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# From Critical Reading to Critical Teacherhood: Exploring the Development of Critical Literacy and Professional Identity in ELT Teacher Education

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**ABSTRACT**

Critical literacy has gained increasing attention in language teacher education due to its potential to foster analytical thinking, reflective learning, and professional growth. However, limited research has examined how critical reading and writing experiences contribute simultaneously to critical literacy development, teacher cognition, and professional identity formation among pre-service English teachers. This qualitative case study explored the experiences of pre-service English teachers enrolled in a Critical Reading and Writing course within an English Language Teaching (ELT) program. The study was conducted with 56 second-year pre-service teachers and adopted an interpretivist approach. Data were collected through reflective journals, focus group interviews, and classroom observations over a fourteen-week semester and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings revealed five interconnected themes: (1) a shift from passive reading to critical engagement, (2) the development of analytical and evidence-based writing, (3) reflective meaning-making and perspective TRANSFORMATION, (4) challenges in practicing critical literacy, and (5) the emergence of a critical language teacher identity. Participants reported becoming more analytical readers and writers, demonstrating greater awareness of diverse perspectives and more reflective understandings of teaching and learning. Although they experienced difficulties related to uncertainty, argumentation, and competing viewpoints, these challenges were generally perceived as valuable learning opportunities. The findings further suggest that engagement with critical literacy practices contributed to the development of teacher cognition and supported the construction of emerging professional identities. The study concludes that Critical Reading and Writing courses can serve as transformative pedagogical spaces that promote critical awareness, reflective professional learning, and identity development in ELT teacher education. The findings highlight the value of integrating critical literacy practices into teacher education programs to support the preparation of reflective and critically informed language teachers.

**KEYWORDS:** critical literacy; critical reading and writing; teacher cognition; professional identity; ELT teacher education.

**ARTICLE DETAILS**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary educational contexts characterized by rapid technological, social, and cultural change, literacy has evolved beyond the ability to decode and comprehend written texts. Individuals are increasingly expected to evaluate information critically, recognize multiple perspectives, question assumptions, and construct informed responses within complex communicative environments. Consequently, educational systems have placed growing emphasis on higher-order thinking skills and critical literacy practices that enable learners to engage actively with knowledge rather than merely consume information (Janks, 2009; Luke, 2012). This shift has particular significance in language education, where reading and writing are increasingly understood as socially situated practices through which learners interpret, negotiate, and construct meaning.

Within English Language Teaching (ELT), critical literacy has emerged as an influential pedagogical orientation grounded in the view that language is closely connected to social, cultural, and ideological processes. Drawing largely on Freire's (2000) work, critical literacy encourages learners to move beyond surface-level comprehension and examine how texts position readers, represent particular viewpoints, and shape understandings of reality. Rather than treating texts as neutral sources of information, learners are encouraged to question whose voices are amplified, whose perspectives are marginalized, and how meanings are produced through language (Freire & Macedo, 2005; Janks, 2009). Through such engagement, learners develop the capacity to analyze, evaluate, and respond critically to the world around them.

The importance of critical literacy extends beyond language learning and is particularly relevant within teacher education. Pre-service teachers are expected not only to develop their own critical literacy skills but also to cultivate learning environments that encourage inquiry, reflection, and critical thinking. As future educators, they play a significant role in helping learners engage thoughtfully with diverse perspectives and complex social realities. Therefore, teacher education programs have increasingly been called upon to foster reflective, analytical, and socially responsive professionals who can critically examine educational practices and make informed pedagogical decisions (Crookes, 2013; Hawkins & Norton, 2009).

The development of critical literacy can also be understood through a sociocultural lens. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning occurs through social interaction and participation in culturally mediated activities. Reading and writing are therefore not merely individual cognitive processes but collaborative practices shaped through dialogue, reflection, and interaction with others. Classroom discussions, reflective writing tasks, and collaborative meaning-making activities can provide important opportunities for learners to engage with multiple viewpoints and develop deeper understandings of texts and ideas. Such experiences may support not only critical literacy development but also broader processes of professional learning.

In teacher education, these experiences are closely connected to teacher cognition and professional identity development. Teacher cognition encompasses the beliefs, knowledge, and assumptions that influence how teachers understand teaching and learning (Borg, 2003). Engagement with critical reading and writing tasks may encourage pre-service teachers to reconsider existing beliefs, develop greater pedagogical awareness, and construct new understandings of their future professional roles. Similarly, professional identity is increasingly viewed as a dynamic and evolving process shaped through reflection, interaction, and educational experiences (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004). Critical literacy practices may therefore function not only as academic activities but also as transformative experiences that contribute to how future teachers perceive themselves and their responsibilities as educators.

