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Exploring Critical Perspectives in English Teaching and Learning at a Colombian University

Exploración de Perspectivas Críticas en la Enseñanza y Aprendizaje del Inglés en una Universidad Colombiana

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Abstract

A critical perspectives approach to teaching and learning English as a foreign language is a relatively recent practice in Colombia. Even though reports explain how this approach is enacted in the curriculum, few studies have been conducted on how teacher educators and pre-service teachers deal with its implementation in their everyday practices. Hence, a descriptive qualitative study was conducted at a public university to delve into the perceptions of teacher educators and pre-service teachers regarding this approach and their challenges. The participants were nine teacher educators and thirty-one pre-service teachers teaching and learning English following a curriculum based on critical perspectives. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and a survey. The thematic analysis of the data yielded results that suggest a nuanced perception of participants, especially the pre-service teachers, and highlight the challenges that both groups of participants undertake when teaching and learning English through critical perspectives. These findings suggest an important issue in the EFL field, which is the need for going beyond language as a system when teaching and learning it, while ensuring in-service teachers' professional development and an adequate balance between linguistic aspects of the language and the promotion of critical awareness.

Keywords: critical perspectives, curriculum, EFL, ELT, teacher education

Resumen

La inclusión de las perspectivas críticas en la enseñanza y el aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera es una práctica relativamente reciente en Colombia, y aunque existen reportes que explican cómo se implementa este enfoque en el plan de estudios, se han realizado pocos estudios sobre cómo los profesores formadores y en formación perciben su implementación. En consecuencia, se realizó un estudio cualitativo descriptivo en una universidad pública para profundizar en las percepciones de profesores formadores y en formación y en los desafíos que este enfoque conlleva. Los participantes fueron nueve profesores formadores y treinta y un profesores en formación que enseñaban y aprendían inglés siguiendo un plan de estudios basado en perspectivas críticas. Los datos se recolectaron mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas, análisis de documentos y un cuestionario. El análisis temático de los datos arrojó resultados que sugieren una percepción matizada de los participantes, especialmente los docentes en formación, y que destacan los desafíos que ambos grupos de participantes enfrentan al enseñar y aprender inglés a través de pedagogías críticas. Estos hallazgos sugieren una cuestión muy importante en el área de inglés como lengua extranjera, la cual es la necesidad de ir más allá de la lengua como un sistema, mientras se asegura el desarrollo profesional de los docentes que integran estas perspectivas y un equilibrio adecuado entre los aspectos lingüísticos y la promoción de una conciencia crítica.

Palabras claves: perspectivas críticas, currículo, inglés como lengua extranjera.

Résumé

L'intégration des perspectives critiques dans l'enseignement et l'apprentissage de l'anglais comme langue étrangère est une pratique relativement récente en Colombie, et bien qu'il existe des rapports qui expliquent comment cette approche est mise en œuvre dans le programme d'études, peu d'études ont été menées sur la façon dont les enseignants formateurs et en formation perçoivent sa mise en œuvre. En conséquence, une étude qualitative descriptive a été menée dans une université publique afin d'approfondir les perceptions des enseignants formateurs et en formation et les défis que cette approche comporte. Les participants étaient neuf enseignants formateurs et trente et un enseignant en formation qui enseignaient et apprenaient l'anglais en suivant un programme d'études basé sur des perspectives critiques. Les données ont été recueillies au moyen d'entretiens semi-structurés, d'une analyse de documents et d'un questionnaire. L'analyse thématique des données a révélé des résultats qui suggèrent une perception nuancée des participants, en particulier des enseignants en formation, et qui mettent en évidence les défis auxquels les deux groupes de participants sont confrontés lorsqu'ils enseignent et apprennent l'anglais à travers des pédagogies critiques. Ces résultats soulèvent une question très importante dans le domaine de l'anglais langue étrangère, à savoir la nécessité d'aller au-delà de la langue en tant que système, tout en assurant le développement professionnel des enseignants qui intègrent ces perspectives et un équilibre approprié entre les aspects linguistiques et la promotion d'une conscience critique.

Mots clés: perspectives critiques, curriculum, anglais comme langue étrangère.

