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## Critical Pedagogy for Humanizing EFL Education: A Qualitative Case Study

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**Abstract.** Critical pedagogy aims to humanize education and social change. In the realm of language learning, it attempts to create an environment in which learning goes beyond language acquisition to nurture empathy, mutual respect, cultural understanding, and critical thinking. Although critical language pedagogy (CLP) strategies are recognized as powerful pedagogical tools, they remain underutilized in practice, which reveals a research gap in understanding how these approaches can be effectively integrated into real educational contexts. This qualitative case study, which is part of a larger research project conducted in Ecuador, explores the experiences of students of English as a foreign language and pre-service teachers' perceptions of CLP on learning and teaching English. Data were collected through artifacts, including drawings and videos in which participants expressed their feelings and described their experiences during lessons. Additionally, after the implementation of CLP, focus group discussions were conducted with pre-service teachers who were in charge of facilitating the English lessons to children in vulnerable situations. Findings underscore the transformative potential of CLP to create inclusive and empowering learning environments, foster emotional expression and cultural awareness among students, and promote dialogic and reflective practices. The study highlights the value of participatory methodologies for addressing the specific needs of marginalized learners and preparing future educators to engage meaningfully in socially responsive teaching practices.

**Keywords:** critical pedagogy; critical language pedagogy; pre-service teachers; transformative practices; English as a foreign language; vulnerable children

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## 1. Introduction

In an era marked by global crises, deepening inequalities, and urgent calls for social justice, education should not focus only on the transmission of knowledge, but also on a transformative process that integrates cognitive, affective, and ethical dimensions to prepare learners for participation in complex and diverse societies (Mercer & Murillo-Miranda, 2025). In this context, pedagogical approaches that foreground care, empathy, cultural awareness, social justice, and critical thinking have gained prominence, particularly in English as a foreign language (EFL) education (Martínez-Alba & Pentón-Herrera, 2023).

Among these approaches, critical pedagogy (CP) shares a humanizing vision and aims to create inclusive spaces in which learners are treated as whole individuals whose emotions, identities, and social realities are integral to learning (Freire, 2000; Noddings, 2013). CP and its branch critical language pedagogy (CLP) seek to empower learners by challenging traditional hierarchies and addressing issues of equity and justice through participatory dialogic practices (Crookes & Lehner, 1998; Freire, 2000; Giroux, 1988). While CLP is widely acknowledged for its potential to develop critical consciousness and social transformation, it has been underutilized in real educational contexts and is frequently perceived as difficult to implement (Ludwig & Summer, 2023).

This study examined CLP in EFL education. Drawing on a qualitative case study with children in vulnerable contexts and pre-service English teachers, it explores how critical practices can cultivate harmony, empathy, and empowerment. The study can contribute to the ongoing conversation on how to humanize EFL education through pedagogies that integrate both critical reflection and the affective dimensions of learning.

## 2. Literature Review

CP fosters inclusive and transformative learning environments through dialogue, collaboration, and reflection, is committed to social justice, and empowers learners to challenge dominant narratives and engage meaningfully with their realities (Freire, 2000). Although CP advocates for a problem-posing model of education, it is not regarded as a specific teaching method or instructional approach; instead, it is understood as a broader social and educational process (Crookes & Lehner, 1998). CP does not consider language education as neutral but as inextricably bound with power relations, social structures, and the transmission of dominant cultural norms (Sharma & Phyak, 2017).

CP advocates for a dialogic model that fosters active engagement and critical reflection, by positioning students as “critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (Freire 2000, p. 81). In addition, CP foregrounds the real-life challenges encountered by learners and educators, and recognizes them as active participants in shaping their educational experiences within and beyond the classroom (Giroux, 1988). Freire’s (2000) concept of critical consciousness promotes reflection by learners, to transform students’ realities through discussion and dialogue.

CLP is a subfield of foreign or second language education that has been under-researched because its application is a difficult endeavor because of the intricate nature of contemporary society and the widespread presence of various social injustices (Ludwig & Summer, 2023). CLP intersects with foreign language teaching and learning. For instance, the communicative language teaching approach and the cooperative and collaborative approaches emphasize learners' authentic and social interaction, through which they can understand and solve problems (Ludwig & Summer, 2023).