Despite growing interest in critical literacy within language education, relatively limited research has examined how critical reading and writing experiences contribute simultaneously to critical literacy development, teacher cognition, and professional identity formation in ELT teacher education contexts. Existing studies have often focused on language skills, classroom practices, or critical awareness in general educational settings, while fewer have explored these processes within dedicated Critical Reading and Writing courses designed for pre-service English teachers. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the experiences of pre-service English teachers enrolled in a Critical Reading and Writing course within an ELT program. Drawing on Freirean critical literacy, Vygotskian sociocultural theory, and teacher cognition research, the study conceptualizes critical literacy as a transformative pedagogical process through which future teachers engage critically with texts, reflect upon their beliefs, and develop emerging professional identities.

The purpose of this study is to explore how critical reading and writing practices implemented in a Critical Reading and Writing course contribute to pre-service English teachers' critical literacy development, teacher cognition, and emerging professional identities. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

**RQ1.** How do pre-service English teachers experience critical reading and writing practices in a Critical Reading and Writing course?

**RQ2.** How do these practices influence participants' critical literacy and analytical engagement with texts?

**RQ3.** What challenges do participants encounter while engaging in critical literacy practices?

**RQ4.** How do critical reading and writing experiences contribute to the development of participants' professional identities as future English language teachers?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Critical Literacy in Language Education

Critical literacy emerged from critical pedagogy and is most closely associated with the work of Freire (2000), who challenged traditional views of literacy as a purely technical skill. Rather than limiting literacy to reading and writing, Freire conceptualized it as a means through which individuals develop critical consciousness and examine the social realities that shape their lives. Freire and Macedo (2005) further argued that learners should be encouraged not only to read words but also to "read the world," critically interrogating the relationships among language, knowledge, and power.

Contemporary understandings of critical literacy extend these foundations by emphasizing the analysis of texts within broader social, cultural, and ideological contexts (Janks, 2009; Luke, 2012). From this perspective, texts are not viewed as neutral representations of reality but as socially constructed artifacts that reflect particular values, assumptions, and interests. Critical literacy therefore involves questioning how meanings are produced, whose perspectives are represented, and what social consequences particular discourses may generate. Such practices foster analytical thinking, informed judgment, and greater awareness of the complex relationship between language and society.

Within English language education, critical literacy has gained increasing prominence because language learning is inherently connected to issues of identity, culture, and power (Norton, 2013; Pennycook, 2021). By encouraging learners to critically examine texts, arguments, and discourses, critical literacy promotes learner agency and meaningful engagement with diverse perspectives. Consequently, it has become an important framework for preparing learners to participate thoughtfully in increasingly complex and information-rich societies.

### 2.2. A Sociocultural Perspective on Critical Literacy Development

The development of critical literacy can be further understood through sociocultural theory, which views learning as a socially mediated process situated within cultural and historical contexts. According to Vygotsky (1978), knowledge is constructed through interaction with others and through engagement with cultural tools that support cognitive development. Learning therefore occurs not in isolation but through participation in meaningful social practices.

From this perspective, literacy is not merely an individual cognitive skill but a socially situated activity shaped through dialogue, collaboration, and shared meaning-making (Lantolf, 2000). Classroom discussions, collaborative inquiry, peer interaction, and reflective dialogue provide opportunities for learners to encounter alternative viewpoints, negotiate interpretations, and develop more sophisticated understandings of texts and ideas. Through these interactions, learners gradually internalize new ways of thinking and reasoning.

Sociocultural approaches are particularly relevant in teacher education because they emphasize learning through participation and reflection. Johnson (2009) argues that teacher learning is fundamentally social and develops through engagement with authentic educational experiences. Accordingly, critical reading and writing activities may function as mediational tools that enable pre-service teachers to connect theoretical knowledge with personal experiences, critically examine educational issues, and construct new understandings of teaching and learning.

### 2.3. Teacher Cognition and Reflective Professional Learning

Teacher cognition provides an important lens for understanding how pre-service teachers interpret and respond to educational experiences. Defined as the beliefs, knowledge, assumptions, and thought processes that shape teachers' professional actions, teacher cognition plays a central role in instructional decision-making and pedagogical development (Borg, 2003). Research has consistently demonstrated that teachers' beliefs influence how they understand learning, evaluate educational practices, and approach classroom instruction.