Resumo

A inclusão das perspectivas críticas no ensino e aprendizagem do inglês como língua estrangeira é uma prática relativamente recente na Colômbia, e bem que existem reportes que explicam como se implementa a abordagem no plano de estudos, foram realizados poucos estudos sobre como os professores formadores e em formação percebemos sua implementação. Como consequência, foi realizado um estudo qualitativo descritivo numa universidade pública para aprofundar nas percepções de professores formadores e na formação e nos desafios que essa abordagem implica. Os participantes foram nove professores formadores e trinta e um professores em formação que ensinavam e aprendiam o inglês conforme um plano de estudos baseado nas perspectivas críticas. Os dados foram coletados por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas, análise de documentos e um questionário. A análise temática dos dados apresentou resultados que sugerem uma percepção matizada dos participantes, especialmente os professores em formação e que ressaltam os desafios que os dois grupos de participantes lidam com o momento de ensinar e aprender o inglês por meio de pedagogias críticas. Essas constatações sugerem uma pergunta muito importante na área do inglês como língua estrangeira, que é a necessidade de ir mais além da língua como um sistema, enquanto é garantido o desenvolvimento profissional dos professores que fazem parte dessas perspectivas e um equilíbrio adequado entre os aspectos linguísticos e a promoção duma consciência crítica.

Palavras chave: Perspectivas críticas, currículo, inglês como língua estrangeira

Introduction

According to Carr and Thésée (2020), “[...] Education seems to function, at the same time, as an incontrovertible lever and brake toward and against the social transformations required to make society more just, engaged, inclusive and ‘democratic’[...]” (p. 68). Thus, they cite Morin (1999) and Petrella (2000) to reflect on the kind of education that is needed to achieve this purpose.

In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), all sorts of approaches to teaching and learning, based on socioeconomic and historical contexts, have emerged, with a tendency to teach the foreign language not only for communicative purposes, but also in a way that reinforces its status as a dominant language over the others spoken in the region (García, 2019). In the global South, recent language teaching praxis and research have focused attention on critical perspectives (CP), responding to a shift in paradigm and pursuing a more inclusive and contextualized approach to teaching.

Consequently, foreign language education programs that have identified this need seek to educate teachers who have language knowledge and who respond to the daily challenges of a society permeated by power structures based on colonialism, inequality, and gender issues, among others. The program in which this study was conducted understands CP as an umbrella term for different approaches, such as critical pedagogies and critical discourse analysis, that share three main endeavors: establishing connections between the classroom and society at large; transformative education; and self-reflection (Escuela de Idiomas, 2022, our translation). As Echeverri-Sucerquia (2020) points out, critical pedagogies situated in a Latin-American context emphasize the political dimension of education, thereby inviting future generations of teachers to position themselves within this framework of political action.

A central issue that our paper addresses is that little is known about how teacher educators and pre-service teachers face this challenge. This is the case of a foreign language teacher education program at Universidad de Antioquia in Medellín, Colombia, whose curricular renewal is based on critical perspectives. Accordingly, a case study was conducted to gain a holistic understanding of the participants’ perceptions of the teaching and learning process of English as a foreign language through critical perspectives in this setting. Thus, to delve into this issue, in this paper, we address the question: how do teacher educators and pre-service teachers from a bachelor’s degree in foreign language education perceive the English teaching and learning process based on critical perspectives?

Theoretical Background

Critical Perspectives and Foreign Language Teaching

Banegas and Villacañas de Castro (2016) state that criticality has been present in various aspects of the teaching-learning process. On the one hand, it can be seen in the intentions to develop critical thinking in students, meaning “being able to identify assumptions and evaluate evidence and issues logically” (p. 1). On the other hand, Freire, cited by Rahimi and Sajed (2014), claims that this understanding is not enough since empowering communities to bring about social transformation towards a more equitable society is necessary. It is this understanding of critical, according to Banegas and Villacañas de Castro (2016), that has allowed the improvement of the teaching and learning process, since it has enabled teachers and students to reflect on the power relations implicit in linguistic and

educational policies and to implement teaching methods oriented to the needs of students.

However, Nieto (2009) expresses that the way knowledge has been imparted has remained as the transmission of a unique way of seeing reality. It has been presented as fixed, static, and isolated, and the historical problems that humanity has experienced have been omitted and censored. Therefore, the role of critical perspectives is the recognition of the multiple ways of approaching a problem, so that students understand its complexity, and take a participatory stance as social agents, who are transformers of their reality. Accordingly, language is both a structural and functional dimension, socially implicated as discourse and, consequently, involved in the construction of individuals and the change of social structures (Crookes, 2012). Within this change of structures, Echeverri-Sucerquia (2020) argues that CP can contribute to “create a different history for ourselves and the future generations without forgetting what we have been through” (p. 26).