Furthermore, the aforementioned authors point out that approaches and concepts such as language learner autonomy, inquiry-based learning, differentiation, and inclusive pedagogy position the learner at the center of the teaching process and the promotion of diversity. However, if such dialogues do not revolve around topics that are real and significant to the learners (usually taboo and controversial topics), critical thinking development and the consideration of diverse perspectives are hindered (Ludwig & Summer, 2023).

Scholars acknowledge the positive effects of implementing CP in EFL teaching and learning (Mousavi, 2021; Nelson & Chen, 2023; Shareef & Sadiq, 2023). According to Mousavi (2021), learners reported higher levels of engagement in classroom activities and greater enjoyment of the learning process. In fact, learners took a more active role and contributed, questioned, and interacted more with the teacher and peers. They also exhibited increased confidence, willingness to speak, and a sense of learning ownership.

Nelson and Chen (2023) found an increase in EFL learners' capacity for problem posing and motivation to write, metacognition, and application of prior knowledge. Shareef and Sadiq (2023) observed that learners achieved higher levels on Bloom's taxonomy, and that learners' speaking, questioning, and reflecting capacity was more developed, which increased student engagement and improved interaction among students and between students and the teacher.

Likewise, regarding EFL teaching, Siqueira (2021) noticed that EFL teachers, after being instructed in CP, became more conscious that English is not just a neutral tool but tied to power, ideology, and identity, which helped them reflect more critically on their role as educators. Even though their classroom practices often remained traditional, the study found that exposure to CP ideas motivated teachers to seek change and try out new practices.

Despite the recognized potential of CP as a transformative pedagogy, its implementation faces significant challenges, which include institutional constraints, curriculum mandates, staffing timetables, discipline policies, and broader neoliberal pressures that prioritize marketable skills over critical engagement (Nkealah & Simango, 2023; Omiunu, 2024). As pointed out by Nicoson et al. (2024), there is a tendency to promote liberal peace ideals that maintain the status quo, and a move away from radical transformation, which can give rise to teaching practices that perpetuate inequalities and harm. Furthermore, in EFL settings, language tends to be treated as a neutral, instrumental skill, which

ignores how language shapes identity, power relations, and social inequality (Essabari & Mohamed, 2025).

In addition, teachers and students can experience stress and resistance when they transition from traditional teacher-centered methods to student-centered, dialogic approaches that require them to examine contentious issues and shifting power dynamics (Kim & Pollard, 2017). Therefore, effective strategies such as problem-posing dialogues and social justice project-based learning, though they have been identified as powerful tools, are not implemented often, which indicates a gap between theory and practice (Omiunu, 2024).

Addressing the challenges facing the implementation of critical and transformative pedagogies is crucial, because these approaches hold significant potential for empowering learners, fostering critical consciousness, developing skills for handling conflict, and preparing students for active, engaged citizenship in a complex and unstable world (Omiunu, 2024). Effective implementation can help students develop relationships and skills for navigating conflict proactively (Parker-Shandal & Bickmore, 2020), deepen engagement with socio-political issues (Omiunu, 2024), and move toward decolonizing and demystifying peace work (Nicoson et al., 2024).

In this regard, teacher education programs play a critical role in shaping pedagogical beliefs and practices (Fajardo-Dack et al., 2024); therefore, these programs should include holistic training that encompasses the implementation of “educational transformation needed to form future citizens responsible for a fairer society” (p. 533). In fact, future language educators must be equipped not only linguistic knowledge but also with emotional and ethical capacities to reflect and support diverse learners.

Leveraging reflection, a central point of CLP, can help teachers and future teachers identify challenges between theory and practice to meet learners’ emotional and cultural needs and support proper, flexible, and responsive teaching. Consequently, teacher preparation for CLP education must intentionally develop emotional and intercultural competencies (Gkonou et al., 2020), which are crucial skills for facilitating inclusive classrooms and fostering meaningful interactions in spite of differences.

Against this backdrop, the scarcity of empirical evidence on the practical use of CLP in EFL classrooms, particularly with vulnerable Ecuadorian children, is evident. Moreover, there is a lack of understanding of how EFL pre-service teachers and learners experience CLP—a gap that this study aimed to address. Therefore, this research sought to explore the experiences of children in vulnerable situations, as well as pre-service teachers’ perceptions of learning and teaching English through CLP, to gain insights into the effectiveness and feasibility of implementing this methodology. This study addressed the following research questions:

- (1) What insights do children’s drawings provide regarding their learning experiences in the framework of CLP?