Within teacher education, opportunities for reflection are considered essential for supporting professional growth. Reflective engagement encourages teacher candidates to examine assumptions, reconsider existing perspectives, and develop deeper understandings of educational practice (Schön, 1983; Zeichner & Liu, 2009). In language teacher education, reflective reading and writing activities have been shown to facilitate meaningful engagement with professional knowledge and support the development of critical perspectives on teaching and learning (Farrell, 2015).

Critical literacy practices may contribute to teacher cognition development because they require learners to evaluate evidence, analyze arguments, and consider multiple interpretations. Through sustained engagement with critical inquiry, pre-service teachers may refine their pedagogical beliefs, develop greater awareness of educational issues, and become more reflective in their understanding of language teaching. Such experiences can influence not only what future teachers know but also how they think about their roles as educators.

### 2.4. Professional Identity Development in ELT Teacher Education

Professional identity is increasingly conceptualized as a dynamic and evolving construct shaped by personal experiences, social interactions, and professional learning opportunities (Beijaard et al., 2004; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Rather than representing a fixed set of characteristics, teacher identity develops through continuous negotiation between individual beliefs, educational experiences, institutional expectations, and professional aspirations.

In ELT teacher education, identity formation is particularly significant because future teachers must navigate complex relationships among language, culture, pedagogy, and learner diversity (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). As pre-service teachers encounter new ideas and experiences, they continuously reconstruct their understandings of what it means to teach and learn languages. Educational experiences that encourage inquiry, reflection, and critical engagement may therefore play an important role in shaping professional identity development.

Recent scholarship suggests that critical literacy contributes to teacher identity formation by encouraging future educators to question assumptions, critically examine educational discourses, and reconsider the broader purposes of language education (Crookes, 2013; Hawkins & Norton, 2009). Through these processes, pre-service teachers may develop more reflective, socially aware, and pedagogically responsive professional identities. Such identities are particularly important in contemporary educational contexts, where teachers are increasingly expected to support learners' critical engagement with knowledge and society.

### 2.5. Research Gap and Conceptual Framework

Although previous research has highlighted the educational value of critical literacy, reflective learning, and professional identity development, these areas have often been examined separately. Existing studies have largely focused on critical literacy in language classrooms, reflective practice in teacher education, or professional identity formation as independent constructs. Comparatively limited attention has been given to how critical reading and writing experiences contribute simultaneously to critical literacy development, teacher cognition, and professional identity formation within dedicated ELT teacher education courses.

This gap is particularly evident in research examining Critical Reading and Writing courses designed for pre-service English teachers. Such courses provide unique opportunities for learners to engage critically with texts, reflect on educational issues, and construct emerging understandings of themselves as future professionals. However, relatively little is known about how these interconnected processes unfold within teacher education contexts.

To address this gap, the present study draws on three complementary theoretical perspectives: Freirean critical literacy (Freire, 2000; Freire & Macedo, 2005), sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), and teacher cognition research (Borg, 2003). Together, these perspectives provide a conceptual framework for understanding how critical reading and writing practices may function as transformative pedagogical experiences through which pre-service teachers develop critical literacy, engage in reflective professional learning, and construct emerging professional identities as future language educators.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Research Paradigm

This study is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and that individuals develop meanings through interaction with their social and cultural environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since the purpose of the study is to explore how pre-service English teachers experience and interpret critical reading and writing activities within a teacher education context, an interpretivist perspective provides an appropriate framework for understanding participants' subjective experiences and meaning-making processes.

### 3.2. Research Design

A qualitative case study design was employed to investigate a bounded educational context in depth. Case study research is particularly suitable for examining complex phenomena within their real-life settings and allows researchers to develop a rich understanding of participants' experiences and contextual influences (Tisdell & Merriam, 2025; Yin, 2018).

The bounded case in this study was a Critical Reading and Writing course offered within an undergraduate English Language Teaching (ELT) program during the 2025–2026 academic year. The design enabled an in-depth exploration of how participation in the course contributed to critical literacy development, teacher cognition, and emerging professional identities.

### 3.3. Context and Participants

The study was conducted in a Critical Reading and Writing course offered to second-year students enrolled in an ELT program at a Faculty of Education in Türkiye. The course aimed to develop students' abilities to critically analyze texts, evaluate arguments, engage with multiple perspectives, and construct evidence-based written responses.

Participants consisted of 56 second-year pre-service English teachers enrolled in the course during the Fall semester of the 2025–2026 academic year. Purposeful sampling was employed because participants were directly involved in the educational context under investigation and could provide rich information regarding the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2015). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

### 3.4. Researcher Role and Positionality

The researcher assumed the dual role of instructor and researcher throughout the study. This position provided prolonged engagement with the instructional context and facilitated a deeper understanding of classroom interactions and participants' learning experiences. Recognizing the potential influence of this dual role, reflexive notes were maintained throughout the research process to document decisions, interpretations, and emerging insights. This practice contributed to greater transparency and analytical rigor.