Critical Perspectives and Foreign Language Learning

To approach foreign language learning within the framework of CP, understanding the concept of language is important since this comprehension impacts the teaching and learning process, from curriculum design to teaching practice itself (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Reagan & Osborn, 2020). For instance, Kumaravadivelu (2006) proposes three ways of understanding language: the first one views it as a system, as the assembly of linguistic elements, phonemes, words, and phrases that converge in the production of texts presented either orally or in writing. The second way intends to go beyond language as a system: it views it as a discourse, that is, the use of language in a social context. Finally, transcending the systemic and discursive notion of language, it is understood as a set of social and cultural experiences, which are determined by power relations in which certain social groups rule over others. This is why, according to Kumaravadivelu (2006), teaching and learning a language becomes an opportunity for both teachers and students to build a “critical consciousness” (p. 69), making these power relations visible through critical discourse analysis.

Moreover, Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) understand language as a social practice, where “knowing a language, therefore, means more than knowing a linguistic system or communicating information, it means engaging in social practices using that system in order to participate in social life” (p. 14). In this sense, Darvin and Norton (2015) add that understanding language as a social practice that constructs and is constructed also implies understanding that behind a student there is a social subject with a constantly changing identity.

Teacher’s Role, Student’s Role, and Critical Perspectives

Critical perspectives are reflected in curricula that aim at discussing issues of multilingualism, interculturalism, identities, gender, and race, among others (Norton & Toohey, 2004, as cited in Banegas & Villacañas de Castro, 2016). Likewise, as stated by Crookes (2012), the elements of the curriculum must be related to the lives of students and the problematic situations in which social transformation can take place. This is why this author emphasizes that language teaching through these perspectives does not have an implicit fixed method. In this sense, Kumaravadivelu (2006) demystifies the idea of method in foreign language teaching and teacher education to describe the role of the teacher and that of the student, within the framework of critical perspectives and the conception of language as a structural, functional, and ideological dimension. In this context, the teacher will guide the students to discover the way in which they learn and thus take ownership and control of their own process by

allowing themselves to establish learning objectives and strategies. Additionally, the teacher should promote independent study, while encouraging the development of their students' skills, competencies, and level of awareness of themselves, of their environment, and their constantly changing identity in terms of their community and that of the target language.

Furthermore, Reagan and Osborn (2020) explain that a teacher is a subject who makes decisions in the classroom based on reflection of their own practice, by thinking about “what takes place, what choices there are [...] in a critical and analytical way” (p. 22). As Reagan and Osborn (2020) conclude, this process must consider not only the learning of grammatical structures and the accumulation of terms in another language, but also the fact that the learner is in constant reconstruction, supporting Gardner's conclusion (1985), according to which the learner is forming an identity in the language being learned.

Research Design

We employed a descriptive qualitative approach to delve into the nuances of the participants' experiences, gain insights, and better understand their perceptions. As Merriam (1998) points out, “a case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation” (p. 19). The case on which we focused, the perceptions of the academic community teaching and learning English as a foreign language through a critical perspectives approach, was significant in shedding light on how each part of the academic community faces this endeavor.

Context

We conducted this research at Universidad de Antioquia, a public university located in the northwestern part of Colombia. It took place in a bachelor's program in foreign language education. The disciplinary component of this program is composed of three language acquisition cycles:

The basic cycle, which takes place in the first three semesters; the intermediate cycle in the fourth and fifth semesters; and finally, the advanced cycle between the sixth and eighth semesters. Semesters 9 and 10 are not part of these language acquisition cycles as they are dedicated to research work and teaching practices. (Escuela de Idiomas, 2022, our translation, p. 82).

We invited pre-service teachers from the first to eighth semesters and teacher educators who had taught these courses as well. We aimed at including participants across different proficiency levels, age groups, and socio-cultural contexts. We obtained informed consent from participants, guaranteed confidentiality, and followed ethical guidelines throughout the study (Vicerrectoría de Investigación, Comisión Institucional de Ética, & Comité Central de Ética en la Investigación, n.d.)

Data Collection Methods

According to Creswell (2003), case studies require data collection to be systematic and from multiple sources. Our approach allowed us to collect rich and comprehensive data through the sources described below.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Glesne (2006) argues that interviews allow learning about “opinions, perceptions, and attitudes towards some topic” (p. 80). Thus, this method for data collection is frequently used in qualitative research because it enhances the comprehension of the phenomena studied. We conducted one-on-one interviews with the nine teacher educators who participated in the study. These interviews were guided by open-ended questions, allowing participants to express their thoughts freely. We were interested in topics such as their lesson planning and teaching strategies based on a critical perspectives approach.

Document Analysis

To triangulate the data, we examined the *Proyecto Educativo del Programa* (Educational Project of Program, EPP), which is the document that establishes the policies and principles of the bachelor’s program; and the syllabi for each course, as provided by the administration of the bachelor’s program.

Survey

Thirty-one pre-service teachers completed the survey that was sent to all those who were enrolled in the English courses when this study took place. Its purpose was to explore participants’ views on the courses they followed, and on the teaching and learning process.

