




Towards teaching anew: Teaching critical literacy with intermediate phase pre-service teachers

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the gap in South African teacher education regarding the integration of critical literacy in Intermediate Phase (IP) English language classrooms. While the Curriculum and Policy Statement (CAPS) of South Africa (SA) highlights critical thinking as one of the general aims of education, critical literacy is still overlooked in teaching practices and teacher training programmes. Underpinned by the Critical Pedagogy (CP) and the Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), this paper engages IP pre-service English teachers in a Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) approach to strengthen the integration of critical literacy. Exploring the perceptions, challenges and collaboratively developing strategies for critical literacy instruction, a purposive sample of fourth-year pre-service English teachers was selected from a South African higher education institution. Data was generated through three PALAR cycles using guided reflective journals and photovoice. Inductive thematic analysis was applied. The findings reveal a transformed approach to teaching critical literacy; pre-service teachers used a dialogic approach, different seating arrangements to ensure collaboration, and used authentic texts and creative activities. This highlights the shift from traditional rote learning and teacher-centred approach to learner-centred methods, underscoring the movement towards teaching anew. The paper emphasises the need for critical literacy integration in classrooms, and the importance of reflective tools, participatory methods, and intentional strategies in developing socially conscious, adaptive teachers. This paper contributes to existing literature by offering insight into how pre-service teachers perceive and attempt to implement critical literacy strategies.

Keywords: Critical literacy, Pre-service teachers, Reflective practice, Teaching anew

INTRODUCTION

The CAPS underscores the significance of developing learners' critical thinking skills; however, the explicit development of critical literacy remains a challenge in English language teaching, often stemming from teachers' lack of pedagogical knowledge.¹ Although critical literacy is often associated

¹ Naomi Boakye, Tilla Olifant, and Madoda Cekiso, "Investigating Teachers' Perceptions of Critical Literacy: A Case Study from Two South African Township Schools," *Language Matters* 52, no. 2 (May 4, 2021): 51–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10228195.2021.1942168>.

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with critical thinking, it involves more than this, encompassing further dimensions.² Critical literacy entails interrogating how power, ideology, and identity are embedded within texts, which is in keeping with CP; this approach moves beyond rote learning.³ This skill supports learners' agency in discussions surrounding societal issues, yet national assessments, such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), continuously highlight South African learners' lack of critical literacy skills.⁴ Boakye et al. show that teachers often rely on rote learning and teacher-centred strategies, due to their lack of knowledge, ultimately depriving learners of critical engagement opportunities required for the development of critical literacy.⁵ These practices stand in contrast to the learner-centred ideals stipulated by the Department of Basic Education.⁶

Despite educational goals, teacher education institutions often do not offer sufficient training for the proper integration of critical literacy in the classroom.⁷ Pre-service teachers tend to emulate their own schooling experiences, exam-driven and rote learning pedagogy, which perpetuates underachievement in critical literacy.⁸ This gap is especially clear in the IP, where critical literacy is still under-explored in South African pre-service teacher education. This paper addresses this gap by exploring how IP pre-service English teachers perceive and enact critical literacy during Teaching Practice (TPRAC) within a broader PALAR study. Drawing on CP and TLT, the study engages participants in reflective cycles using guided journals and photovoice. Using CP, TLT and PALAR together gives this study a clear way of understanding how pre-service teachers begin to teach critical literacy in new and meaningful ways. The purpose of this paper is to ascertain how pre-service teachers shift from traditional teaching of critical literacy in pursuit of renewed pedagogical approaches to critical literacy.

This paper contributes to the discourse on critical literacy by exploring how pre-service teachers in a South African teacher education programme understand and engage with critical literacy practices. Employing a PALAR methodology, the broader study, on which this paper is based, highlights the importance of participatory and reflective approaches in addressing implementation challenges and highlights the importance of reimagining the way critical literacy is taught, towards teaching anew.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical Pedagogy

CP aims to empower learners to question and transform oppressive social structures through education.⁹ It is based on the belief that education should promote freedom, where learners engage in dialogue and critical thinking, rather than passively receiving information from authoritative teachers.¹⁰ Freire critiques the banking model in education, where teaching and learning are seen as a banking transaction and teachers deposit knowledge into passive learners.¹¹ He contrasts this with problem-posing education, in which learners engage in a dialogue with their teachers that fosters reflection and critical

² Tsung-han Weng, "Creating Critical Literacy Praxis: Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice," *Relc Journal* 54, no. 1 (2023): 197–207.

³ Lystiana Nurhayat Hakim et al., "Critical Literacy-Based Instruction in Teaching Reading: Insights and Challenges," *Systematic Reviews in Pharmacy* 12, no. 3 (2021): 220–23.

⁴ Jane Carter et al., "A Systematic Review of the Effectiveness of Reading Comprehension Interventions in the South African Multilingual Context," *Educational Research and Evaluation* 29, no. 1–2 (2024): 69–103.

⁵ Boakye, Olifant, and Cekiso, "Investigating Teachers' Perceptions of Critical Literacy: A Case Study from Two South African Township Schools."

⁶ Department of Basic Education, "Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS): English Home Language Grades 4–6," 2011, <https://www.education.gov.za>.

⁷ Boakye et al., "Investigating Teachers' Perceptions of Critical Literacy: A Case Study from Two South African Township Schools."

⁸ Boakye, Olifant, and Cekiso, "Investigating Teachers' Perceptions of Critical Literacy: A Case Study from Two South African Township Schools"; Usree Bhattacharya, "'I Am a Parrot': Literacy Ideologies and Rote Learning," *Journal of Literacy Research* 54, no. 2 (2022): 113–36.

⁹ Paulo Freire, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," in *Toward a Sociology of Education* (New York: Continuum, 2020), 374–86.

