Neill (1998) argue that process drama enables learners to inhabit alternative identities and construct meaning through imaginative engagement, which deepens both linguistic competence and creative awareness. Similarly, Schewe (2013) highlights that drama expands learners' pragmatic and interactional repertoires by encouraging playful experimentation with language forms and social meanings.

For pre-service teachers, engagement in drama-based ELT activities can also shape their pedagogical creativity. Research suggests that teachers who experience drama are more likely to design learner-centered, multimodal, and innovative instructional practices in their future classrooms (Baykal et al., 2019). By modeling creativity through embodied performance, pre-service teachers develop greater confidence in experimenting with novel teaching strategies rather than relying solely on textbook-driven instruction.

Overall, drama-based pedagogy supports the development of creative thinking by integrating imagination, embodiment, and collaborative meaning-making—elements that are essential for innovative language teaching in contemporary educational contexts.

2.4 21st-Century Skills, Drama, and Pre-Service Teacher Development

The integration of 21st-century skills into teacher education has become a central concern in global educational reform agendas. Frameworks such as P21 emphasize that effective teachers must not only understand critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration but also be capable of embedding these competencies into their instructional practices (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Similarly, the OECD Education 2030 framework underscores the need for teachers who can foster adaptability, ethical reasoning, and collaborative problem-solving in diverse learning environments (Howells, 2018).

However, research suggests that many pre-service teachers tend to conceptualize 21st-century learning primarily in terms of technology use rather than pedagogical transformation (Bedir, 2019; Külekçi, 2025). This misinterpretation highlights the need for experiential, practice-based approaches that enable teachers to internalize these competencies through lived experience rather than abstract discussion.

Drama-based pedagogy aligns closely with the 4Cs framework by simultaneously engaging learners in critical reasoning, creative exploration, communicative interaction, and collaborative problem-solving. Studies indicate that drama fosters meaningful communication by requiring participants to negotiate roles, clarify intentions, and co-construct narratives within shared contexts (Winston, 2012). At the same time, it promotes collaboration through ensemble work, peer feedback, and collective reflection (Kao & O'Neill, 1998).

In teacher education, drama has also been linked to professional identity development. Doğan (2017) found that creative drama training enhanced pre-service English teachers' metacognitive awareness, reflective capacity, and classroom presence, suggesting that drama contributes to both cognitive and professional growth. Similarly, Ulubey and Aykaç (2016) demonstrated that drama-based human rights education strengthened empathy, democratic attitudes, and ethical awareness among pre-service teachers, highlighting its broader social impact.

Taken together, the literature suggests that drama-based pedagogy offers a comprehensive framework for integrating 21st-century skills into ELT teacher education. By merging experiential learning, critical inquiry, creative expression, and collaborative engagement, drama supports the holistic development of reflective, innovative, and socially responsive English teachers.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design, which is suitable for investigating complex educational phenomena within their real-life context and for capturing participants' subjective meanings, interpretations, and lived experiences (Yin, 2018; Stake, 1995). A case study approach was selected because the research aimed to explore in depth how drama-based pedagogy influenced pre-service teachers' critical thinking, creative thinking, and reflective awareness within a specific instructional setting rather than to generalize statistically to a larger population.

The "case" in this study was defined as a cohort of pre-service English teachers enrolled in a Drama in ELT elective course at a foundation university in Istanbul. By focusing on a bounded system—one course, one cohort, and one instructional context the study enabled a rich, contextualized understanding of participants' cognitive and professional development over time (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

The design aligns with interpretivist qualitative inquiry, which assumes that knowledge is socially constructed through interaction, reflection, and meaning-making rather than objectively measured (Denzin, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Given that drama-based learning is inherently experiential, collaborative, and reflective, a qualitative case study was considered methodologically congruent with both the research questions and the pedagogical nature of the intervention.