### 3.5. Data Collection

Data were collected over a fourteen-week semester through multiple qualitative sources to ensure methodological triangulation and provide a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences (Denzin, 2012).

#### 3.5.1 Reflective Journals

Reflective journals served as the primary data source. Participants completed weekly journal entries focusing on their responses to course activities, engagement with texts, evolving perspectives, and perceived learning experiences. Journals provided valuable insights into participants' meaning-making processes and personal reflections (Farrell, 2015).

### 3.5.2 Focus Group Interviews

At the end of the semester, semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with 12 volunteer participants. Focus groups were selected because they facilitate interaction among participants and allow collective exploration of experiences, perceptions, and challenges (Morgan, 1997). Discussions focused on participants' experiences within the course and the perceived influence of these experiences on their learning and professional development.

### 3.5.3 Classroom Observations

Classroom observations were conducted throughout the semester to document participation patterns, classroom discussions, collaborative activities, and engagement with course tasks. Observation notes provided contextual information that complemented the journal and interview data.

## 3.6. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) framework. Thematic analysis was selected because it offers a systematic yet flexible approach for identifying and interpreting patterns across qualitative datasets. Analysis followed six phases: familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and report production (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An inductive approach was adopted, allowing themes to emerge from participants' accounts rather than from predetermined categories. Data from journals, focus groups, and observations were analyzed iteratively and comparatively to identify recurring patterns and construct a coherent thematic structure.

## 3.7. Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the study was established using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation across journals, focus groups, and observations, as well as member checking with selected participants. Transferability was supported through detailed descriptions of the research context and participants. Dependability was enhanced through the maintenance of a systematic audit trail documenting research procedures and analytical decisions. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive documentation and peer debriefing, which helped ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the data.

## 3.8. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any stage, and the measures taken to protect confidentiality.

To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used throughout the reporting process and all identifying information was removed from the dataset. The study adhered to the ethical principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and responsible research conduct in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

# 4. FINDINGS

## 4.1. From Passive Reading to Critical Engagement

The first theme addresses participants' experiences with critical reading practices and responds directly to RQ1 and RQ2. Analysis of reflective journals, focus group discussions, and classroom observations revealed a substantial shift in how participants approached reading. Prior to the course, many students described reading primarily as a process of understanding content and identifying key information. Over time, however, they began to engage with texts more critically by examining authors' claims, evaluating evidence, and considering alternative interpretations.

A recurring pattern across the data was participants' growing awareness that texts are socially and ideologically situated rather than neutral representations of reality. Many students reported paying greater attention to authors' intentions, underlying values, and the perspectives embedded within texts. This shift encouraged them to move beyond accepting information at face value and adopt a more analytical stance toward reading.

One participant explained:

"Before this course, I usually focused on understanding the text and finding the correct answer. Now I try to think about why the author wrote the text in a particular way and what perspectives may be missing." (Participant 12)

Similarly, another participant stated:

"I realized that every text reflects certain ideas and values. Reading critically helped me see that there can be different interpretations of the same issue." (Participant 27)

Reflective journals further indicated that participants increasingly compared sources, evaluated the credibility of information, and examined how arguments were constructed. Rather than concentrating solely on textual content, they became more attentive to the quality of evidence and the reasoning used to support particular claims.

Classroom observations supported these findings. During the early stages of the course, discussions were largely characterized by descriptive summaries and straightforward responses. As the semester progressed, students demonstrated greater willingness to justify their viewpoints, challenge ideas presented in texts, and engage in more analytical discussions. Their contributions became increasingly evaluative, reflecting deeper engagement with both the texts and the issues under discussion.

Another participant reflected:

"The course changed the way I read. I no longer read only to understand the content. I read to evaluate the arguments and decide whether they are convincing." (Participant 41)

Focus group discussions revealed that participants often perceived this transformation as intellectually demanding yet rewarding. Many described critical reading as a process that expanded their thinking, encouraged independent judgment, and increased their awareness of social, cultural, and educational issues.

Overall, participants reported a substantial shift in how they approached texts. Reading was no longer perceived as a process of extracting information but as an opportunity to evaluate arguments, examine underlying assumptions, and construct informed interpretations. These findings suggest that engagement with critical literacy practices contributed to the development of a more analytical and reflective approach to reading.