- (2) What pedagogical experiences do pre-service English teachers report after implementing English language instruction through CLP?

### 3. Methodology

This study undertook a qualitative approach because the aim was to interpret the meanings that the participants assigned to social or human issues in their natural context, thereby emphasizing the value of inductive reasoning, prioritizing the subjective experiences of participants, and seeking to capture the inherent complexity of the phenomena under study (Creswell, 2014). This qualitative case study involved an in-depth examination of the participants' processes and behaviors (Stake, 2005); it followed an interpretive framework because it emphasized the structured examination of actions that hold social significance, in an attempt to understand and interpret how individuals construct and sustain their social realities (Creswell, 2014; Neuman, 2014).

#### 3.1 Participants and Context

The study took place in a non-profit entity located in Cuenca, Ecuador. This institution helps vulnerable women and children by providing them with support, strengthening their emotional and financial well-being, and implementing community-driven solutions. A convenience sample was used because the participants were 66 children (whose ages ranged from 9 to 12 years) in vulnerable situations who were helped by the institution, as well as 30 EFL pre-service teachers (whose ages ranged from 20 to 22 years) who were in their seventh semester of an eight-semester EFL teaching major, and were also part of an outreach program of a public university. While convenience sampling may limit the generalizability of results, it was deemed appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research (Mackey & Gass, 2021). All participants were Spanish speakers. The pre-service teachers taught 26 EFL lessons (one hour each), following the Me Mapping method (Me Mapping, n.d.).

Me Mapping employs visual tools called Me Maps to delve into and make sense of students' identities, backgrounds, and viewpoints, with a special focus on multilingual learners (Me Mapping, n.d.). These visual representations encourage self-reflection and help create a more inclusive atmosphere by valuing diversity and enriching educational experiences inside and outside the classroom. In essence, Me Mapping is a flexible teaching strategy that supports active student participation, highlights cultural and linguistic variety, and nurtures a more inclusive and empowering environment for all learners.

Me Mapping reflects the ideals of CP by offering an inclusive and reflective approach that enables students to explore and express their identities, languages, and cultural roots. This method cultivates critical awareness by prompting students to examine their life experiences and social roles. Through visual tools and classroom discussion, Me Mapping disrupts conventional hierarchies, affirms diverse perspectives, and encourages meaningful participation. Allowing students to share their narratives and language practices turns the classroom into a democratic and culturally sensitive space, which supports the notion that education should serve as a means of inclusion, empowerment, and social change.

## 3.2 Data Collection

### 3.2.1 Artifacts

Children's drawings were used as data. The drawings are instinctive yet intricate forms of communication that children blend with other methods, such as speaking, writing, cutting, and gluing, to convey meaning; the children make deliberate choices about what to depict and how to do so (Deguara, 2019). Drawings enable children to employ symbols to make sense of their understanding of the world, internally, and to express those ideas to others in a visible way (Hall, 2010).

According to Farokhi and Hashemi (2011), children use their drawings to convey emotions such as fear, happiness, dreams, and pain; their artwork offers insight into how they relate to the world, serves as a means of communication and reveals aspects of their personality. Children often complement their drawings with storytelling and verbal expression, using them as tools through which various cognitive and emotional processes unfold (Wright, 2011). Therefore, drawing becomes a multifaceted activity during which thinking, physical action, and emotions continuously interact (Wright, 2003). This perspective moves drawing beyond mere artistic expression and positions it as a significant means of thinking and meaning making, which shapes the way to interpret and approach children's drawings (Cox, 2005).

The oral descriptions of the drawings were video recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. The descriptions were given in Spanish because using one's native language allows for more unrestricted expression of ideas and access to a broader vocabulary (Cortazzi et al., 2011). The transcripts were distributed among the researchers to be translated separately; these translations were later validated by the other two researchers to make sure that the message was true to the original meaning.

### 3.2.2 Focus Groups

After the intervention, the pre-service teachers participated in a focus group. They were divided into three smaller groups of 10 students each. Each researcher led one focus group, which lasted one hour. The discussion was facilitated by a set of questions that were adapted and translated from Poonchuay (2022) (see Appendix A). The meetings, held in Spanish, were audio recorded, then transcribed and translated into English. The transcripts and translations were thoroughly reviewed by the participants to ensure they accurately reflected their intended message, thereby securing internal validity (Creswell, 2014).