3.2 Context and Participants

The study was conducted at a private foundation university in Istanbul, Türkiye, within the Department of English Language Teaching. Participants were 32 second-year pre-service ELT teachers (27 female, 5 male) enrolled in the "Drama in ELT" elective course during the fall semester. The course spanned eight weeks, with weekly two-hour sessions combining theoretical input, practical drama activities, and reflective discussion.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on course enrollment, which is appropriate in qualitative research when the aim is to select information-rich cases that can provide deep insight into the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2014). All participants had completed foundational linguistics and methodology courses prior to enrollment, ensuring a basic pedagogical background from which to engage critically with drama-based instruction.

The course was structured around process drama, improvisation, role-play, and collaborative performance tasks designed to stimulate interaction, perspective-taking, and reflective meaning-making. Activities included tableau work, role-in-the-wall, teacher-in-role, and improvisational dialogues. Each session concluded with guided reflection linking drama experiences to language teaching principles and 21st-century skills.

3.3 Data Collection Tools and Procedure

Data were collected in two sequential phases to ensure methodological triangulation, enhance interpretive depth, and capture both individual and collective dimensions of participants' experiences with drama-based pedagogy (Denzin, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2016). The instruments were designed to elicit reflective, experiential, and pedagogical insights rather than evaluative judgments.

Phase 1: Open-Ended Reflective Questionnaire

At the end of the eight-week Drama in ELT course, all 32 participants completed a structured open-ended questionnaire. The instrument was developed by the researchers in alignment with the study's research questions and the P21 21st-century learning framework. Open-ended formats were chosen to allow participants to articulate their experiences in their own words, thereby generating rich qualitative data and minimizing response constraint (Patton, 2014).

The questionnaire focused on participants' perceived development in four key domains: (a) critical thinking, (b) creative thinking, (c) communicative confidence, and (d) pedagogical orientation toward drama. Participants were encouraged to provide concrete examples from specific drama activities to strengthen analytic depth and authenticity of responses (Miles et al., 2014).

Sample prompts included:

1. How has participating in drama activities influenced your critical thinking?
2. In what ways has drama affected your creative thinking?
3. Describe a drama activity that challenged your thinking.
4. How has drama influenced your confidence in speaking English?
5. How would you integrate drama into your future teaching?

Completed questionnaires were anonymized and coded using unique participant identifiers to protect confidentiality.

Phase 2: Semi-Structured Focus Group Interviews

To deepen interpretation and capture the social dynamics of meaning-making, semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted following questionnaire analysis. Ten participants were purposively selected from among volunteers to ensure variation in classroom engagement, communicative confidence, and reflective depth in their written responses (Patton, 2014). This approach enabled the selection of information-rich cases rather than random sampling.

Two focus groups of five participants each were organized to encourage interaction, co-construction of meaning, and collective reflection. Interviews lasted approximately 60-75 minutes and were facilitated by one researcher while another took field notes on non-verbal communication and group dynamics (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

The interview protocol explored participants' lived experiences with drama, their evolving cognitive processes, and implications for future teaching. Sample guiding questions included:

1. How would you describe your overall experience in the Drama in ELT course?
2. Can you recall a moment when drama prompted critical reflection or problem-solving?
3. How did collaborative group work shape your creativity?
4. Do you feel more prepared to teach using drama? Why or why not?
5. What challenges did you encounter during drama activities?

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized prior to analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, incorporating iterative cycles of open, axial, and selective coding, consistent with qualitative grounded approaches to pattern identification (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Creswell & Poth, 2016). This analytic strategy enabled systematic organization of meaning while preserving participants' authentic voices.