### 4.2. Developing Analytical and Evidence-Based Writing

The second theme addresses participants' experiences with analytical writing and further responds to RQ1 and RQ2. Analysis of reflective journals and focus group interviews revealed noticeable changes in how participants approached academic writing throughout the course. Many students reported that their previous writing experiences had largely involved summarizing information or expressing personal opinions with limited justification. As the semester progressed, however, they became increasingly aware of the importance of developing coherent positions, supporting claims appropriately, and engaging critically with different viewpoints.

A recurring pattern across the data was participants' growing recognition that effective academic writing requires careful reasoning rather than the simple presentation of personal beliefs. Students increasingly emphasized the need to justify their ideas, evaluate alternative perspectives, and organize their thoughts in a logical and persuasive manner. This shift appeared to strengthen their confidence as writers while encouraging a more deliberate and reflective approach to written communication.

One participant explained:

"Before this course, I usually wrote based on my personal opinions. Now I try to support my ideas and explain why I agree or disagree with a particular position." (Participant 18)

Similarly, another participant reflected:

"I learned that good writing is not only about grammar or vocabulary. It is also about presenting ideas clearly and convincing readers through logical reasoning." (Participant 34)

Reflective journals indicated that participants became increasingly aware of the relationship between reading and writing. Critically examining texts helped them understand how authors developed positions, structured ideas, and persuaded readers. Many participants reported transferring these insights to their own written work by paying greater attention to organization, source use, and coherence.

Classroom observations further demonstrated changes in students' written responses over time. Early assignments often contained descriptive explanations and unsupported statements. By contrast, later assignments reflected greater engagement with course readings, clearer organization of ideas, and more thoughtful consideration of competing viewpoints. Students increasingly justified their positions by drawing on course materials, discussions, and independent reflection.

Another participant stated:

"Reading different viewpoints helped me write more carefully. I started thinking about possible counterarguments and how to respond to them in my writing." (Participant 46)

Focus group discussions suggested that participants viewed analytical writing as both challenging and intellectually rewarding. Although many initially struggled to organize their ideas and critically evaluate different perspectives, they reported that continuous practice, classroom dialogue, and feedback helped them become more confident and purposeful writers.

Overall, participants reported a significant shift in how they approached academic writing. Writing was increasingly understood as a process of constructing reasoned positions, engaging with alternative viewpoints, and communicating ideas in a coherent and persuasive manner. These experiences contributed to the development of more analytical, reflective, and academically informed writing practices.

### 4.3. Reflective Meaning-Making and Perspective Transformation

The third theme focuses on participants' meaning-making processes and the transformation of their perspectives throughout the course. Analysis of reflective journals, focus group discussions, and classroom observations indicated that engagement with course activities extended beyond the development of reading and writing skills. Participants frequently described changes in how they understood social issues, educational practices, and their own approaches to learning.

A prominent finding was participants' increased willingness to reconsider previously unquestioned beliefs. Through engagement with diverse texts, classroom dialogue, and writing tasks, many students reported becoming more aware of the complexity of social and educational issues. Rather than seeking straightforward answers, they increasingly recognized the value of examining issues from different angles before reaching conclusions.

One participant explained:

"The course taught me that many issues do not have simple answers. I started looking at problems from different perspectives instead of immediately deciding who is right or wrong." (Participant 9)

Similarly, another participant reflected:

"Reading different opinions and discussing them in class helped me realize that my first reaction is not always the only possible interpretation." (Participant 22)

Journal entries revealed that participants frequently connected course content to their personal experiences and future professional roles. Many described moments of self-examination during which they reconsidered established viewpoints and developed greater awareness of the broader social dimensions of education. These reflections often encouraged students to think more carefully about how beliefs and experiences shape understandings of teaching and learning.

Classroom observations further demonstrated increasing openness to dialogue and intellectual flexibility. As the semester progressed, students became more willing to listen to alternative viewpoints, justify their positions, and revise their thinking when confronted with new ideas or evidence. Discussions evolved from simple exchanges of opinions into more thoughtful explorations of complex issues.

Another participant noted:

"I learned that changing your opinion after listening to others is not a weakness. It can actually mean that you are thinking more deeply about the issue." (Participant 37)

Focus group discussions suggested that these experiences contributed to broader intellectual development. Participants frequently described becoming more open-minded, self-aware, and thoughtful in their engagement with both academic and everyday issues. Several students emphasized that reflective activities helped them better understand how personal experiences influence educational beliefs and decision-making.