## 3.3 Procedure

The EFL classes took place at the non-profit entity for three months; children were taught for two hours every week. The pre-service teachers followed four Me Mapping units; however, they were free to make adjustments to meet the children's needs. At the end of each unit, the children presented their maps in English, they were recorded by the pre-service teachers and posted on Flipgrid. At the end of the intervention, the children were asked to draw their experiences during the lessons, for which they received the following prompts: (1) What did you learn? (2) How did you feel? (3) What did you like the most? and (4) Do you

think that what you learnt will be useful in your life? Once the drawings were completed, the children were video recorded describing them. Lastly, the focus groups were conducted as explained above.

### **3.4 Ethical Considerations**

Before the outreach program started, the researchers approached the non-profit entity to offer the teaching program to the beneficiaries, which included participating in a research study. After reaching agreement with the authorities of the institutions, the project was presented to the children's parents, who signed informed consent forms. Informed consent was also obtained from the pre-service teachers who took part in the focus groups.

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, participants' real names and personal information were not used at any point of the study; instead, codes were assigned to children (for example, S1, S2) and pre-service teachers (for example, PST1, PST2) (Mackey & Gass, 2021).

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

The children's drawings were analyzed according to Barthes' model (1977), which analyzes how meaning is constructed through signs in language, images, and culture. This model consists of a two-level system of signification: denotation (which refers to the literal or primary meaning of a sign) and connotation (which involves the cultural and emotional associations attached to that sign). Additionally, Barthes introduced a third level, called myth, which refers to how the sign is used to convey broader ideological meanings that appear natural or self-evident. According to Barthes (1977), signs are not neutral; they are shaped by culture and ideology, and their meaning can vary depending on how they are interpreted by audiences.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the translated transcripts of the oral descriptions of drawings (taken from the video recordings) and focus groups. The researchers started by familiarizing themselves with the data through repeated readings of the transcripts, followed by open coding to capture initial descriptive categories. These codes were then compared and refined collaboratively, with the three researchers independently coding a subset of the data to establish inter-rater reliability. Disagreements were discussed until consensus was achieved, ensuring consistency in the interpretation of participants' accounts.

Then, codes were grouped into broader categories and refined into themes that captured recurring patterns related to empathy, inclusion, and critical reflection. Additionally, participant verification (member checking) was applied by sharing preliminary thematic summaries with the pre-service teachers, who confirmed that the interpretations accurately represented their perspectives. This process resulted in a structured thematic analysis that provides deeper insight into participants' experiences, beliefs, and social contexts (Mackey & Gass, 2021).

## 4. Results and Findings

To address the research questions, this section is organized according to the three different data sets: children's drawings, oral descriptions of drawings (which explore the first research question), and focus group discussions (which explored the second question).

### 4.1 Drawings

The 17 drawings that were analyzed represent the experiences of children while they learned English through CP. Through visual and textual elements, the students reflected on their linguistic progress, their emotions, social connections, and cultural exposure. Using Barthes' model (1977), we explored these drawings at three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. To illustrate how data (drawings) were analyzed, three sample drawings and their analyses are presented.



Figure 1: Drawing #4

Table 1: Drawing #4 analysis

Level	Meaning
Denotation	A colorful drawing with human figures, vocabulary words paired with images, a sun, a cloud, and a ball
Connotation	Friendly learning environment, English vocabulary, safe classroom atmosphere, personal pride in learning, child-centered pedagogical approach
Myth	Idealized vision of education as joyful discovery, in which knowledge is colorful, friendly, and guided by teachers who foster confidence and happiness

As can be seen in Figure 1 and Table 1, the child presents a lively scene that integrates English vocabulary learning with personal expression. On the denotative level, we see human figures, colorful vocabulary words paired with drawings, and natural elements, such as the sun and a cloud. On the connotative level, the image reflects a playful and supportive learning environment in which

children acquire language skills joyfully. The vivid colors, smiling sun, and self-identification suggest happiness, personal pride, and a safe space for learning, while the English words highlight early exposure to global cultural and linguistic elements.