Data Analysis

For the analysis of qualitative data, Bryman (2012) and Creswell (2012) recognize two strategies: deductive and inductive. We followed a thematic approach with inductive and deductive coding. We analyzed the syllabi, collected the answers to the survey, and transcribed the interview recordings. We coded the data line by line, identifying recurring themes related to the participants’ perceptions. Then, we grouped codes into broader categories, exploring connections between themes. We compared data across participants, paying attention to discrepancies and similarities between their perspectives. This iterative process allowed us to refine themes and identify patterns. Also, we regularly cross-checked our interpretations to minimize bias and ensure consistency.

Results and Discussion

This study showed important results for the setting in which it took place, and for the academic community interested in the process of implementation of a critical perspectives approach to teaching and learning English at the undergraduate level. We present the results in two main axes: those related to teacher educators and those related to pre-service teachers. Then, we propose a dialogue between these findings and the documents that we analyzed, which leads to the main conclusions of the study. Since data were collected in Spanish, we translated all the citations included below from participants, to whom were assigned pseudonyms to ensure ethical considerations.

Teacher Educators

The group of teacher educators who participated in this study has been educated at Universidad de Antioquia, either at the undergraduate level, postgraduate level, or both. Most of them graduated from the Master’s in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning offered by this university, specifically the Critical Perspectives on Language and Culture Research line, which “focuses on the study of teaching and learning practices in language education and culture from both critical and socio-cultural perspectives. [...] Special attention is paid to social, cultural, ideological, and political factors that shape language education in the Colombian context.” (Escuela de Idiomas, n.d., para. 4). We counted on at least one professor who had

taught every English course offered in this bachelor's program. The analysis of the data collected from the teacher educators produced two main categories: methodology and their perceptions about the program.

Methodology

In critical perspectives, the role of the educator is to promote the use of the foreign language not only as a means of communication, but also to problematize society and the power relations embedded in it (Luke & Woods, 2009). This section describes the principles and beliefs of the teacher educators who participated in the study, their understanding of language, and the teaching strategies they use to enact the syllabi. These aspects contribute to an informed understanding of teacher educators' perceptions, as they are the primary agents who bring the curriculum to life.

Principles. The main principles that the participants reported in the interviews conducted in this study were commitment, social awareness, respect, and empathy (Bella, Earl, Ferrara, and Filomena, interview, question 2). The participants acknowledged that these principles were also present in the philosophy of the undergraduate program and the syllabi of the courses that they taught. This shows their knowledge of the syllabi under their responsibility as well as their alignment with the *Proyecto Educativo del Programa* (EPP). Remi, for instance, reported that “diversity will always be a tool, an enriching element, and that alone is a huge change [in this program] (interview, question 2). This comment is coherent with the cultural dimension of the holistic education that the School of Languages aims at promoting when it declares its commitment to an education that fosters openness to different ways of seeing the world to contribute to democratic, inclusive, and respectful interactions (Escuela de Idiomas, 2006). It is noteworthy that these principles are also noticeable in Freire's pedagogy of freedom (2000), when he defines the importance of opposing discrimination in any way it can present itself.

Language. The way the teacher educators who participated in the study understand language reflects the principles that frame their teaching practices. Not only that, but also their understanding of language is coherent with a critical perspectives approach to language teaching, in which language is perceived as holistically built in the interaction with the context in which communication and meaning negotiation takes place (Escuela de Idiomas, 2022). Thus it makes sense that the most frequently used words to describe their view of language are linked to ideas such as reflection, construction of identity, communication, and evolution (Bella, Earl, Ferrara, and Filomena, interview, question 3).

For instance, Ferrara explains that languages are “tools that allow me to get closer to other cultures, to another knowledge, to have the privilege of reading in other languages” (interview, question 3). While Bella, defines language as “something alive and that is built through one's experiences rather than through grammar” (interview, question 3). This concept is aligned with the way the bachelor's program defines language, since it is recognized as a socially situated practice, thus a dynamic one (Shohamy, 2007).

Teaching Strategies. The most frequent strategies mentioned by our participants are multimodality, inclusion of new material, problematization, and analysis. These strategies show commitment to a critical perspectives approach to teaching foreign languages since they aim to make language learning relevant to everyday situations. They promote problem-solving, question societal norms and beliefs, encourage the exploration of new solutions, and foster openness to diverse

viewpoints (Escuela de Idiomas, 2022). All of these are promoted by the policies followed by the bachelor's program and, as such, suggested in the syllabi. However, some educators mentioned that they learned through trial and error and were also inspired by the feedback received from the students, either verbally or non-verbally.

