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The Relationship Between Pre-Service EFL Teachers' Critical Pedagogy and Critical Thinking Levels

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Abstract

This study explores the critical thinking levels of pre-service EFL teachers and their perceptions of critical pedagogy. A quantitative research design was employed. Data were collected through the Critical Thinking Questionnaire with 25 items and the Critical Language Pedagogy Questionnaire with 17 items. The two questionnaires were administered to 80 pre-service English language teachers at a state university in Turkey. The data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics in SPSS, including independent t-tests, Mann-Whitney U tests, and Spearman's correlation analysis. The findings showed that while pre-service EFL teachers had high levels of critical thinking across all six cognitive domains (analysing, evaluating, creating, remembering, understanding, and applying). Moreover, a moderate positive correlation was found between awareness of critical pedagogy and critical thinking. There were no differences between participants' genders and both variables. Additionally, the findings revealed a moderate positive correlation between critical thinking and critical pedagogy awareness, suggesting that higher engagement with critical pedagogy increases critical thinking ability. Based on the findings, researchers suggest that integrating critical pedagogy into teacher education programs may enhance critical thinking.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, Critical Pedagogy, English Language Teaching, Pre-Service Teachers, EFL Education, Teacher Education

Introduction

In the 21st century, the ability of humankind to think is insufficient to deal with the rising complexities of the world; that is why improving critical thinking skills is essential for effective teaching and learning ([Tosuncuoğlu, 2018](#)). In addition, the active role of language learners is prioritised in language classrooms today, and the focus is more on becoming a critical thinker ([Asgharheidari & Tahriri, 2015](#)); critical thinking skills are also emphasised more in EFL classrooms. However, defining critical thinking is challenging, although it is a common concept ([Zhao et al., 2016](#)). [Sternberg \(1986, p.2\)](#) clarifies this concept as “critical thinking comprises the mental processes, strategies, and representations people use to solve problems, make decisions, and learn new concepts”. As stated before, critical thinking is an essential skill in the 21st century, and [Zhao et al. \(2016\)](#) state that it can be integrated into EFL classrooms with several strategies: explicit instruction, teacher questioning, active and cooperative learning strategies are among the techniques that can be used in EFL classrooms. To adopt active and cooperative learning strategies into their classrooms, teachers can make use of methods and strategies, such as group discussions, debates, and reciprocal peer questioning, so that students can actively participate in the learning process, cooperate, and interact with each other and eventually develop their critical thinking skills.

In addition, the teachers should include direct instruction, repeated practice, intense student interaction and supporting classroom environment to integrate critical thinking into their practices efficiently. ([Zhao et al., 2016](#)). Critical thinking provides a foundation for deeper engagement and reflection by enhancing students' problem-solving skills and decision-making in the learning process. While critical thinking emphasises the ability to question, analyse, and evaluate information, critical pedagogy extends this practice into the realm of education and social transformation. Critical pedagogy builds upon critical thinking by encouraging learners not only to question knowledge but also to challenge the power and dominant ideologies within society. Therefore, critical thinking serves as a foundational skill in critical pedagogy, which moves beyond individual skills to enable learners to develop critical awareness.

Critical pedagogy, from the perspective of Paulo Freire, centres on education ([Kaya and Kaya, 2017](#)) and aims to depart from teacher-centred curricula by focusing on the interests of the learners' and their identities to create a critical perspective on students, transforming them into agents of change. Critical pedagogy considers language learning and teaching as political processes in English language teaching ([Mahmoodarabi and Khodabakhsh, 2015](#)). According to [Aliakbari and Faraji \(2011\)](#), in critical pedagogy, teachers play a role in posing problems and are intellectual individuals who learn from their students, consider their perspectives, interact with them, and engage in self-reflection. Meanwhile, students actively participate in the process with their teachers to correct the curricula, share their opinions, learn how to challenge presumptions, and [Giroux \(1997\)](#), as cited in [Aliakbari and Faraji \(2011\)](#).

Critical thinking and critical pedagogy can help teachers make their instructional practices more effective in today's world. Therefore, analysing teachers' levels of critical thinking and their opinions about critical pedagogy is essential. However, despite the growing body of research on critical thinking and critical pedagogy in EFL contexts, these constructs have largely been examined independently. While previous studies have explored teachers' critical thinking skills or their awareness

of critical pedagogy, limited attention has been paid to the potential relationship between these two constructs, particularly among pre-service EFL teachers. Moreover, in the Turkish context, existing research has predominantly focused on either critical thinking or critical pedagogy separately, leaving a gap in the understanding of how these dimensions interact within teacher education. Therefore, there is a need for studies that simultaneously explore pre-service teachers' critical thinking levels and their perceptions of critical pedagogy, as well as the relationship between them. In this regard, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between pre-service EFL teachers' critical thinking levels and their perceptions of critical pedagogy.