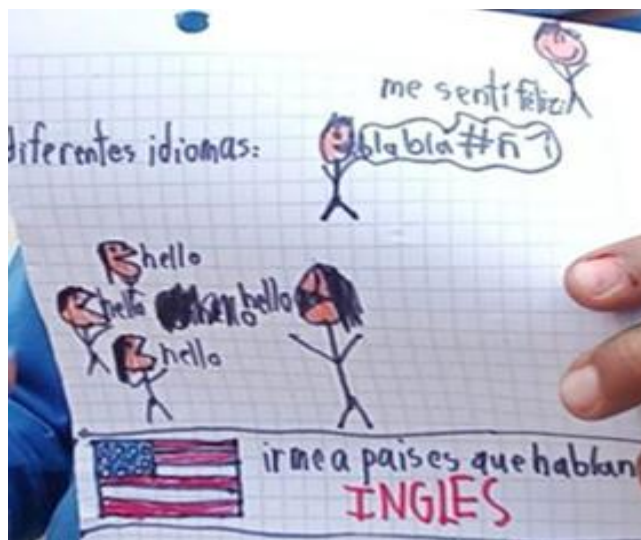


Figure 2: Drawing #7

Table 2: Drawing #7 analysis

Level	Meaning
Denotation	Stick-figure drawing with speech bubbles, American flag, Spanish and English texts about languages and happiness
Connotation	Joyful experience with language learning, aspiration for travel, emotional satisfaction, intercultural awareness, personal pride, playful learning environment, and cultural symbolism attached to English and the United States
Myth	Language as a key to opportunity, where English becomes the symbolic gateway to exploration, travel, success, and belonging in a wider international community

Figure 2 and Table 2 show that the student represents language learning through stick figures, speech bubbles, and national symbols. On the denotative level, we see dialogues using the word hello, an American flag, and phrases about languages and happiness. On the connotative level, the drawing may reflect excitement, pride, and aspiration for travel and global connection through English. The use of simple figures, joyful messages, and cultural symbols can portray language learning as an enjoyable experience and an international opportunity.



Figure 3: Drawing #15

Table 3: Drawing #15 analysis

Level	Meaning
Denotation	Four quadrants with a vocabulary list, a board, colorful abstract shapes, and multiple decorative circles
Connotation	Bilingual learning experience, balance between structured and playful learning, personal pride, diversity of knowledge, joyful classroom environment, and creative expression
Myth	Structure, language, imagination, and identity are woven together, allowing children to build knowledge while enjoying personal and emotional expression

As seen in Figure 3 and Table 3, the student combined vocabulary lists, writing practice, colorful abstract forms, and playful decorative circles to reflect their English learning experience. On the denotative level, we see writing exercises, a vocabulary list under “Ingles,” colorful shapes, and patterned circles. On the connotative level, the image reflects a joyful, creative classroom environment in which language learning is both structured and imaginative. The drawing shows emotional engagement, personal pride, and an educational space that nurtures both cognitive and emotional growth.

Once the 17 drawings had been analyzed, thematic analysis was conducted. Eight themes emerged, synthesizing the individual analyses. Barthes’ levels of denotation, connotation, and myth were retained for each theme.

**Table 4: Thematic Analysis of Children's Drawings**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Denotation</b>	<b>Connotation</b>	<b>Myth</b>
Emotional engagement and happiness	Smiling faces, hearts, suns, words, and happy, colorful designs	Positive emotional experiences, a safe learning space, joy, motivation, comfort, pride in progress	Learning English is a joyful, safe, emotionally nurturing experience
Teacher affection and attachment	Teacher names, teacher-student figures, hearts near the teacher	Admiration for the teacher, emotional attachment, the teacher as a nurturing figure, and a motivator	Teachers as central emotional figures who nurture and motivate learners
Vocabulary acquisition and knowledge display	Words in English, numbers, colors, animals, emotions, school objects, and pronouns	Retention of learned vocabulary, cognitive growth, and mastery of basic English concepts	Learning English as structured mastery of key knowledge and concepts
Creativity, play and artistic expression	Drawing activities, Simon Says, games, songs, puzzles, colorful decorations, and dynamic designs	Playful pedagogical approach, creative learning, multisensory engagement, active participation	Learning is playful, creative, exploratory, and a joyful journey, not mere instruction
Social connection and classroom community	Groups of classmates holding hands, shared scenes, and classroom interaction	Social bonding, peer relationships, collaborative learning, and emotional security through community	Learning English as a socially rich, emotionally connected community experience
Global and cultural aspirations	Airplanes, flags (USA, England), phrases about traveling, international symbols	Aspirations to travel, global awareness, English as a gateway to future international opportunities	English opens the door to the world, mobility, communication, and cultural access
Communication skills and interaction	Speech bubbles and personal introductions	Language is seen as a tool for real interaction, developing communicative competence, and readiness to use language socially	English as the key to real human communication and interaction with others