¹⁰ Samira Essabari and Brahim Hiba, "Democratizing the EFL Classroom: The Impact of a Negotiated Syllabus on Student Voice and Critical Engagement," *Curriculum Perspectives* 45, no.2 (September 11, 2025):149–61, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41297-025-00303-z>.

¹¹ Freire, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed."

consciousness. Furthermore, through dialogue, learners critically explore ideas, challenge dominant narratives, and develop social awareness.¹²

Moreover, CP involves teachers working with learners to uncover and address hidden curricula and societal injustices.¹³ It positions learners as active participants, emphasising dialogue, reflection, and empowerment to challenge dominant ideologies.¹⁴ CP requires teachers to facilitate discussions that promote reasoning and challenge learners' critical thinking skills.¹⁵ Furthermore, effective dialogue in CP involves learners speaking out against oppressive actions seen in the text under discussion.¹⁶ CP empowers learners, particularly from marginalised backgrounds, to gain confidence to challenge social inequalities and engage in transformative practices.¹⁷ These practices enhance critical literacy.

Critical Literacy

There are multiple perspectives on the definition of critical literacy.¹⁸ Critical literacy is a pedagogical practice that emphasises the analysis and critique of texts to uncover underlying power structures, ideologies, and discourses.¹⁹ It involves recognising the social, political, and economic contexts in which texts are produced and consumed, as well as examining multimodal texts to see how they influence and reflect identity and power dynamics.²⁰

Moreover, critical literacy also requires learners to actively construct meaning, question the status quo, and consider multiple perspectives.²¹ Sibanda highlights that learners may analyse a newspaper article to identify bias or hidden agendas.²² Importantly, critical literacy differs from critical thinking: while critical thinking focuses on logical reasoning, critical literacy extends this by examining how texts position readers and by challenging inequalities. This is with the aim of advancing social justice.²³ As Enslin notes, texts are never neutral; they privilege certain voices while marginalising others, which makes the role of a teacher in cultivating critical literacy both urgent and complex.²⁴ Critical literacy transforms the learning environment by encouraging learners to relate the curriculum to their own experiences and analyse broader social issues.²⁵ To make education more relevant and

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- ¹² Gideon Nomdo, "Unpacking the Notion of 'Criticality' in Liberatory Praxis: A Critical Pedagogy Perspective," *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning* 11, no. SI (2023), <https://doi.org/10.14426/cristal.v11iSI.644>.
- ¹³ Ben Seipel, Kelly Mendel, and Rachel Young, "Teaching Teacher Agency in an Era of Standardization," in *Research Anthology on Developing Critical Thinking Skills in Students* (IGI Global, 2021), 1208–29, <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-3022-1.ch062>.
- ¹⁴ Sandro Barros, "Paulo Freire in a Hall of Mirrors," *Educational Theory* 70, no. 2 (2020): 151–69; Jelena Bobkina and Svetlana Stefanova, "Literature and Critical Literacy Pedagogy in the EFL Classroom: Towards a Model of Teaching Critical Thinking Skills," *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching* 6, no. 4 (2016): 677–96.
- ¹⁵ Ann France, "Teachers Using Dialogue to Support Science Learning in the Primary Classroom," *Research in Science Education* 51, no. 3 (June 4, 2021): 845–59, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11165-019-09863-3>.
- ¹⁶ Donatella Donato et al., "Teacher Training. An Experience of Knowledge Coproduction in a Class of the Master's Degree of Secondary Education Teacher Training," *Foro de Educacion* 20, no. 1 (2022): 281–96.
- ¹⁷ Eóin MacMaoilí and Deirdre McGillicuddy, "'I'm Actually a Female Empowerer': Student Perspectives on a Critical Pedagogical Approach to Re/Engage At-Risk Females in School," *Education and Urban Society* 55, no. 9 (December 17, 2023): 1047–69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00131245221106725>; Joanna Joseph Jeyaraj and Franco Gandolfi, "Empowering Students for Social Justice through a Critical Pedagogy Inspired Framework of Servant Leadership," *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 30, no. 2 (March 15, 2022): 169–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2020.1793216>.
- ¹⁸ Vivian Maria Vasquez, Hilary Janks, and Barbara Comber, "Critical Literacy as a Way of Being and Doing," *Language Arts* 96, no. 5 (2019): 300–311.
- ¹⁹ Hakim et al., "Critical Literacy-Based Instruction in Teaching Reading: Insights and Challenges."
- ²⁰ Bogum Yoon and Rukhsar Sharif, "History of Critical Literacy through the Various Theoretical Frameworks," *Critical Literacy Practice: Applications of Critical Theory in Diverse Settings*, 2015, 9–19.
- ²¹ Cynthia McDaniel, "Critical Literacy: A Questioning Stance and the Possibility for Change," *The Reading Teacher* 57, no. 5 (2004): 472–81.
- ²² Rockie Sibanda, "Beyond the Written Word: Newspapers as Critical Literacy Teaching Tools in the South African Classroom," *English Language Teaching Educational Journal* 4, no. 3 (2021): 174–86.
- ²³ Cheu-jei Lee, "Myths about Critical Literacy: What Teachers Need to Unlearn.," *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* 7, no. 1 (2011): 95–102.
- ²⁴ Emma Enslin, "Teaching Critical Literacy in South African English Classrooms: Constraints and Affordances," *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 40, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): 100–114, <https://doi.org/10.2989/16073614.2021.2009351>.
- ²⁵ Zeynep Mine Derince, "A Critical Literacy Class: Beyond English Learning and Teaching in Higher Education," *Language Learning in Higher Education* 13, no. 2 (October 26, 2023): 393–409, <https://doi.org/10.1515/cercles-2023-2024>.

empowering, critical literacy should be incorporated into the curriculum to bridge the gap between the identities of learners in school and out of school.²⁶