Ferrara, for example, stated that the first time she taught the first semester of the program, she noticed how her students reacted to the documents that she proposed, and the impact these had on their understanding of language and of their role as future teachers, and how this affected her choice of materials. In the interview, she said the following: "I want to teach English to pre-service teachers with different purposes. Hence, I brought different types of texts that allowed me to problematize each unit of the course" (Question 4). This citation shows the need for teacher educators to innovate in the implementation of the syllabi, which is a challenge with which they have dealt since the beginning of the implementation of the curricular renewal of this bachelor's program, as will be shown in the section focused on challenges.

Perceptions about the Bachelor's Program

This section of the results presents how the teacher educators evaluated the English component and the program itself. Despite the challenges, all of them made a positive assessment. Earl, for instance, who has taught the English grammar course, acknowledges the following: "To me, the main changes relate to the critical reading profile [of the course]. Reading from different perspectives and generating more participation from the students. It's moved from a vertical view of grammar; the exercises are different" (interview, question 8).

In addition, they highlight the curriculum's flexibility, the philosophy that fuels the program, and allows students to explore various facets of the teaching identity while going beyond mere linguistic rules. Nonetheless, the teacher educators who participated in the study also criticized the program. First, they consider that the proposal for some courses is ambitious for the time at which it is intended to be implemented. Filomena summarizes this by stating that despite her 10-year long career teaching English, she felt overwhelmed the first time she taught a beginner course in this bachelor's program because she felt it had too many elements to consider (interview, question 9), second they mentioned lack of clarity in the definition of language in the official documents, such as, EPP, and that more emphasis should be placed on discursive structures. The latest may appear since a frequent concern among the pre-service teachers is the feeling that the process of learning French at the bachelor's program starts from the most basic, which they do not consider happens in English.

Although quite challenging, the teacher educators that we interviewed value the inclusion of critical perspectives, as they believe that these allow students to unleash their potential, go beyond the linguistic mechanism, deconstruct prejudices, learn in a contextualized way, and develop their autonomy as language learners and their civic awareness. For instance, Filomena, on the one hand, recognizes that critical approaches are important, even though she admits that she prioritizes the linguistic component of the courses that she has taught. Ferrara, on the other hand, reported that she managed to promote critical reflections without overlooking the linguistic aspect of the teaching and learning process. However, she needed to make some changes because she noticed she was focusing her attention on the students who were not true beginners in the first-semester course she taught, and disregarding the ones who were true beginners.

Challenges and Suggestions

Although the group of teacher educators highlights the impact that the education provided to students can have on the community at large, they consider it necessary to start working from the grassroots, in the practicum. As they state, this might allow the institutions that host the students to become imbued with the curricular proposal and facilitate the integration between the University and the community. Ferrara illustrates this by explaining how her role as a practicum advisor in the curricular proposal that preceded the current one allowed her to analyze how a critical approach to teaching was materialized by pre-service teachers.

Another challenge that the participants report is the need to establish clear communication of the curricular proposal with the pre-service teachers, since these tend to voice their concerns about their learning of the systemic characteristics of language; therefore, more dialogue is needed to close this gap. This idea may be linked to the fact that some teacher educators report a low interest in critical perspectives among their students and what their inclusion in courses implies, that is, the deconstruction of the idea of language as a fixed mechanism.

Consequently, the suggestions that the teacher educators make to the program aim to encourage students to understand language from an organic and a social perspective. This suggestion also applies to the teacher educators currently teaching in this bachelor's program, since it is crucial for them to know the curricular proposal and the principles that guide it. Therefore, a recommendation from the participants of this study is that future candidates to teach in the bachelor's program be selected based on their knowledge of critical perspectives, and that, if possible, professional development on this approach be offered, and specific materials be shared so that the program's proposal can successfully be implemented in this institution. This is something that any institution that includes critical perspectives in its curriculum should consider.

Pre-service Teachers

Thirty-one students from the first to eighth semesters participated in this study. This section summarizes the findings related to their perceptions about the English learning and teaching process through a critical approach.

Perceptions of Teaching and Learning from Pre-service Teachers

In this section of the results, we present the way pre-service teachers have perceived the teaching of English in their undergraduate program. We identified two trends within their responses to the survey: one is aligned with their own conception and construction of their teacher identity, and the other explicitly states their experience learning English as a foreign language in the curricular proposal of this program.

In the pre-service teachers' perception of English instruction, it is discernible that their pedagogical and didactic conceptions are centered on student identity, contextual factors, and the imparting of linguistic and cultural aspects. However, it is noticeable that the answers to most of the questions from the survey showed changes in the discourse when the concept of *critical perspective* or *critical consciousness* is explicit. This trend may make evident the influence that the critical perspectives in this context of pre-service teacher education have had on their own views of the world and language education; nevertheless, the data suggested a gap in the understanding of language as an ideology, as the EPP proposes. The table below illustrates the transition of responses to different questions in the survey.