Open coding involved line-by-line examination of transcripts and written responses to identify initial meaning units related to cognition, emotion, and pedagogy. During axial coding, these codes were compared, clustered, and refined into broader conceptual categories based on relationships and patterns across data sources. Finally, selective coding was used to integrate categories into four overarching themes aligned with the research questions:

1. Critical Thinking – evidence of reasoning, perspective-taking, and problem-solving
2. Creative Thinking – imagination, flexibility, and innovative idea generation
3. Pedagogical Awareness – beliefs about teaching, classroom interaction, and learner-centered practice
4. Reflective Thinking – metacognitive awareness and professional self-evaluation

To enhance credibility, two researchers engaged in collaborative coding and iterative discussion to resolve discrepancies and refine thematic boundaries. Representative quotations were selected to illustrate each theme, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participants' language (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An audit trail documenting analytic decisions was maintained to support dependability and confirmability.

4. FINDINGS

The thematic analysis yielded four interconnected themes that illustrate how drama-based pedagogy supported the development of pre-service teachers' cognitive, creative, communicative, and collaborative competencies in line with the P21 21st-century learning framework: (1) enhanced critical thinking, (2) development of creative thinking, (3) pedagogical awareness and empathy, and (4) reflective thinking and professional identity. These themes are presented below with representative participant excerpts.

Theme 1: Enhanced Critical Thinking (P21 Critical Thinking & Problem Solving): Participants reported that drama-based activities strengthened their ability to analyze situations, interpret multiple perspectives, and make reasoned decisions in unpredictable communicative contexts. Role-play and improvisation required them to think critically in real time, evaluate social meanings, and

justify their choices rather than rely on memorized language patterns. This process mirrors the P21 emphasis on problem-solving, reasoning, and evaluative judgment.

One participant explained:

"While doing role-play, I had to quickly think of what to say, how to respond, and why my character would act that way. It really made me think more deeply about communication and meaning." (Questionnaire, P4)

This response suggests that drama positioned language learning as a form of situated problem-solving, where meaning had to be constructed through interpretation, negotiation, and ethical reasoning. Rather than treating language as isolated grammar, participants engaged in critical dialogue, perspective-taking, and analytical decision-making, which are central components of 21st-century critical thinking competence.

These findings indicate that drama-based ELT activities can function as a practical training space where pre-service teachers practice the cognitive processes they are expected to cultivate in their future classrooms.

Theme 2: Development of Creative Thinking (P21 Creativity & Innovation): Participants described increased imagination, originality, and willingness to experiment with language during drama tasks. Activities such as freeze-frame, storytelling, and improvisation encouraged them to move beyond conventional thinking patterns and explore multiple possible meanings and expressions. This aligns closely with the P21 view of creativity as the ability to generate novel ideas, take intellectual risks, and adapt flexibly to new situations.

One participant noted:

"The freeze-frame and storytelling tasks were so different from anything I've done. I learned to think outside the box and express ideas without fear of making mistakes." (Focus Group, P7)

This statement reflects the development of creative confidence, a key 21st-century competence. Participants began to see mistakes not as failure but as part of the learning and meaning-making process. Drama thus functioned as a safe experimental space where linguistic and pedagogical creativity could emerge.

Furthermore, creative thinking was not limited to artistic expression; it also involved innovative pedagogical imagination, as participants began to envision how they might design interactive, multimodal, and learner-centered activities in their own future classrooms.

Theme 3: Pedagogical Awareness and Empathy (P21 Communication & Collaboration): Drama heightened participants' sensitivity to inclusive, learner-centered teaching and the social dimensions of classroom interaction. Through role-taking and collaborative performance, they developed greater awareness of how emotions, confidence, and participation shape learning. This reflects the P21 emphasis on effective communication, teamwork, and social responsibility.

One participant reflected:

"I realized how drama can help students who are shy or have low participation. They can express themselves more easily when they're in character." (Focus Group, P10)

This indicates that drama fostered empathic communication and an understanding of diverse learner needs. Participants began to view themselves less as authoritative transmitters of knowledge and more as facilitators of interaction, dialogue, and collaborative meaning-making.