Teacher Education Toward Critical Literacy

CAPS explicitly states that learners should critically interact with texts, discuss social values, challenge the perspectives and evaluate information in texts in terms of accuracy and meaning.²⁷ However, despite critical literacy being a desired outcome in South Africa's curriculum, Nkealah reports that its implementation is lacking.²⁸ The results of the PIRLS 2021 further support the urgency of moving beyond rote learning. A significant 81% of learners could not read for meaning in any language.²⁹

Enslin documents the challenges of teaching critical literacy in South African English classrooms, such as the lack of time, support, and the prescriptive curriculum that hinders the implementation of critical literacy practices.³⁰ Enslin further states that the implementation of critical literacy as an approach to teaching depends on explicit modelling and assessment alignment.³¹ Nkealah makes a persuasive case for using CP in teacher preparation, arguing that teacher education programmes must explicitly cultivate sociopolitical consciousness and dialogic methods across Home Language (HL) and First Additional Language (FAL). Enslin further underscores that without explicit mentoring and assessment redesign, enactment remains superficial.³² This paper addresses these concerns and the existing gap in the literature.

METHODOLOGY

Transformative Learning Theory and Participatory Action Learning and Action Research

The TLT, developed by Mezirow, explains how people can change their frames of reference through reflection and dialogue.³³ These frames of reference refer to the beliefs and values that shape how people see themselves and interpret the world around them.³⁴ This theory primarily centres around the idea that adults can transform their perspectives through critical reflection, leading to profound personal and professional changes.³⁵ For pre-service teachers, it encourages them to question and transform these frames of reference, but it does not show clear ways of putting this into practice. PALAR helps fill this gap by offering a collaborative and ongoing process that supports transformative learning. Through PALAR, pre-service teachers reflect on their teaching and classroom experiences, which strengthens the integration of critical literacy in education.

In the broader study, on which this paper is based, three PALAR cycles were employed as a means of fostering participants' transformation. The first cycle centred on relationship building, laying the foundation of trust and collaboration necessary for critical engagement, in line with PALAR's principle of working *with* rather than *on* participants.³⁶ The second cycle involved the planning of pedagogical strategies, in an intervention plan, to implement critical literacy during the first semester TPRAC, reflecting PALAR's emphasis on co-construction of knowledge and action. During the third cycle, the intervention plan was revised based on participants' reflections and feedback from their

²⁶ A Quinlan and A Curtin, "Contorting Identities: Figuring Literacy and Identity in Adolescent Worlds," *Irish Educational Studies* 36, no. 4 (2017): 457–70.

²⁷ Department of Basic Education, "Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS): English Home Language Grades 4-6."

²⁸ Naomi Nkealah and John Simango, "Using Critical Pedagogy in English Education: Disjunctures between Pre-Service Teachers' Preparation and Opportunities for Implementation," *Journal of Education (University of KwaZulu-Natal)*, no. 90 (2023): 69–86.

²⁹ Annika Bergbauer and Surette van Staden, "Social Interaction Determinants of South African Reading Literacy Achievement: Evidence from PrePIRLS 2011.," *International Journal of Instruction* 11, no. 2 (2018): 555–68.

³⁰ Enslin, "Teaching critical literacy in South African English classrooms: Constraints and affordances."

³¹ Enslin, "Teaching critical literacy in South African English classrooms: Constraints and affordances."

³² Enslin, "Teaching critical literacy in South African English classrooms: Constraints and affordances."

³³ Jack Mezirow, "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 1997, no. 74 (1997).

³⁴ Michelle L. Maiese, "Transformative Learning and the Affordance of Flexible Habits of Mind," in *Learning, Design, and Technology* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 1317–38, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-17461-7_153.

³⁵ Christina Schlattner, "The Embodying of Transformative Learning," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Learning for Transformation* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 831–46, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84694-7_46.

³⁶ Lesley Wood and Ortrun Zuber-Skerrit, "PALAR as a Methodology for Community Engagement by Faculties of Education," *South African Journal of Education* 33, no. 4 (2013): 1–15.

classroom experiences, which speaks to PALAR's cyclic nature of reflection and action, thereby facilitating professional development and transformative learning. This paper focuses on the second and third cycles, which highlight teaching anew. In this paper, PALAR guided the reflective cycles that shaped data generation through guided reflective journals and photovoice, and informed the interpretation of participants' reflections.

Population, Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select IP pre-service English teachers who were completing their TPRAC. These participants took part in the three PALAR cycles.³⁷ Given the focus on integration of critical literacy in language teaching, the broader study involved IP pre-service English teachers in their final year of the teacher education programme.

The participants consisted of male and female IP pre-service English teachers enrolled at a South African University. The group consisted of ten females and two males, aged between 21 and 24 years. Their home languages included Sesotho, isiZulu, Sepedi, and English, reflecting linguistic diversity. These participants were placed in both township and urban school contexts during teaching practice, thereby providing varied perspectives on the integration of critical literacy.

Data Generation

Data was generated from guided reflective journals and photovoice activities.

Guided reflective journaling

Guided reflective journaling significantly enhances pre-service teachers' ability to engage in critical analysis and supports their professional development.³⁸ Without guidance, students' reflections are often self-focused, concentrating on immediate issues like classroom management and curriculum rather than deeper pedagogical considerations.³⁹ However, when structured prompts are provided, reflective journaling promotes self-regulated learning strategies such as monitoring, evaluation, and emotional control, which are essential for the professional growth of pre-service teachers.⁴⁰

Photovoice

Photovoice is a visual, participatory method that allows participants to capture and share their experiences using photographs and stories.⁴¹ This tool is suitable because it fits with PALAR's participatory approach and reveals perspectives on critical literacy that verbal methods may miss.⁴² Pre-service teachers symbolically captured elements of their teaching environments to reflect on critical literacy.