Table 1 <i>Perception towards the Learning and Teaching of English</i>		
Participant	Questions and Answers	
	Question 1. From your perception and construction of your teaching identity, how should a language be taught?	Question 4. What do you consider to be the role of critical reflection in foreign language learning?
Gabriela	In my opinion, this process should be carried out considering each student's prior knowledge, particular interests, and the connection of the proposed topics with the current social context.	[...] I believe that being reflective allows us to use our knowledge not only in the classroom, but also in political and social scenarios in a highly globalized world where we tend to see the status of certain languages, cultures, and ways of thinking, over others; where it is necessary to use languages as a means of dissemination and expression of criticism of the system of which we are part.
Javier	I believe that to teach a language, several very important aspects must be considered. The first aspect is the student's objective, which is connected to their context, [...] The second aspect has to do with the linguistic aspect, [...] and the third aspect, to call it in some way, I would say, is the relevance of learning that language for society, which includes the critical aspects that in my opinion should be present in every educational act.	The role that critical reflection plays in this field is especially important because learning a foreign language has many political and economic interests behind it, and people must be very aware of the implications of this and the interests to which it responds.
Raúl	Mainly with a very holistic approach with different levels of flexibility according to the different stages of language learning and recognizing specific contexts. Likewise, teaching as an accompanying guide and not as a "guardian of knowledge".	What the program has allowed me to see is to think of language as a possibility to interact among different cultures, to recognize the different dynamics between each of them but also similarities, instead of a barrier between different niches of social interaction that will lead me to a purely individual development of knowledge. In the same sense, language serves as an excuse for the construction of community.

Note. The table shows the results of the survey applied to the pre-service teachers about their perception towards the learning and teaching of English. Own creation.

In this regard, teaching is influenced by the concept of language conceived within the EPP. From the perspective of the surveyed pre-service teachers, there is evidence of a concept of language that transcends mere communication, by considering culture, social dynamics, as well as differences and similarities. Language is perceived as a tool for community-building and addressing social issues. Nevertheless, as mentioned in the preceding category, they acknowledged that this is the program's concept of language, not necessarily the one they will adopt in their future teaching practices. Table 2 illustrates how their responses differ when defining their conception of language and when expressing their perception of the program's concept.

Table 2 <i>Concept of Language</i>		
Participant	Questions and Answers	
	Q. For you, what is language?	Q.3 Considering your experience in this program, how do you perceive the program's conception of language?
Gabriela	It is the code used by the people of a society to express their needs, opinions, and feelings regarding the interpretation they give to reality.	[...] they visualize language as a tool to converse or give an account of our position on many topics of interest and the way in which it can shape our identity.
Javier	For me, language is the code or order used by a certain population to communicate.	I believe that language is considered an important aspect, but that it must be learned implicitly. It is as the means to deal with critical aspects that are given more relevance.
Raúl	A system of communication between a society determined by several characteristics that involves interaction and perhaps development of the individual's identity.	What the program has allowed me to see is to think of language as a possibility to interact between different cultures, to recognize the different dynamics between each of them but also similarities, rather than a barrier between different niches of social interaction [...].

Note. The table shows the results of the Concept of language. Own creation.

In accordance with the educational objectives outlined in the EPP, critical perspectives “imply the imperative of nurturing prospective educators who are cognizant of the social milieu within which language instruction occurs, and who are equipped to address the attendant tensions through transformative pedagogies” (Escuela de Idiomas, 2022, p. 30, our translation). This implies that pre-service teachers are cultivating a teaching identity that leads them to acknowledge the social context of their students, their exigencies, and interests. However, it is not apparent that they envisage employing pedagogical and didactic strategies beyond language instruction, i.e., transformative strategies.

Considering their perceptions towards the construction of their identity as future teachers, the participants highlighted the political role of education. On the one hand, some participants showed evidence of having a broad perception of education, not positioning themselves as language teachers. This trend was evident when pre-service teachers answered question # 18 about their perception of the scope of critical perspectives in foreign language teacher education. As some participants stated:

“I would consider the scope to be quite high or significant, as developing critical perspectives, no matter what language they are done in, will always provide better and stronger results in teacher education” (Marco, Question 18, survey).

“A lot [the scope], having an impact on many people's minds can change the world. That is the purpose of education” (Julieta, Question 18, survey).

“I think the main role of a teacher is to be a social agent. Education is fundamental in social change, and it is important that we as teachers promote change and social criticism” (Héctor, Question 18, survey).