Literature Review

Critical thinking and critical pedagogy have been the focus of several studies in the EFL context. For example, [Birjandi and Bagherkazemi \(2010\)](#) investigated the relationship between EFL teachers' critical thinking ability and their professional success in Iran and found a significant relationship between the two variables. [Asgharheidari and Tahriri \(2015\)](#) examined EFL teachers' attitudes toward critical thinking instruction and found that, although the teachers were aware of critical thinking and its importance, they believed they needed more guidance during their training. In the Turkish context, [Çakıcı \(2018\)](#) analysed the possible relationship between metacognitive awareness and the critical thinking abilities of pre-service EFL teachers, revealing that senior students had higher metacognitive awareness and were able to think more critically than their counterparts, with a strong relationship found between metacognitive awareness and critical thinking. Additionally, [Tosuncuoğlu \(2018\)](#) investigated pre-service EFL teachers' awareness of critical thinking, finding that participants' awareness was not at the desired level.

[Mahmoodarabi and Khodabakhsh \(2015\)](#) developed a Critical Language Pedagogy Questionnaire and investigated EFL teachers' perceptions of critical pedagogy and their tendency to apply it in their classrooms in Iran. The findings revealed that teachers' degree levels (BA, MA, PhD) and their years of teaching experience significantly

influenced their awareness of critical pedagogy. In Turkey, [Kaya and Kaya \(2017\)](#) analysed the educational beliefs and opinions of prospective teachers from various departments, including pre-service EFL teachers, regarding the principles of critical pedagogy. According to the researchers, while participants' critical thinking skills supported their agreement with educational beliefs, their overall opinions about critical pedagogy were found to be low. [Kircali \(2021\)](#) analysed Turkish EFL teachers' awareness of implementing critical pedagogy. The research showed that the participants had some awareness of the implementation of critical pedagogy, and there was a significant difference between the participants with different degrees.

Pre service English language teachers' critical thinking tendencies and their teaching learning conceptions explored by [Gürbüz \(2021\)](#) among pre service English language teachers and findings showed that the majority of pre-service English teachers connect transformational concepts with social development, awareness, and incorporate these concepts into their teaching. Finally, [Roohani and Haghparast \(2020\)](#) investigated the relationship between EFL Teachers' level of critical pedagogy and reflective thinking with their pedagogical success in Iran and found a positive relationship between them. However, exploring both pre-service EFL teachers' level of critical pedagogy and critical thinking, and the possible relationship between them, remains an important question in the EFL field, especially in Turkey. The purpose of the present study is to shed light on these issues.

Research Questions

Considering the purpose of the study, the following questions were addressed:

What is the critical thinking level of pre-service English language teachers? Does the critical thinking level of pre-service English language teachers differ by gender?

What is the level of critical pedagogy among pre-service English language teachers? Does the level of critical pedagogy among pre-service English language teachers differ by gender ?

Is there any relationship between pre-service English language teachers' critical pedagogy level and their critical thinking level?

Methodology

Participants

The participants were third and fourth-year pre-service EFL teachers studying at a state university in Turkey. The total number of participants was 80, of whom 31 were male and 49 were female. The average age of the participants was 22 years.

Procedure

This study used a quantitative research method. For data collection, two questionnaires were used. The questionnaires were transferred to Google Forms together; however, they remained as separate sections. The data collection tool was sent to the participants via a link. The participants completed a consent form before participating in the research. They were informed that participation in the research was voluntary and that the data would only be used for research purposes. After data collection was completed, they were analysed using IBM SPSS.

Data Collection Tools

Two questionnaires were used for data collection. For data collection, the questionnaires were transferred to Google Forms. The first data collection tool was the critical thinking questionnaire (CThQ) prepared by [Kobylarek et al. \(2022\)](#). The questionnaire consisted of 25 items with 5 possible answers (from strongly disagree to strongly agree.) It was prepared according to the learning objectives presented in Bloom's Taxonomy and included six categories: remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating, and creating. To identify the participants' critical thinking levels, the recommended calculation and interpretation provided by the creators of the questionnaire were used. The scores of the items from each category were added together, and overall scores were calculated. The data were then analysed according to the suggested interpretation. The Cronbach 'salpha coefficient of the questionnaire was calculated as .87 by the researchers who developed the tool.