One participant stated:

"The reflective journals helped me understand how my own experiences influence the way I think about teaching. I became more aware of how my perspectives affect my decisions." (Participant 51)

Overall, participants reported meaningful changes in how they interpreted information, approached complex issues, and evaluated their own viewpoints. Engagement with critical literacy practices encouraged deeper self-awareness, greater openness to alternative interpretations, and more thoughtful consideration of educational and social questions. These experiences appeared to play an important role in participants' intellectual development and emerging understandings of themselves as future educators.

### 4.4. Challenges in Practicing Critical Literacy

While participants generally described the course as a valuable learning experience, the analysis also revealed several challenges associated with engaging in critical literacy. This theme addresses RQ3 by highlighting the difficulties students encountered as they moved beyond traditional approaches to reading and writing. Data from reflective journals, focus groups, and classroom observations indicated that these challenges primarily involved expressing critical viewpoints, coping with uncertainty, and navigating complex issues.

One of the most frequently reported difficulties concerned articulating critical evaluations in both written and oral contexts. Many students explained that their previous educational experiences had emphasized identifying correct answers and summarizing information rather than questioning ideas or constructing independent interpretations. Consequently, some initially found it difficult to critique arguments, justify their positions, or express disagreement with confidence.

One participant explained:

"It was difficult at first because I was used to finding the main idea and answering questions. I was not used to questioning the text or explaining why I disagreed with an argument." (Participant 15)

Similarly, another participant noted:

"Sometimes I had ideas, but I was not sure how to express them clearly in my writing. I worried that my arguments were not strong enough." (Participant 29)

A second challenge involved dealing with issues that did not have clear or definitive answers. Many students entered the course expecting discussions to lead to a single correct conclusion. However, course activities frequently required them to consider alternative interpretations and engage with topics characterized by complexity and uncertainty. For some participants, this shift was initially uncomfortable.

As one participant stated:

"I wanted to know which opinion was correct, but many discussions showed that different perspectives could all have valid points. This was sometimes confusing for me." (Participant 33)

Classroom observations further revealed that some students were hesitant to share opinions when discussions addressed controversial or sensitive topics. During the early weeks of the course, several participants appeared reluctant to voice positions that might be questioned by their peers. Nevertheless, this hesitation gradually decreased as students became more familiar with the course expectations and discussion environment.

Another challenge involved positioning oneself in relation to competing viewpoints. Although students generally recognized the value of examining diverse perspectives, some found it difficult to determine their own stance when confronted with complex social, cultural, or educational issues.

One participant reflected:

"Sometimes I understood both sides of an issue, but that made it harder to decide what I actually thought." (Participant 44)

Focus group discussions suggested that these difficulties were not necessarily viewed negatively. On the contrary, many students described them as important opportunities for growth. Struggling with uncertainty, defending viewpoints, and reconsidering established beliefs often encouraged deeper engagement with course content and more careful evaluation of ideas.

Overall, the findings indicate that the development of critical literacy was accompanied by both cognitive and communicative challenges. Difficulties related to expressing critical viewpoints, managing uncertainty, and negotiating competing interpretations were common throughout the course. Despite these challenges, participants generally perceived them as meaningful experiences that contributed to deeper thinking, greater self-awareness, and more active engagement with learning.

### 4.5. Becoming a Critical Language Teacher

The final theme examines how participants' experiences in the Critical Reading and Writing course contributed to the development of their emerging professional identities as future English language teachers. Analysis of reflective journals, focus group discussions, and classroom observations revealed that the course influenced not only how participants engaged with texts but also how they understood the purposes of teaching and learning. Many students described a shift from viewing teaching primarily as the delivery of knowledge toward seeing it as a process that encourages inquiry, dialogue, and independent thinking.

A recurring finding was participants' growing awareness of the teacher's role in creating opportunities for learners to question information, examine alternative perspectives, and construct their own understandings. Rather than positioning themselves solely as sources of knowledge, many participants began to view teachers as facilitators of learning who support students' intellectual engagement and personal growth.

One participant explained:

"Before this course, I thought teaching was mainly about helping students learn information. Now I think it is also about helping them question information and think for themselves." (Participant 11)

Similarly, another participant reflected:

"The course changed my understanding of what a teacher should do. I want my students to express their ideas, discuss different perspectives, and make their own decisions." (Participant 26)

Journal entries further indicated that participants increasingly connected course experiences to their developing pedagogical beliefs. Many expressed a desire to create more interactive and discussion-oriented classrooms where learners could actively engage with ideas rather than simply reproduce information. They frequently emphasized the importance of encouraging learners to participate, reflect, and form their own interpretations.