Many pre-service teachers also emphasized that drama strengthened their ability to work in teams, listen actively, negotiate ideas, and co-construct learning including all core 21st-century collaborative skills.

Theme 4: Reflective Thinking and Professional Identity (P21 Metacognition & Lifelong Learning): Sustained engagement with drama encouraged participants to reflect on their beliefs, emotions, and emerging professional identities as teachers. Over time, they reported increased self-awareness, confidence, and professional agency including competencies closely linked to 21st-century reflective and adaptive learning.

One participant explained:

"At first, I was nervous and felt silly acting in front of my classmates. But after a few sessions, I felt free. Drama helped me enjoy learning and teaching again." (Questionnaire, P5)

This trajectory illustrates how drama supported metacognitive reflection — participants became more aware of their own learning processes, emotional responses, and pedagogical assumptions. Instead of viewing teaching as rigid technique, they began to conceptualize it as a dynamic, reflective, and creative profession.

Several participants noted that drama helped them imagine themselves as innovative, confident, and empathetic teachers, better prepared to design participatory, communicative, and student-centered classrooms aligned with 21st-century educational demands.

Table 1. Summary of Findings in Relation to 21st-Century Skills

Theme	Related 21st Century Skills (P21)	Evidence from Participants
Critical Thinking	Critical reasoning, problem-solving	Real-time decision-making in role-play
Creative Thinking	Innovation, flexibility	Imaginative storytelling and improvisation
Pedagogical Awareness	Communication & collaboration	Empathy, teamwork, inclusive teaching
Reflective Identity	Metacognition & lifelong learning	Self-awareness and professional confidence

Table 1 summarizes how each theme identified in the study aligns with key 21st-century skills from the P21 framework. The findings show that drama-based activities supported the development of critical thinking through real-time decision-making in role-play, fostered creative thinking through imaginative storytelling and improvisation, enhanced pedagogical awareness through collaboration and empathy, and strengthened reflective identity by promoting self-awareness and professional confidence among pre-service teachers.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that integrating drama-based pedagogy into an ELT teacher education course significantly contributed to the cognitive, creative, and professional development of pre-service English teachers within a 21st-century learning framework. The results indicate that drama did not function merely as an engaging classroom activity but operated as a transformative pedagogical approach that simultaneously fostered critical thinking, creative thinking, collaborative communication, and reflective professional identity—competencies central to contemporary educational paradigms (Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Howells, 2018).

With regard to critical thinking, participants reported that drama-based role-play and improvisation required them to analyze situations, interpret multiple perspectives, and make rapid, reasoned decisions in dynamic communicative contexts. This aligns with Saçlı Uzunöz and Demirhan's (2017) findings that creative drama enhances analytical reasoning, inference, and evaluative judgment among pre-service teachers. Similarly, O'Toole and Dunn (2002) argue that process drama engages learners in authentic problem-solving where meaning must be negotiated rather than memorized. In the present study, participants' reflections suggest that drama shifted their engagement from mechanical language use toward deeper interpretive reasoning, supporting claims that drama can function as a powerful medium for developing higher-order thinking in teacher education (Winston, 2012).

In relation to creative thinking, the study revealed that drama fostered imagination, originality, and willingness to experiment with language. Participants described feeling more comfortable taking risks, generating novel ideas, and thinking beyond conventional patterns. This resonates with Torrance's (1995) conceptualization of creativity as involving flexibility, fluency, and originality, as well as with Fleming's (2018) argument that arts-based pedagogy nurtures creative and aesthetic dimensions of learning. Moreover, Baykal et al. (2019) found that pre-service ELT teachers exposed to drama became more inclined to design innovative, interactive, and multimodal classroom activities, a pattern that also emerged in this study. Thus, drama appears to cultivate not only creative language use but also pedagogical creativity, preparing teachers to implement more dynamic and learner-centered practices.