The second data collection tool was a critical language pedagogy questionnaire created by [Mahmoodarabi and Khodabakhsh \(2015\)](#). The questionnaire consisted of 17 items with six possible responses: strongly disagree, disagree, slightly

disagree, partly agree, agree, and strongly agree. One of the items was adapted to the context of the study, and the name of the country in the 10th item was changed to Turkey. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the questionnaire was calculated as .93 by the researchers who initially prepared the tool.

Data Analysis

IBM SPSS was used to analyse the data and identify pre-service EFL teachers' perspectives on critical pedagogy, their critical thinking levels, and the relationship between them. During the investigation, the participants' critical thinking levels and perspectives of critical pedagogy, as well as their gender status, were considered. First, the critical thinking levels of the pre-service EFL teachers and the differences between their critical thinking levels and their gender status were analysed. For data collection, the participants' responses were summed up, and the interpretations were made according to the classifications made by the creators of the questionnaire (see Table 1 for interpretation). Second, the participants' critical pedagogy awareness and the differences between their awareness of critical pedagogy and their gender were revealed. As a final step of the research, the relationship between pre-service EFL teachers' critical thinking levels and their perspectives of critical pedagogy were

investigated. Descriptive statistics was used and means and standard deviations for each questionnaire items and subscales (Analysing, Evaluating, Creating, Remembering, Understanding, Applying) were calculated. Inferential statistics were used, and a t-test was employed to determine the differences between male and female groups.

Table 1 The Suggested Interpretation of Raw Scores

	Low Results	Average results	High results
Analysing	5-10	11-14	15-20
Evaluating	5-10	11-14	15-20
Creating	6-13	14-22	23-30
Remembering	3-7	8-10	11-15
Understanding	5-10	11-14	15-20
Applying	5-10	11-14	15-20
Overall Score	25-58	59-92	93-125

Findings

1st Research Question

What is the critical thinking level of pre-service English language teachers?

Is there any difference between the critical thinking level of pre-service English language teachers and their gender status?

Table 2 The Results of Critical Thinking Questionnaire

	Question Number	Male Participants		Female Participants		All Participants	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Analysing	4	3.84	1.09	3.92	1.13	3.89	1.11
	12	3.77	.95	3.94	.94	3.87	.94
	17	4.00	.96	4.08	.78	4.05	.85
	24	4.00	1.09	3.88	.85	3.92	.95
Evaluating	1	3.68	1.01	3.82	1.05	3.76	1.03
	11	3.81	1.01	3.80	.79	3.80	.87
	16	4.10	.87	4.39	.75	4.28	.81
	18	3.45	1.09	4.06	.94	3.82	1.04
Creating	2	4.13	.92	4.24	.77	4.20	.83
	6	4.29	.90	4.27	.86	4.27	.87
	8	4.13	.95	4.04	.78	4.08	.85
	9	3.81	1.44	4.04	1.17	3.95	1.28
	13	3.90	1.04	3.82	.78	3.85	.88
Creating	20	3.97	1.11	4.06	.80	4.03	.92

Remembering	5	3.74	.72	3.78	.84	3.76	.79
	15	3.90	.97	4.14	.81	4.05	.88
	19	3.03	1.14	3.18	1.01	3.13	1.06
Understanding	7	3.87	.84	3.84	.89	3.85	.87
	21	3.77	1.05	4.02	.72	3.92	.86
	22	3.61	1.28	3.78	1.04	3.71	1.13
	25	3.52	1.12	3.94	.85	3.77	.98
Applying	3	4.19	.79	4.35	.87	4.29	.84
	10	3.65	.98	3.82	.85	3.75	.90
	14	4.06	1.03	4.08	.73	4.07	.85
	23	3.71	1.07	3.84	.80	3.79	.91

To analyse the data collected from the participants, the mean scores were compared in IBM SPSS in terms of gender, and overall mean scores were calculated and summed.

As seen, all six critical thinking dimensions were assessed using multiple items per dimension.

Standard deviations ranged approximately 0.72–1.44, indicating variability in responses.

Overall means (all participants) generally fell in the 3.7–4.2 range across all items and dimensions.

The overall score of the male participants from all the categories of the questionnaire was 95.93. In contrast, the female participants' score was 99.13. The overall score of all participants was 97.86.

2nd Research Question

What are pre-service English language teachers' opinions/levels of critical pedagogy?

Is there any difference between pre-service English language teachers' critical pedagogy level and gender status?

To answer the second research question, the descriptive statistics of the findings of the CLP Questionnaire were used (N= 80, M= 4.93, Std= .84). It can be stated that the participants' awareness level was above average. In addition, a Mann–Whitney U test was conducted in SPSS to compare the levels of awareness of male and female participants. No significant difference was found between male and female participants (Mdn= 4.94 for male participants, Mdn= 5.11 for female participants, U= 613, p=.16, r= 0.15).