Theme	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
Personal identity and self-representation	Self-portraits, names written, and personal reflections in drawings	Pride in self, emerging identity as an English speaker, ownership of the learning process, and confidence	Language learning as a process of personal growth, identity building, and empowerment

As can be seen in Table 4, several major themes emerged from the 17 video transcripts, and reflect the children's experiences, perceptions, and emotions related to their English learning process, which are present across almost all transcripts.

The first theme is emotional engagement and happiness, which had the most references. In almost every transcript, the children described feeling happy, very happy, or proud during their English classes. Many used the word "happy" directly (S1, S3, S6, S7, S8, S10, S13, S14, S15, S16, S17). Some went further to describe feeling proud of their progress, as seen in S17 who said "she feels proud." These descriptions suggest that the English learning environment had created a positive, safe, and enjoyable space for the children, in which learning became a source of happiness and personal satisfaction.

A second theme that emerged is teacher affection and attachment. Many children expressed gratitude, affection, and admiration for their teachers. S5 said "thanks to my teacher who is loving and happy," while S17 emphasized her appreciation for the teacher: "to the teacher whom I love so much." This suggests that the teacher played an important role as an instructor and as an emotional support figure, who enhanced the children's learning experience through care, encouragement, and positive interaction.

The third theme is vocabulary acquisition and knowledge display. The children frequently mentioned the specific things they had learned: vocabulary related to numbers, colors, emotions, animals, family, parts of the house, school supplies, and basic conversational phrases such as greetings and self-introduction ("My name is ..."). Several children mentioned learning personal pronouns (S3), colors and animals (S11, S12), emotions (S13, S14, S15, S16), and classroom vocabulary (S4). The repetition of this content across video transcripts indicates the centrality of these topics in the curriculum and that children learned and recalled what they had learned.

Another recurring theme is creativity, play, and artistic expression. Several children mentioned that they had enjoyed drawing, singing songs, playing games such as Simon Says, playing with classmates, or completing classroom activities such as puzzles or hangman (S1, S2, S4, S5, S15, S16). This indicates that playful, dynamic, and creative pedagogical methods are deeply appreciated by the learners and help them remain engaged and motivated.

A fifth key theme is social connection and classroom community. Several participants mentioned enjoying being with classmates, making friends, and interacting with others in the learning environment (S2, S5, S7, S8, S9, S15). The social nature of the learning context contributed to the overall positive emotional experience and reinforced the children's motivation to engage in learning English.

The next theme is global and cultural aspirations. Almost all the children believed that what they were learning would be valuable for their futures. Many directly connected English proficiency with the possibility of travel or communication in other countries, particularly the United States or England (S5, S7, S8, S9, S10, S11, S12, S14, S15, S16, S17). Some children mentioned that learning English would enable them to talk to people from other countries (S17), while others mentioned having the goal of understanding others or using English while traveling by plane (S9).

The seventh theme is communication skills and interaction. The children clearly perceived English to be a means for real communication. Speech bubbles containing greetings such as Hello and Hi, as well as written self-introductions ("My name is ..."), reflect their readiness and eagerness to use English socially. This focus on speaking and interaction shows that their learning was not limited to isolated vocabulary but was connected to their desire to meaningfully engage with others.

Finally, the eighth theme that emerged is personal identity and self-representation. Many children included their names in their drawings, drew themselves holding books, or wrote about their own feelings and achievements. They often expressed pride in what they had learned, with some explicitly stating they felt proud of their progress. These acts of self-representation demonstrate that language learning is deeply tied to their developing sense of self. Through both their words and drawings, they presented themselves not just as students but as capable, developing English speakers who are proud of their accomplishments.