Data Analysis

Data generated from guided reflective journals and photovoice activities were analysed using inductive thematic analysis with the support of ATLAS.ti (version 25.0.1.32924). Following Braun and Clarke, the analysis involved coding and grouping data into categories and themes, allowing patterns of

³⁷ Steve Campbell et al., "Purposive Sampling: Complex or Simple? Research Case Examples," *Journal of Research in Nursing* 25, no. 8 (December 18, 2020): 652–61, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987120927206>.

³⁸ Irene García-Lázaro and Salvador Reyes-de-Cózar, "Preservice Teachers' Reflective Processes during Field Experiences: A Systematic Review from the ONION Model Framework," *Reflective Practice* 26, no. 1 (January 2, 2025): 115–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2024.2421597>.

³⁹ Åge Diseth, "Reflection Notes as a Tool for Professional Development of Pre-Service Psychology Teachers," *Reflective Practice* 26, no. 6 (November 2, 2025): 821–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2025.2504139>.

⁴⁰ Yining Zhang et al., "On a Path to Becoming More Self-Regulated: Reflective Journals' Impact on Chinese English as a Foreign Language Students' Self-Regulated Writing Strategy Use," *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (November 16, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1042031>.

⁴¹ Jule Marie Huber et al., "Photovoice: Participatory Research Methods for Sustainability - Toolkit #8," *GAI - Ecological Perspectives for Science and Society* 32, no. 4 (December 29, 2023): 386–88, <https://doi.org/10.14512/gaia.32.4.10>.

⁴² Linda Liebenberg, "Photovoice and Being Intentional about Empowerment," *Health Promotion Practice* 23, no. 2 (2022): 267–73.

meaning to emerge.⁴³ Three themes were identified, which gave depth to understanding how participants integrated critical literacy in their classrooms. Trustworthiness was supported through triangulation. Using the two data generation tools, we collaboratively coded and analysed the data, which strengthened interpretive reliability.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics committee of the university (NWU-01061-25-S2). The participants were informed of the details of the study, and their consent was sought before the study began. The participants were informed that they would remain anonymous and could withdraw at any time they wished to do so. Furthermore, ethical practice was ensured by asking participants not to photograph learners or identifiable people during their photovoice activities. In the broader study and in this paper, participants' codes were employed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

To ascertain how pre-service teachers integrated critical literacy education, we coded and categorised their narratives into three themes. Results show innovative teaching practices, though challenges remain.

Theme 1: Critical Literacy as a Social Praxis

One of the emerging concepts in the data is the idea of *social justice*. Scholars such as Molle, Barak, and Kakanowski define this concept as a multifaceted and transdisciplinary concept that is rooted in fairness and equality within a society. This is achieved through the equitable distribution of resources, welfare, and opportunities based on the premise that freedom and equality are key to human rights.⁴⁴ Within the context of this paper, the participants' reflections illustrate how they sought to introduce their learners to the issues of justice, identity, power and voice, which are core tenets of critical literacy.⁴⁵ Participant 03 highlighted how critical literacy could prepare learners to become active citizens by stating:

Critical literacy instruction prepares students to be informed and active members of their communities. It promotes empathy and shows learners how to recognise and combat unfair circumstances while also supporting their own and others' needs. (Participant 03_Guided Journaling Reflection)

Participant 03 also noted how a lesson on a book he brought to class elicited a dialogue among learners and himself on issues of identity and justice. These were revealed in these words:

When we were reading a book about identity and justice, I led students in discussions regarding the characters' histories and the elements that influenced their acts. After reading the key chapter, learners explored in groups how the characters' actions influenced them and the society in the book. (Participant 03_Guided Journaling Reflection)

This interaction between the pre-service teacher and the learners reflects Freire's notion of *dialogic teaching*, where a dialogue is not a mere conversation between the teacher and learners but rather a relationship that requires curiosity and critical thinking while discussing the subject matter.⁴⁶ Additionally, Participant 06 described a lesson where learners engaged with a newspaper article about a local protest.

⁴³ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

⁴⁴ Cheryl Molle, "Food Insecurity: Where Social Injustice Meets Environmental Exploitation," in *The Routledge Handbook of Green Social Work* (Routledge, 2018), 195–205; Gregg Barak, "Social Justice and Social Inequalities," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (Elsevier, 2015), 392–96, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.45085-3>.

⁴⁵ Hilary Janks, *Literacy and Power* (routledge, 2009).

⁴⁶ Freire, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed."

I asked learners to think about who was speaking in the article and whose voices were left out... Some learners really engaged... especially when they connected the issue to their own communities... Over time, more learners opened up. (P06_ Guided Journaling Reflection)

The quote illustrates learners' critical engagement with authentic materials and highlights the teacher's evolving role in guiding learners to overcome their discomfort and foster thoughtful participation. In these lessons, learners were encouraged to not only read, but to question and analyse the text. The same experience is captured further in Participant 06's guided journaling reflection where he added that authentic materials and literary texts could be used to encourage learners to question the author's perspective, consider whose voice is heard and whose voice is missing. This is illustrated in the following photovoice:



Figure 1: Photo showing authentic and literary text for class discussion on justice (Participant 06)

Using texts like this is a powerful way to promote critical literacy, as it allows learners to read with purpose and connect classroom learning to the world beyond school. This moment reflects both a challenge and a success-creating space for critical dialogue while navigating sensitive topics with care.

These findings indicate that for pre-service teachers, teaching anew involved utilising dialogic pedagogy. This marks a shift from traditional to praxis-oriented pedagogy.