Classroom observations supported these findings. Throughout discussions and reflective activities, participants regularly considered how the approaches experienced in the course could be adapted to their own teaching contexts. Many demonstrated an emerging sense of responsibility for supporting learners' engagement with language, knowledge, and broader social issues.

Another participant noted:

"I realized that students need opportunities to think critically from an early age. As a future teacher, I want to create activities that help them explore ideas instead of just finding correct answers." (Participant 39)

Focus group discussions further suggested that participants increasingly viewed language education as a means of supporting intellectual development alongside linguistic growth. Several students argued that language classrooms should provide opportunities for discussion, interpretation, and thoughtful engagement with meaningful issues rather than focusing exclusively on linguistic accuracy.

One participant stated:

"I used to think that language teaching was mostly about grammar and vocabulary. Now I see that language lessons can also help students develop their thinking and express their opinions more confidently." (Participant 48)

Overall, the findings suggest that participation in the course contributed to the emergence of a more reflective and critically informed understanding of teaching. Participants increasingly perceived language education as a space for dialogue, interpretation, and

intellectual engagement. Through these experiences, they began to construct professional identities characterized by greater awareness of the educational value of critical literacy and a stronger commitment to fostering thoughtful and active learners.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore how critical reading and writing practices implemented in a Critical Reading and Writing course contributed to pre-service English teachers' critical literacy development, teacher cognition, and emerging professional identities. The findings indicate that participants experienced meaningful changes in how they approached texts, constructed written responses, interpreted complex issues, and conceptualized their future roles as language educators. Collectively, these findings support the view that critical literacy functions not merely as a set of academic skills but as a transformative educational process that shapes ways of thinking, learning, and teaching.

The first two themes revealed a shift from surface-level engagement with texts toward more analytical approaches to reading and writing. Participants increasingly questioned claims, evaluated evidence, and developed reasoned positions in their written responses. These findings align with Freire's (2000) conception of literacy as a means of developing critical consciousness and support contemporary understandings of critical literacy as an active process of interrogating texts and constructing meaning (Janks, 2009; Luke, 2012). The findings also resonate with Comber's (2015) argument that critical literacy enables learners to move beyond comprehension and engage with broader questions concerning knowledge, representation, and social reality. Within the present study, participants demonstrated growing awareness of how texts shape perspectives and how readers can actively negotiate meaning rather than passively receive information.

The findings further suggest that critical literacy development was closely connected to reflective meaning-making. Participants became increasingly aware of the complexity of social and educational issues and demonstrated greater openness to alternative interpretations. This finding is consistent with sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of dialogue and social interaction in cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). Through collaborative discussions, reflective writing, and engagement with diverse texts, participants were exposed to multiple perspectives that encouraged deeper examination of their own beliefs and assumptions. Similar findings have been reported by Johnson (2009), who argues that teacher learning emerges through participation in meaningful social practices, and by Farrell (2019), who highlights reflection as a central mechanism through which teachers develop professional understanding.

The challenges identified in the fourth theme provide further insight into the nature of critical literacy development. Difficulties related to expressing critical viewpoints, coping with uncertainty, and negotiating competing interpretations suggest that critical engagement often requires learners to move beyond familiar ways of thinking. Rather than representing obstacles to learning, these challenges appear to have functioned as productive tensions that encouraged participants to reconsider assumptions and engage more deeply with ideas. This interpretation is consistent with Schön's (1983) conception of reflective learning and with critical pedagogical perspectives that view intellectual struggle as an essential component of transformative education (Crookes, 2013; Freire, 2000).

Perhaps the most significant finding concerns the emergence of a more critically informed teacher identity. Participants increasingly described teaching as a process of facilitating inquiry, dialogue, and independent thinking rather than transmitting predetermined knowledge. This finding supports Borg's (2003, 2015) assertion that educational experiences play a significant role in shaping teacher cognition and professional beliefs. As participants reflected on their experiences, they began to reconsider the purposes of language education and envision classrooms that encourage active engagement with ideas. Such developments are consistent with research suggesting that professional identity is constructed through reflection, experience, and participation in educational communities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004).

The findings also support more recent scholarship emphasizing the dynamic relationship between teacher cognition and identity formation. Pennington and Richards (2016) argue that language teacher identity develops through ongoing interaction between personal beliefs and professional experiences, while Kubanyiova and Feryok (2015) highlight the importance of reflective engagement in shaping teachers' professional growth. Similarly, participants in the present study demonstrated how engagement with critical literacy practices contributed to changing understandings of themselves as future educators. Rather than viewing language teaching solely as the development of linguistic competence, they increasingly recognized its potential to foster critical thinking, reflection, and learner agency.