Together, these eight themes depict language learning experiences through CP. For these children, learning English was not simply a cognitive task; it was an experience filled with joy, affection, creativity, social connection, identity formation, and global curiosity. Their drawings and corresponding oral descriptions reveal that they were learning a language while also building a positive relationship with the world around them through that language.

#### **4.2 Focus Groups**

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis conducted on the transcripts of the three focus group discussions with the pre-service teachers. The analysis highlights personal and professional growth teachers experienced while teaching English through CP. Seven themes emerged: (1) The role of the English teacher, (2) Development of critical thinking, (3) Incorporation of social issues in language lessons, (4) Adaptation and contextualization of teaching materials,

(5) Professional and emotional growth, (6) The English classroom as a space for dialogue; and (7) Challenges encountered.

Regarding the first theme, the role of the English teacher, pre-service teachers perceived, in all focus groups, that teachers should be facilitators, guides, and motivators. They described their responsibility not as transmitters of knowledge but as individuals who supported students emotionally and encouraged autonomy. Several pre-service teachers emphasized the importance of building trust and creating a positive learning environment in which students feel safe to participate and express themselves: "The role is to be a facilitator and guide, someone who helps them grow, not just teaches content" (PST1, FG2).

The second theme is development of critical thinking. Pre-service teachers mentioned that they incorporated real-life contexts and discussions into their English lessons to foster critical thinking. Through problem-solving, open-ended questioning, and personal reflections, they encouraged children to analyze social and personal situations beyond language learning. Even with young learners, pre-service teachers observed significant capacity to reflect when exposed to meaningful conversations: "They reflected about their own family situations, understanding that not all families are the same" (PST2, FG1).

The next theme is incorporation of social issues in language lessons. Most pre-service teachers agreed that values such as equality, equity, and inclusion are essential topics to address, even at an early age. Pre-service teachers emphasized using language learning as a means to promote social awareness, and help students question stereotypes, discrimination, and inequality. Several pre-service teachers shared moments when children freely talked about issues such as racism, migration, and poverty: "We discussed that it doesn't matter if people live in big or small houses; everyone deserves respect" (PST3, FG2).

Another theme is adaptation and contextualization of teaching material. While all pre-service teachers used a general teaching guide, they reported exercising autonomy to adapt and contextualize materials. They modified culturally distant or age-inappropriate content to fit students' realities and interests. This flexibility enhanced children's engagement and deepened learning. "I had to modify the guide since many questions were about foreign places the students didn't know" (PST4, FG3).

Professional and emotional growth is the next theme. Throughout the intervention, pre-service teachers reported experiencing an increase in patience, empathy, emotional sensitivity, and successful classroom management. They reported that they developed a better understanding of the children's needs and learned to navigate emotionally charged situations with professionalism and care: "They sometimes shared difficult situations; I had to react sensitively and continue the class" (PST2, FG1).

The next theme is the English classroom as a space for dialogue. The pre-service teachers indicated that they fostered communication and allowed learners to

share personal experiences and engage in meaningful discussions. Pre-service teachers reflected on the importance of establishing boundaries and taking care to not cross a line while they provided a safe environment for dialogue: "Students started sharing their own personal problems, and we talked openly while respecting limits" (PST4, FG3).

The last theme is challenges encountered. Pre-service teachers acknowledged that the Ecuadorian educational system prioritizes completing the curriculum and grammar instruction over having critical discussions. "Sometimes institutions require us to focus only on grammar and finishing books" (PST5, FG1).

Furthermore, pre-service teachers mentioned the issue of balancing the complexity of social topics with the level of children's cognitive development. "I don't know if children should know about social issues or if they are too young for that. They don't have the capacity to reflect or at least we believe that they are not aware of those problems" (PST6, FG1).

The findings from the three focus groups demonstrate that the intervention provided a powerful context for developing pedagogical skills and humanistic teaching approaches. Pre-service teachers developed instructional abilities as well as emotional intelligence, empathy, and awareness of social justice issues. They reimagined English language classrooms as transformative spaces in which the language becomes a tool to promote critical thinking, inclusion, and moral education.

## 5. Discussion

Through this triangulated analysis of drawings, oral descriptions, and focus group discussions, it can be seen that learning English through CP is far more than a linguistic exercise; it is a rich emotional, social, and cognitive experience for the learners and pre-service teachers. Therefore, the findings of this study reinforce the central tenet of CP, which frames education as a dialogic and transformative process rather than a neutral transmission of knowledge (Freire, 2000; Sharma & Phyak, 2017).