Another recurring code under this theme was *multiple perspectives*. This refers to the approach of examining a situation, problem, or system to gain a comprehensive understanding from a perspective that no single viewpoint can fully capture the complexity of real-world scenarios.⁴⁷ This concept signals a transformation in teaching approaches where learners' diverse backgrounds and viewpoints are heard and understood. In line with critical literacy, this shift encourages learners to interrogate dominant narratives and recognise that meaning is never singular nor neutral, showing a shift from Penn-Edwards' observations. Penn-Edwards noted that pre-service teachers often view literacy as a neutral skill rather than a socially constructed concept.⁴⁸ Notably, the pre-service teachers in this study view critical literacy as a socially constructed concept.

⁴⁷ Choon Bae Paul Yoo, "Re-Envisioning Organizational Complexity Using a Multiple Perspectives Model," *Journal of Management & Organization* 27, no. 4 (2021): 751–67.

⁴⁸ Sorrel Penn-Edwards, "I Know What Literacy Means: Student Teacher Accounts," *Australian Journal of Teacher Education* 36, no. 6 (January 1, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2011v36n6.4>.

Participant 01 captured this notion by stating:

This involves understanding how language and texts can shape perspectives and reinforce social inequalities, encouraging students to challenge biases, stereotypes, and dominant narrative, fostering skills to evaluate evidence, identify multiple perspectives, and form informed opinions. (Participant 01_Guided Journaling Reflection)

This quote reveals that this participant understands that critical literacy lends itself to the concept of multiple perspectives by going beyond just decoding texts, by encouraging learners to voice their opinions about the text.

Participant 03, reflecting on classroom discussions, noted:

Having a diversity of perspectives in the conversation made it more interesting, as learners connected the key topics to things they had personally experienced and heard in the news. (Participant 03_Guided Journaling Reflection)

This quote indicates that creating such spaces for multiple perspectives not only enhances the depth of the discussion but also allows learners to connect school content with their real-life experiences.

Not only is critical literacy socially constructed, but the arrangement of the classroom also supports the integration of critical literacy. Participant 06 reflected on how their classroom setup supports critical literacy. They explained that:

This arrangement [round table] fosters open dialogue, critical questioning, and collaborative meaning-making-all central to critical literacy. The visual also reflects my intention to create a space where learners feel safe to express diverse viewpoints and reflect on real-world issues through discussion-based learning. (Participant 06_Guided Journaling Reflection)

This implies that classroom furniture arrangements can promote the principles of critical literacy by making all the learners more visible. This echoes what is observed by Babadjanova, who noted that the seating arrangement should align with the tasks.⁴⁹ The round table arrangement challenges traditional seating, allowing for a democratic space echoing CP. This shows that the understanding of this concept within this cohort of pre-service teachers is not an abstract idea but actively pursued in class as a teaching strategy.

These findings indicate that participants understood the importance of allowing multiple perspectives in their lessons because meaning is neither fixed nor neutral,⁵⁰ and showed evidence of understanding how classroom arrangement and seating can contribute to more collaborative discussions.

Theme 2: Teaching Strategies and Pedagogical Tools

Within the context of this paper, participants shared teaching strategies and pedagogical tools they used to teach critical literacy in IP classrooms. These include the use of authentic materials, visual texts, and collaborative learning. The strategies used reflect the transformation from traditional models to teaching using learner-centred approaches.

Participant 10 described how employing different teaching strategies promoted a more critical approach to literacy in the classroom:

I intend to use a variety of strategies, including open-ended questioning, visual literacy prompts (such as analysing images or advertisements), and collaborative group discussions. These tools are intended to spark curiosity and foster a sense of inquiry among learners. (Participant 10_Guided Journaling Reflection)

⁴⁹ U. B. Babadjanova, "Different Student Groupings and Seating Arrangements," *Journal of Critical Reviews* 7, no. 02 (January 1, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.31838/jcr.07.02.58>.

⁵⁰ Lolita B. Makeeva, "The Relevance Theory, Pragmatics and the Problem of Meaning," *Philosophy Journal* 15, no. 3 (August 29, 2022): 125–39, <https://doi.org/10.21146/2072-0726-2022-15-3-125-139>.

This is a conscious move away from teacher-centred approach to a more dialogic pedagogy where learners are encouraged to be expressive, allowing for embracing their different perspectives.

The integration of critical literacy not only applies to the English classroom but can be integrated into any content subject. For example, Participant 07, who was not placed for English during TPRAC, attempted to integrate critical literacy across the curriculum. She reflected on how the use of visual tools helped her facilitate deeper engagement in the Social Sciences:

Visuals helped learners connect better with the content and sparked curiosity. Annotated maps showing communities near rivers or mountains helped highlight inequalities in access to resources. Learners discussed how living near a river (like the Orange River) might provide advantages, such as water for farming, but also challenges like flooding. (Participant 07_Guided Journaling Reflection)

This is an indication that critical literacy is not necessarily limited to language subject areas and could be used across other learning areas. The use of annotated maps enabled learners to critically examine the inequality of geographical resources.

While the lack of technology continues to hinder teaching and learning in some contexts, one can integrate critical literacy by improvising using other methods. In keeping with this notion, Participant 01 added that the lack of technology at the school where she was placed during TPRAC was a challenge, but she overcame this challenge by using printed materials to connect classroom learning to societal issues:

Without technology, engaging learners with real-world examples was a challenge, so I brought printed advertisements from physical newspapers and magazines for learners to analyse. (Participant 07_Guided Journaling Reflection)

These texts provided learners with opportunities to analyse everyday media and made learning relevant, enabling them to still engage critically.

Participant 08 used creativity as a teaching tool to help learners view texts as dynamic and open to any interpretation. This was illustrated using a visual activity to demonstrate multiple interpretations, as reflected in the photovoice below.