Taken together, the findings suggest that critical literacy, teacher cognition, and professional identity development are deeply interconnected processes. Engagement with critical reading and writing practices encouraged participants to question assumptions, refine pedagogical beliefs, and reconsider the broader purposes of language education. These findings extend previous research by demonstrating how a single Critical Reading and Writing course can function as a transformative pedagogical space within ELT teacher education. Consistent with Kumaravadivelu's (2012) vision of reflective and socially responsive teacher education, the

course provided opportunities for participants to develop not only academic literacy skills but also a stronger sense of themselves as thoughtful and critically aware future professionals.

Overall, the study demonstrates that critical literacy-oriented instruction can play an important role in preparing future English language teachers for the intellectual and social demands of contemporary education. By creating opportunities for inquiry, reflection, dialogue, and critical engagement, teacher education programs can support the development of educators who are capable of fostering meaningful learning experiences and encouraging learners to engage thoughtfully with language, knowledge, and society.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study explored how engagement with critical reading and writing practices contributed to pre-service English teachers' critical literacy development, teacher cognition, and emerging professional identities within a Critical Reading and Writing course. The findings demonstrated that participants' experiences extended beyond the acquisition of academic reading and writing skills. Through sustained engagement with texts, dialogue, reflective activities, and critical inquiry, participants developed more analytical approaches to meaning-making, became increasingly aware of multiple perspectives, and reconsidered their understandings of teaching and learning.

A key contribution of the study lies in highlighting the interconnected nature of critical literacy, reflective learning, and professional identity development in ELT teacher education. The findings suggest that critical literacy-oriented instruction can provide meaningful opportunities for pre-service teachers to examine assumptions, engage with complex issues, and develop more informed pedagogical perspectives. In this respect, critical literacy appears to function not only as a pedagogical approach but also as a catalyst for professional growth.

The study also offers important implications for teacher education programs. Opportunities for critical discussion, reflective writing, and inquiry-based learning may help future teachers develop the intellectual dispositions required to navigate increasingly complex educational environments. Integrating critical literacy practices into teacher education curricula may therefore contribute to the preparation of educators who are better equipped to support thoughtful, reflective, and socially aware learning communities.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted within a single course and institution, and the findings are based on participants' self-reported experiences within a specific educational context. Future research may examine critical literacy development across different teacher education programs, employ longitudinal designs, or investigate how critical literacy practices influence classroom teaching during professional practice and early career experiences.

In conclusion, the study suggests that Critical Reading and Writing courses can serve as valuable spaces for fostering critical engagement, reflective professional learning, and identity development among pre-service English teachers. By encouraging future educators to question, interpret, and engage thoughtfully with ideas, such courses may contribute to the preparation of language teachers who view education not merely as the transmission of knowledge but as a process of meaningful intellectual and social engagement.

## 7. LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the study was conducted within a single Critical Reading and Writing course at one teacher education institution, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts. Second, the study relied primarily on qualitative data derived from participants' reflections, focus group discussions, and classroom observations. Although these sources provided rich insights into participants' experiences, the findings reflect subjective interpretations within a specific context. Finally, the study examined participants' perceptions during a single academic semester and did not investigate the long-term influence of critical literacy experiences on subsequent teaching practices.

## 8. FUTURE RESEARCH

Future studies may explore critical literacy development across different teacher education programs and institutional contexts to provide broader comparative perspectives. Longitudinal research following pre-service teachers into their practicum experiences and early professional careers could offer valuable insights into how critical literacy-oriented learning influences classroom practice over time. Additionally, mixed-methods studies may further examine the relationships among critical literacy, teacher cognition, and professional identity development by combining qualitative experiences with quantitative measures of professional growth.

**Declaration of Conference Presentation**

A preliminary version of this study was presented as an oral presentation at the ICSAS 6th International Congress on Education, held in İzmir, Türkiye, on April 10–12, 2026, under the title "From Text to Critical Transformation: Exploring Critical Reading and Writing Practices in ELT Teacher Education."

During the manuscript development process, the title was modified to better reflect the final scope, focus, and findings of the study. The manuscript submitted to the journal represents a substantially revised and expanded version of the conference presentation. Significant developments include an enhanced theoretical framework, an expanded review of the literature, a more comprehensive analysis of the qualitative data, and a deeper examination of critical literacy development, teacher cognition, and professional identity formation in ELT teacher education.

The present manuscript has not been published elsewhere and is submitted as an original scholarly contribution.

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