The findings further indicate that drama enhanced pedagogical awareness and empathy, particularly in relation to shy or low-participation learners. By inhabiting different roles, participants developed greater sensitivity to students' emotional needs and communicative barriers. This supports Ulubey and Aykaç's (2016) research demonstrating that drama strengthens empathy, democratic attitudes, and social awareness among pre-service teachers. Similarly, Dörnyei (2005) emphasizes that psychological safety and reduced anxiety are crucial for successful language learning; drama, as observed in this study, created a supportive environment where learners felt more comfortable expressing themselves. Participants' shift toward viewing themselves as facilitators rather than authoritative transmitters of knowledge aligns with constructivist perspectives on collaborative learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

In terms of reflective thinking and professional identity, participants reported a transformation from initial discomfort to confidence and professional agency. This mirrors Horasan Doğan's (2017) findings that creative drama enhances metacognitive awareness and self-efficacy among pre-service English teachers. Schön's (1983) concept of the reflective practitioner is also evident here, as participants began to critically evaluate their own beliefs, emotions, and teaching approaches through embodied experience and dialogue. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) argue that teacher identity develops through lived experience, interaction, and reflection

rather than abstract coursework alone; the present study supports this claim by demonstrating how drama enabled participants to reconstruct their professional self-concept in more confident, empathetic, and innovative ways.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings can be interpreted through both sociocultural and experiential learning lenses. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory suggests that learning occurs through mediated social interaction; in this study, collaborative drama activities functioned as scaffolding within participants' zone of proximal development, enabling them to internalize new cognitive and pedagogical strategies (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Similarly, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle—experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application was clearly reflected in the structure of the drama course, where participants engaged in performance, reflected on their actions, conceptualized teaching implications, and envisioned future classroom applications.

Furthermore, the embodied nature of drama aligns with contemporary perspectives on embodied cognition, which argue that learning is distributed across mind, body, and environment rather than confined to abstract reasoning alone (Piazzoli, 2011). Participants' engagement through movement, emotion, and interaction appeared to deepen memory, meaning-making, and communicative authenticity, reinforcing the value of drama as a holistic pedagogical tool in ELT teacher education.

Overall, the findings suggest that drama-based pedagogy offers a coherent and effective pathway for integrating 21st-century skills into pre-service teacher education. By simultaneously cultivating critical reasoning, creative imagination, collaborative communication, and reflective professional identity, drama bridges the gap between policy rhetoric and classroom practice in ELT. Rather than treating 21st-century competencies as add-ons, drama embeds them organically within lived pedagogical experience.

This study therefore contributes to the growing body of literature advocating for experiential, arts-based, and learner-centered approaches in language teacher education. It also extends prior research by demonstrating that drama not only benefits young learners but plays a crucial role in shaping the cognitive and professional dispositions of future English teachers.

In conclusion, this study showed that integrating drama into ELT teacher education positively influenced pre-service teachers' critical thinking, creative thinking, and reflective awareness within a 21st-century learning framework. Drama fostered analytical reasoning, imaginative expression, collaboration, and empathy while strengthening participants' confidence and emerging professional identities. The findings suggest that drama should be systematically integrated into ELT teacher education as an effective pedagogical tool for preparing reflective, creative, and critically engaged teachers.

6. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study has several limitations. The sample size was limited to 32 pre-service teachers from a single institution, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. The absence of a control group prevents strong causal claims about the impact of drama-based pedagogy. In addition, the reliance on self-reported data may have introduced subjectivity, and the eight-week duration of the study may not fully capture long-term effects on teaching practice.

Future research should employ mixed-method or longitudinal designs to examine the sustained impact of drama-based pedagogy. Studies including pre- and post-tests of critical and creative thinking would strengthen empirical evidence. Expanding research across multiple universities and comparing drama-based ELT with traditional instructional approaches would enhance transferability. Finally, integrating reflective journals, classroom observations, and action research could provide deeper insights into how pre-service teachers implement drama in real teaching contexts.

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