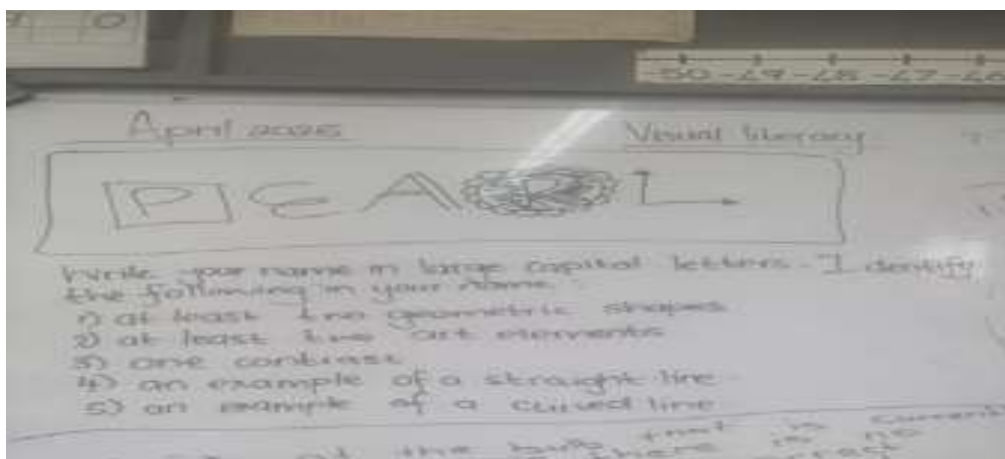


Figure 3: Learners' name designs reflecting self-expression and the fluidity of identity

This activity embodies self-expression and meaning-making, central to critical literacy. By reshaping their names using geometric and curvy designs, learners engage with representation, seeing how form influences interpretation. This exercise helped them recognise that language and identity are not static, reinforcing that literacy is about constructing meaning rather than simply following rules.

Though not part of the South African official English curriculum, the task shows how critical literacy can be integrated into various subjects. By creatively and visually representing their names, learners engaged in creating their own meanings, highlighting that critical literacy goes beyond language learning.

In addition to using visual texts, printed media, and creative activities, participants also noted that deliberate text selection is pivotal as a pedagogical strategy. These texts were not chosen randomly but with the intent to elicit discussions and empower learners.

Participant 05 explained:

I have selected a few texts that I am going to use when integrating critical literacy in the classroom. I have selected texts on the internet that promote discussion about social justice, identity, stereotypes, and cultural perspectives. These texts will allow learners to express their views and opinions. (Participant 05_Guided Journaling Reflection)

This underscores that purposeful text selection empowers learners by giving them a voice in the process of analysing the text.⁵¹ Similarly, Participant 03 described how learners were able to question characters' actions and the consequences thereof:

When we were reading a book about identity and justice, I led students in discussions regarding the characters' histories and the elements that influenced their acts. After reading the key chapter, learners explored in groups how the characters' actions influenced them and the society in the book. (Participant 03_Guided Journaling Reflection)

Participant 10 focused on concise and socially conscious texts, such as Benjamin Zephaniah's *Talking Turkeys*, to prompt learners to think critically about everyday issues, like consumerism and tradition.

I selected shorter, high-impact sections from the poem to focus the discussion and used exit tickets to continue reflection beyond the lesson. (Participant 10_Guided Journaling Reflection)

These insights indicate that critical literacy is not only informed by what is taught, but also by how it is taught. The texts used in class can give learners a chance to question ideas, but if teaching methods do not encourage discussion, reflection, and different viewpoints, these opportunities are limited. Consequently, the integration of critical literacy lies in the appropriate selection of texts and the pedagogical strategies that shape learners' interaction with those texts.

Theme 3: Teacher Development and Reflective Growth

Reflective practice and *professional identity* emerged as key codes in this theme. Reflective practice is a cognitive skill that requires conscious self-examination of one's beliefs. Importantly, this process takes different forms, which are reflection-on-action (after events), reflection-in-action (during events), and reflection-for-action (planning for future practice).⁵² Moreover, professional development refers to the ongoing process through which teachers reflect on and reshape their professional roles and identities.⁵³ This includes the integration of ethics, values, knowledge, skills, and behaviours that are characteristics of a particular profession.⁵⁴ In this paper, reflective practice served as a catalyst for professional identity formation. Participants reflected on their roles in teaching critical literacy. Findings suggest that developing critical literacy is not only about instructional techniques, but also

⁵¹ Yuko Iwai, "Multicultural Children's Literature and Teacher Candidates' Awareness and Attitudes toward Cultural Diversity," *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education* 5, no. 2 (2013): 185–98.

⁵² Kiran M. Patel and Kateryna Metersky, "Reflective Practice in Nursing: A Concept Analysis," *International Journal of Nursing Knowledge* 33, no. 3 (July 12, 2022): 180–87, <https://doi.org/10.1111/2047-3095.12350>; Holly R. Feen-Calligan, "Constructing Professional Identity in Art Therapy Through Service-Learning and Practica," *Art Therapy* 22, no. 3 (January 1, 2005): 122–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2005.10129490>.

⁵³ Joanna K. Garner and Avi Kaplan, "A Complex Dynamic Systems Perspective on Teacher Learning and Identity Formation: An Instrumental Case," *Teachers and Teaching* 25, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 7–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2018.1533811>.

⁵⁴ MA Gastelurrutia, "Construcción de Una Identidad Profesional Consistente Como Palanca Para El Cambio," *Farmacéuticos Comunitarios* 17, no. 1 (January 15, 2025): 34–39, [https://doi.org/10.33620/FC.2173-9218.\(2025\).06](https://doi.org/10.33620/FC.2173-9218.(2025).06).

about growing one's identity as a teacher. Additionally, participants described how the process of integrating critical literacy encouraged them to rethink their teaching identities and question traditional approaches to teaching. This is evidenced by Participant 01, who noted that her confidence and pedagogical awareness evolved over time, due to the reflections she conducted during the TPRAC period.