3rd Research Question

Is there any relationship between pre-service English language teachers' critical pedagogy level and their critical thinking level?

Table 3 Correlation Analysis of the Questionnaires

		Critical Pedagogy
Critical Thinking	Spearman's Correlation	.33
	Sig. (Two Tailed)	.002
	N	80

To answer the third research question, Spearman's correlation coefficient was calculated and is shown in the above table. The findings of –0.33 indicate a moderate positive correlation; that is, as critical pedagogy levels increase, critical thinking levels tend to increase slightly.

Discussion

Findings revealed that pre-service English language teachers had a high overall critical thinking level across all domains - analysing, evaluating, creating, remembering, understanding and applying with the highest means in "Analysing" abilities. According to [Kobylarek et al., \(2022\)](#) the participants who scored high in this category could find the most important parts of a text and connections of different texts. For the second category, which was "Evaluating", both groups had high scores which showed that they could evaluate the information that they get and use various sources while doing that and review the information after reading ([Kobylarek et al., 2022](#)). For "Creating", both groups had high scores again which showed that they

could link and combine different parts and create organisations (Kobylarek et al., 2022). In terms of “Remembering”, male participants got average scores while female participants got high scores which showed that female participants could easily remember important information, use it correctly and recall previous knowledge while reading (Kobylarek et al., 2022). For “Understanding”, the male participants had average scores while females had high scores. It can be said that the participants who got high scores from this category could understand texts from different areas, interpret and compare different types of information and paraphrase easily (Kobylarek et al., 2022). As for the last category, which was “Applying”, both groups had high scores which showed that they could check and share the new information and use it in daily life (Kobylarek et al., 2022). According to these results, both male and female participants got high scores from 4 categories, and female participants got high scores from 2 categories while males got average scores from them, so it can be stated that both of the groups mostly have high critical thinking ability and there were not significant differences between the two groups and this suggests that gender does not influence critical thinking levels, consistent with previous research (Kuswandar & Prasetya, 2024; Rima & Muhyidin, 2023; Çakıcı, 2018). However, in terms of critical thinking levels Coşkun (2022) found out that the critical thinking disposition levels of pre-service EFL teachers were mid-level in contrast to the current study and similarly, there was no difference between the genders of the participants. The results related to critical pedagogy showed that the critical pedagogy awareness of the pre-service EFL teachers was found to be above average, reflecting that English language teachers showed strong agreement with items related to social justice, learner empowerment, and no differences in terms of gender were identified. This means that exposure to teacher education may impact prospective teachers’ critical pedagogy awareness. However, regarding the relationship between critical pedagogy awareness and critical thinking was found to be at a moderate level, suggesting that higher critical pedagogy awareness tends to coincide with critical thinking skills at a moderate level. This may be due to individual factors, such as prior education,

teaching experience, and individual learning styles. This finding may support the idea that critical pedagogy can foster critical thinking (Kuswandar & Prasetya, 2024). However, this comparison should be interpreted with caution, as the two constructs were measured by two different scales.

Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between pre-service EFL teachers’ critical thinking levels and their perceptions of critical pedagogy in the Turkish context. The results show that prospective EFL teachers possess high levels of critical thinking and above-average awareness of critical pedagogy, with no significant differences based on gender. Furthermore, a moderate positive relationship was found between critical pedagogy awareness and critical thinking levels, suggesting that greater awareness of critical pedagogical principles may be associated with stronger higher-order thinking skills. These findings highlight the importance of integrating critical pedagogy and critical thinking into teacher education programmes to better support the development of future English teachers. In this regard, the study contributes to the existing research pool by highlighting the limited research that explores these two constructs together. Additionally, the study provides empirical findings from the Turkish EFL context.

Implications

The results of the study indicate that even though the participants had high scores on the critical thinking questionnaire, their awareness of critical pedagogy was not high. This suggests that EFL teachers may benefit from targeted instruction and experiences to improve their understanding and application of critical pedagogy in ELT programs.

Suggestions

New modules to raise awareness of critical pedagogy can be integrated into ELT programs. New course content can include case studies and practical exercises that may help prospective teachers adopt critical pedagogy approaches. Guidance can be provided to help teachers implement critical thinking strategies in school settings. Designing workshops as

part of teacher education programs can strengthen both critical thinking and critical pedagogy skills.

Further Study

The current study had some limitations as it was conducted by a single university with a small number of participants. Further studies may investigate critical pedagogy awareness and critical thinking skills in greater detail with larger groups in different contexts. Additionally, other background information, such as previous education and reading habits, can be investigated to determine any possible links between these variables and critical thinking skills and awareness of critical pedagogy.

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