On the other hand, other participants questioned the scope regarding language learning or language proficiency within the framework of critical perspectives in the responses to the same question and to question # 19, which aimed to explore how they assessed the way the program meets the objective of educating teachers with a wide knowledge of the language, as illustrated by the following citations.

“I think they can be very useful to transform society with the help of languages. The question is, do we pre-service teachers have a high knowledge of the language?” (Rafael, Question 18, survey).

“I think it is possible. It is necessary to keep in mind that linguistic knowledge and social reflections should be leveled by providing reinforcement spaces in teacher education and at the same time in phonetic and grammatical aspects so that teachers maintain a constant growth in the linguistic level, without losing the social essence that should characterize this profession” (Clara, Question 18, survey).

To conclude, the participants, both teacher educators and pre-service teachers, remarked that critical perspectives provide the opportunity to view language to bring discussions to the classroom, to problematize social issues, to reflect upon the power of languages, especially English, to recognize the value of one’s own culture and that of others. Also, they considered that this approach fosters didactic and pedagogical strategies based on the construction of learning, while they inquired about the students’ context and motivated them to explore their identity and role in society, as the following answers show:

“I think it makes us, pre-service teachers, consider the role of students’ identity and knowledge, as well as the role they play in their communities and in society. It also motivates the idea that students do not replicate knowledge but create their own” (Mario, Question 4, Survey).

“Its role lies in the reasoning of what is beyond languages, to see them not only as a linguistic system, but as a human construction in which aspects such as power, culture and politics play a fundamental role” (Silvia, Question 4, Survey).

“It is quite useful, as most languages are linked to a discourse of power and/or have a story to tell through them. Through a language many -isms can be transmitted (racism, sexism, etc.), so learning must be done consciously, stopping these discourses while learning or teaching.” (Adrian, Q.4, Survey).

Perceptions of Teaching and Learning English through Critical Perspectives

In this section, we focus on the learning and teaching process that the pre-service teachers have experienced in this program. We identified that the participants described their perceptions from their feelings and emotions that emerge throughout the English courses. Moreover, students expressed their concerns regarding the instruction on linguistic aspects. Lastly, another paramount finding for this study is that there seems to be an understanding of the concept of the word ‘critical’ as a cognitive process.

Considering that critical perspectives have been recently introduced into foreign language

teaching and learning, one of the questions in the survey was directed at knowing about the participants' process of adaptation to these ways of education that aim for a more just society. The table below illustrates divided opinions regarding the polarity of emotions that emerged from the different ways in which students experienced this process.

Table 3.

Pre-service Teachers' Feelings and Emotions towards the Learning of English

Positive Sentiments	Negative Sentiments
It [adaptation] was easy, because fortunately, I had a good process of learning English in school. So, in this program, it was just a matter of understanding those elements I learned in school. I could use them to talk about complex topics or express myself regarding current and important issues. (Rafael, Question 7, Survey).	Initially, it was a bit complex and curious, as it breaks with the traditional teaching practices we are used to, which meant a feeling of not being prepared for the course because of what was initially expected from us. Sometimes I felt frustration, which little by little changed, and by level two it became a little more bearable; I could even say that it pushed me in the development of it [my learning process]. (Antonio, Question 7, Survey)
It was a new experience, although a pleasant one for me. I was used to the basics (reading, writing, and speaking), but I consider that teaching languages with a more critical approach not only allows greater contact with the language but also gives us access to another culture and gives us a more critical way of seeing the world from other perspectives (Hector, Question 7, Survey).	Very difficult, specifically concerning the language itself, it was very hard to understand what the teachers were saying, and even nowadays I see great difficulties, but it is possible to overcome (Victor, Question 7, Survey).
Personally, it was refreshing because I already had a previous level of English, but I can understand how challenging it can be for a person who does not (Julieta, Question 7, Survey).	It was complex, as I felt that I was developing as a critical social agent, but at the same time I was progressing very slowly in my English skills, I am a student who learns mainly with grammar lessons and explicit Linguistics in general. (Adrian, Question 7, Survey).

Note. The table shows the perceptions related to the English learning process. Own creation.

The initial perceptions were highly divided; however, what is evident and noteworthy is the fact that most students who experienced this process positively emphasized having prior knowledge or experience in English. Conversely, students with less positive experiences attributed it to a lack of basic language competence. Consistent with this idea, students voiced their concerns regarding the instruction of linguistic aspects of English. For instance, some of them expressed:

“I, for example, perceive that many of my classmates and I can talk about many complex and diverse topics, but we make many mistakes in the construction of the messages, and we even say things that are not what we want to express just because we do not know how to do it” (Rafael, Question 15, Survey).