Over time, I became more confident in guiding discussions, framing questions effectively, and using relatable examples. (Participant 01_Guided Journaling Reflection)

The same participant observed that through reflection, she recognised the need to adjust her teaching methods according to the engagement levels of the learners and their understanding of the lesson.

[B]ut I am also aware that I may need to adapt my approach based on student engagement and comprehension. (Participant 01_Guided Journaling Reflection)

Participant 01's reflections show professional growth, which is marked by her increasing confidence. This transformation is evident in TLT, where individuals examine their prior assumptions and are open to change. Her ability to critically evaluate her teaching during the TPRAC period enabled her to identify areas of improvement, such as the need to adjust her teaching strategies based on the learners' needs. Within TLT, such growth is not limited to one phase, but to a few phases, such as critical assessment of assumptions and trying out new roles, as illustrated by Mezirow.⁵⁵

Participant 06 mentioned that his confidence evolved over time, noting that initially he was uncertain about integrating critical literacy and concerned about how learners would react to it. This is expressed in the following manner:

My confidence and approach have grown a lot since I first started. At the beginning, I was unsure about how to introduce critical literacy, and I was worried about whether learners would understand or engage with it. (Participant 06_Guided Journaling Reflection)

The same participant measured his confidence by stating that:

One of my strengths is my ability to create a positive and open learning environment where learners feel comfortable expressing their thoughts. I've also developed a strong understanding of critical literacy and how to guide learners in questioning texts and exploring different perspectives. My willingness to reflect and adapt my teaching approach based on feedback has also helped me grow. (Participant 06_Guided Journaling Reflection)

For some participants, reflective practice involved grappling with the gap between theory and practice:

I feel moderately prepared. Theoretical knowledge has provided me with useful strategies and frameworks, but I still feel apprehensive about how well I can apply these in practice, particularly when managing learner responses and navigating the classroom environment. (Participant 10_Guided Journaling Reflection)

The same participant goes on to state:

The unpredictable nature of real-time teaching can be daunting, but I am committed to learning through the experience. (Participant 10_Guided Journaling Reflection)

For this participant, reflection was not only a mirror for surfacing internal tensions, but also a map guiding her professional growth.

Participant 08 shared an image of a box with pens labelled 'Beyond the Red Pen.' Upon reflecting on the image in the photovoice, she expressed that pens, in her view, serve a purpose beyond merely marking learners' correct and incorrect answers. Instead, she regards them as instruments

⁵⁵ J. Mezirow, "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice.," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 158, no. 1 (2018): 5–15.

designed to inspire learners to critically engage with the text, fostering inquiry and deepening involvement. This approach aligns more with transformative teaching rather than simply using them as tools for assessing performance and providing feedback, transforming the teaching and learning process and empowering learners.⁵⁶



Figure 5: 'Beyond the Red Pen' – Participant 08's image symbolising a shift from assessment-focused teaching to critical engagement and inquiry

This image represents the evolution of assessment in teaching. Traditionally, marking tools are used for grading correctness, but in a critical literacy framework, they serve as dialogue tools, prompting learners to reflect rather than just receive feedback. I chose this image to emphasise how assessment should challenge thinking, encourage inquiry, and deepen engagement rather than just measure performance.

Overall, this theme underscores how structured reflection empowered participants to move beyond surface-level reflection, as stated by Liu et al.⁵⁷ In doing so, they began developing more responsive teaching identities rooted in inquiry, adaptability, and critical engagement with pedagogy.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this paper reveal that pre-service teachers are progressively shifting from traditional, teacher-centred approaches towards a praxis-oriented, learner-centred pedagogy, demonstrating the enactment of teaching anew through critical literacy. The data show pedagogical and professional transformations during the TPRAC period across the three themes discussed in this paper.

The first theme, critical literacy as social praxis, demonstrates that pre-service teachers understand literacy as socially situated and inherently political. Participants actively engaged learners in exploring justice, identity, power, and voice, reflecting Freire's notion of dialogic teaching.⁵⁸ Classroom interactions, such as discussions of books and authentic newspaper articles, allowed learners to critically examine whose perspectives were represented and whose were marginalised. For example, learners can read actively by analysing a newspaper article to identify biases or hidden agendas.⁵⁹ Similarly, Afrilyasanti et al. found that incorporating media like newspaper articles helps learners

⁵⁶ Freire, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed."

⁵⁷ Qingtang Liu, Yanli Wang, and Yubei Chang, "Exploring the Effects of Scaffolded Reflective Learning on Student Teachers' Design Performance and Reflective Thinking," *Thinking Skills and Creativity* 56 (2025): 101709.

⁵⁸ Freire, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed."

⁵⁹ Sibanda, "Beyond the Written Word: Newspapers as Critical Literacy Teaching Tools in the South African Classroom."

develop comprehensive arguments in writing, demonstrating how critical media literacy encourages engagement with texts before producing their own work.⁶⁰

The incorporation of multiple perspectives further reinforced the socially constructed nature of meaning, enabling learners to interrogate dominant narratives while connecting learning to real-world experiences. These findings align with prior studies highlighting the role of critical literacy. As noted by Aukerman, critical literacy teaching should involve dialogic engagement, where teachers step back from being the sole authority and allow learners to interact critically with texts.⁶¹ This reflects the principles of CP that emphasise learner agency, dialogue, and the co-construction of knowledge. In practice, this means replacing traditional teaching with methods that promote questioning, critical thinking, and participation.⁶² Teachers guide learners to reflect on their own assumptions and engage in social critique, creating opportunities for learners' voices to be heard.⁶³ However, VanDerHeide and Johnson have noted that pre-service teachers can sometimes focus more on ensuring participation, for example, through "Socratic Seminars" and miss deeper meaning-making opportunities.⁶⁴ This highlights the ongoing challenge of effectively translating dialogic pedagogy into practice, which can leave pre-service teachers feeling frustrated or inadequate.

The second theme, teaching strategies and pedagogical tools, shows how pre-service teachers put theory into practice. By using authentic materials, visual texts, collaborative tasks, and creative activities, they encouraged learner-centred inquiry and deeper engagement with content. Activities such as annotated maps or name redesign exercises allowed learners to analyse, question, and co-construct meaning, demonstrating that critical literacy can be applied beyond language classrooms. In addition, careful selection of texts became a deliberate strategy to give learners a voice and challenge assumptions, underscoring that pedagogy is defined not only by what is taught but equally by how it is taught. This is supported by Lim, who states that texts that resonate with learners' realities and interests can enhance engagement and participation.⁶⁵ These findings support previous research showing that reflective, creative, and purposeful teaching strategies are key to developing learners' critical literacy skills.

The third theme, teacher development and reflective growth, shows how reflective practice and professional identity are closely connected, reflecting principles of Mezirow's TLT, where examining assumptions and exploring new teaching roles support professional growth and teaching transformation.⁶⁶ Participants described growing confidence and flexible teaching approaches as part of their professional growth. Reflection during, after, and for future lessons helped them learn continuously and adjust their strategies to meet learners' needs. The photovoice, like the 'Beyond the Red Pen' image, showed a move from using assessment only to judge learners, toward using it to encourage inquiry and dialogue. These developments highlight how reflective practice not only shapes teachers' identities but also drives transformative shifts in their classroom practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To further strengthen the integration of critical literacy in classrooms, this paper offers the following recommendations: Teacher education institutions should institutionally capacitate pre-service teachers to teach critical literacy from the lower grades. Lecturers in teaching methodology should demonstrate

⁶⁰ Rida Afrilyasanti, Yazid Basthomi, and Evynurul Laily Zen, "Fostering Creativity and Critical Literacy: Transforming EFL Classes with Engaging Critical Media Literacy Integration," *Asian Education and Development Studies* 14, no. 2 (March 25, 2025): 133–51, <https://doi.org/10.1108/AEDS-06-2024-0124>.

⁶¹ Maren Aukerman, "'Why Do You Say Yes to Pedro, but No to Me?' Toward a Critical Literacy of Dialogic Engagement," *Theory Into Practice* 51, no. 1 (January 6, 2012): 42–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2012.636335>.

⁶² Aishorya Bharati and P. M. Nisanth, "Critical Pedagogy in the 21st Century: Challenges and Possibilities," *International Journal of Scientific Research in Modern Science and Technology* 3, no. 4 (April 30, 2024): 20–27, <https://doi.org/10.59828/ijrmst.v3i4.203>.

⁶³ Henry Giroux, "Critical Pedagogy," in *Handbuch Bildungs- Und Erziehungssoziologie* (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2021), 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-31395-1_19-1.

⁶⁴ Jennifer VanDerHeide and Ashley Johnson, "Examining Preservice Teachers' Narratives of Teaching Dialogically," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 87 (2020): 102946.

⁶⁵ Jia Wei Lim, "What Might Readers Want? Unexpected Responses from Malaysian *Literature in English* Students and Suggestions of Potentiality in Text Selection," *Literacy* 54, no. 3 (September 10, 2020): 91–98, <https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12206>.

⁶⁶ Mezirow, "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice."

the use of scaffolded prompts, and pre-service teachers should be supported in the use of multimodal resources and the creation of such resources. Moreover, the Department of Basic Education should have stringent or clear plans on monitoring the mentorship programme in schools to ensure that pre-service teachers benefit from this experiential learning. Additionally, policy makers should explicitly define and integrate critical literacy in the IP English CAPS documents, for both English HL and FAL. Future studies should investigate how in-service teachers understand and implement critical literacy, as well as how learners in the IP perceive and respond to it.

CONCLUSION

This paper, which emanates from a broader PALAR study, explored how fourth-year pre-service English teachers perceived and enacted critical literacy instruction during TPRAC, the challenges they encountered, and the strategies they collaboratively developed to address these challenges. Guided journaling reflections and photovoice in their transformative journey helped pre-service to implement practice-oriented literacy teaching, enhancing learner engagement and teacher identity. Challenges remain, such as managing learners' responses, school constraints, and classroom unpredictability as reflected in the broader study. The paper emphasises the need for critical literacy integration in classrooms, and the importance of reflective tools, participatory methods, and intentional strategies in developing socially conscious, adaptive teachers. Ultimately, by situating critical literacy within CAPS and drawing on Freire's CP and Mezirow's TLT, this paper highlights how reflective and participatory approaches enable pre-service teachers to transform their teaching identities and address the teaching of critical literacy to foster more dialogic learning environments.

LIMITATIONS

This study was limited by its small, purposively selected sample, which may affect the generalisability of the findings. Data was drawn from a broader study, which was done in one of the universities in South Africa, so experiences from other contexts may differ. The reliance on self-reported reflections and photovoice may have introduced bias, as participants could emphasise successes over challenges. Finally, the study captured short-term classroom experiences, leaving the long-term impact of critical literacy integration unexplored, as this was done over a TPRAC period.

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Dr. Jennifer Sheokarah is a lecturer in the School of Language Education at North-West University, South Africa, and holds a PhD from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Her research focuses on second language learning as well as teacher education, particularly pre-service teachers' readiness to teach English and the development of strategies that build second language learners' confidence and motivation. Her research interests include humanising pedagogy, gamification, and creative learning approaches aimed at reducing anxiety and enhancing engagement in language classrooms. Informed by her background as a high school English teacher, she integrates innovative, learner-centred methodologies to prepare future educators for dynamic and responsive teaching.