“The explicit linguistic learning part (grammar, phonetics, etc.) can be neglected. There can also

be disagreements between students and teachers or among the students themselves because of their different positions and socio-cultural backgrounds. It can also be a repetitive approach if the material to be implemented is not carefully analyzed and chosen” (Adrian, Question 15, Survey).

Within the perception of teaching through the critical perspectives being implemented in this program, students delve into socio-cultural aspects in their discourse and observe a disregard for explicit instruction on linguistic aspects, including grammar. This approach may produce anxiety among certain students due to the unconventional way English is taught. In contrast, a significant portion of the surveyed students accentuate that this teaching approach, from this perspective, motivates them to construct their knowledge, defining the concept of language they perceive not only as a tool for communication but also as an instrument of transformation.

Considering these perceptions of students and what the EPP proposes in this regard, we make evident a different understanding of the linguistic aspects of the language through the critical approach. Within the theoretical considerations of the EPP, teaching is envisaged as the guidance provided to students to utilize language in comprehending the social functions embedded in grammatical structures and lexical repertoires, thereby enabling them to engage in a process of problematizing societal and global dynamics. Similarly, drawing from the theoretical framework informing this study, Reagan and Osborn (2020) conceptualize teaching as a process that acknowledges the student’s ongoing reconstruction of themselves as social beings and their evolving worldview, necessitating the incorporation of linguistic aspects or lexical-grammatical components of language to attain learning objectives.

In terms of their understanding of the “critical”, the data collected from pre-service teachers suggest a superficial understanding of what being critical means, and mainly related to critical thinking. For instance, Gabriela stated the following when asked about their adaptation to a critical pedagogy curriculum:

“I feel that I had a good process of adaptation because in my school they used a similar methodology, making debates, presentations, and other activities that allowed me to discuss various current issues. I have also had the opportunity since I was a child to use different textbooks in class to give my opinion on the subject and to do activities that allow me to develop critical thinking through writing and speaking” (Question 7, Survey).

In critical perspectives’ principles, the concept of ‘critical thinking’ transcends its conventional understanding as a cognitive process aimed at enhancing reasoning and argumentation skills, characterized by a vertically dialectical and decontextualized interaction between students and educators. Here, critical thinking entails a critical reflection that acknowledges reality as socially constructed, thus emphasizing the imperative for informed action with transformative and emancipatory aims (Fernandez-Balboa, 2014).

This result shows a need to clearly explain to pre-service teachers the principles of critical perspectives and how they will experience the teaching and learning process in the classrooms.

Conclusions

The teaching and learning process of English as a foreign language is a complex and multi-faceted endeavor, influenced by various factors such as educational policies, teaching methodologies, classroom environment, teacher-student dynamics, and students' individual characteristics and experiences. These factors can impact the effectiveness and success of English language instruction; thus, educators should critically examine and evaluate their practices to promote meaningful and transformative learning experiences for students.

Furthermore, understanding students' attitudes towards learning a foreign language and their initial experiences can shed light on their motivations, expectations, and potential challenges. By critically examining and addressing these factors, educators can better tailor their teaching approaches and strategies to meet the diverse needs and goals of their students. Consistent with what the pre-service teachers' survey data showed, negotiations between teacher educators and pre-service teachers about their needs at the language level may take place so that the process is productive for both parties.

For doing so, teacher education requires a solid foundation to provide quality instruction. As most pre-service teachers reiterated, the need to balance education between the principles of critical perspectives and the linguistic components of language as a system, grammar, and phonetics, for instance, stands out as crucial to achieve a high proficiency level in the language. They suggested that it should not be limited to an exclusive grammar and phonetics course, but it should focus on students' development of skills aligned with a more critical view towards language as an ideology, thus delving into the power dynamics reflected in the speakers' choices, and providing an opportunity to promote the principles of a more just society.

Moreover, teacher educators are to continuously enhance their own language proficiency and pedagogical skills to provide effective and engaging instruction. This is a challenge that the participant teacher educators mentioned during the data collection stage of our study, even though all of them had several years of experience teaching in different settings, including educating pre-service teachers. By adopting a reflexive perspective, teachers can identify areas for improvement, incorporate innovative teaching techniques, and create a supportive and inclusive learning environment that empowers students to actively participate and excel in their language journey.

Overall, the teaching and learning process of English as a foreign language through critical perspectives takes into consideration factors such as educational policies, teaching methodologies, classroom environment, teacher-student dynamics, and students' individual characteristics and experiences.

Statement of originality

We declare that this manuscript is the result of original research and that it has not been published before and is not currently under evaluation in another journal.

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Conflicts of interest

We do not have any potential conflict of interest to declare.

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