The children's drawings and oral descriptions depict English classes as joyful and nurturing environments; they express positive emotions, self-confidence, and strong connections between pre-service teachers and children. They also portray classrooms as spaces where they feel safe, valued, and capable, which, in turn, fosters motivation and engagement. These findings indicate that the affective dimension of language learning is central to learners' experience and aligns with Freire's (2000) vision of education as a problem-posing practice through which learners become co-investigators in dialogue with teachers. The results also resonate with Giroux's (1988) conceptualization of education as a process of humanization, in which students and teachers alike engage in shaping their realities.

Likewise, the pre-service teachers' reflections in the focus group discussions indicate that they acknowledged that their role went beyond mere knowledge

transmitters to facilitators and critical practitioners. Pre-service teachers recognize their roles as facilitators of content, as well as emotional guides and ethical agents. Their accounts confirm the presence of affective bonds, creative teaching methods, and an emphasis on meaningful communication as observed in the children's outputs. Their ability to recognize students' cognitive and affective needs allowed them to adapt materials and center students' experiences, which echoes Freire's (2000) notion of dialogic and problem-posing education, in which learners are co-constructors of meaning.

Furthermore, the evidence supports the idea that language education cannot be detached from power and identity; the pre-service teachers' reflections indicate that they became more aware that English teaching involves negotiating issues of inequality and identity. These findings resonate with Sharma and Phyak's (2017) study, which found that language instruction is always bound to social structures and cultural norms, and with Siqueira's (2021) findings, which report that exposure to CP helped teachers recognize the ideological dimensions of English, even if their practices remained partially traditional.

Moreover, the identification of common patterns as identity building, intercultural awareness, and aspirations for global mobility connect with the arguments of Kramsch (2014), Cummins (2000), and Porto et al. (2018), who advocate that the language learning process ought to be linked to the formation of identity and intercultural communicative competence. The data also show that CLP can foster social awareness from an early age. Pre-service teachers presented topics such as inequality, migration, and respect for diversity during the intervention. Children engaged with these issues meaningfully, which validates Ludwig and Summer's (2023) call for a language teaching process that embraces social justice-related topics, confirming the role of CLP in fostering critical thinking and students' and teachers' agency.

Nevertheless, this study also brings attention to challenges facing CP implementation. The pre-service teachers' narratives highlight the difficulty of balancing curriculum demands with the desire to address social issues and promote critical thinking. They also articulate the complexities of adapting materials to students' contexts while striving to create inclusive, dialogic, and transformative classrooms. As Omiunu (2024) and Parker-Shandal and Bickmore (2020) suggest, institutional constraints, such as traditional curricula and policies, can hinder the implementation of CLP.

Another challenge concerns the tension between CP ideals and the developmental readiness of learners. Pre-service teachers expressed doubts about whether it was age-appropriate to introduce certain social justice issues to young children. They mentioned that children may be too young to engage with social issues. This aligns with Kim and Pollard's (2017) findings that both teachers and students may experience stress and resistance when they shift from traditional, teacher-centered practices to dialogic and problem-posing models. This reality underscores the urgent need, as Fajardo-Dack et al. (2024) argue, to embed humanized and

intercultural competencies in teacher education programs, thereby preparing pre-service teachers for the complex pedagogical realities they will encounter.

Furthermore, implementing Me Mapping as a CLP strategy enabled learners to express their identities, languages, and experiences through visuals and narratives. This method is concurrent with Cummins' (2000) and del Carmen Salazar's (2013) call for participatory and culturally responsive practices. Me Mapping acknowledges and values children's identities and backgrounds and fosters a supportive classroom environment. Finally, the joyful, safe, dialogic classroom environment described in the data indicates that interaction and reflection serve as the foundation for students' construction of their learning (Boyd & Markarian, 2011), and leads to stronger cognitive, emotional, and ethical engagement.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study underscores the transformative potential of CP to humanize EFL education, thereby showing that language learning goes beyond linguistic acquisition. It nurtures emotional expression, intercultural awareness, critical thinking, and collaborative classroom relationships. Children perceived learning as joyful, safe, and socially engaging, while pre-service teachers redefined their roles as facilitators and reflective practitioners, and recognized their responsibility, not only for language instruction but also for fostering empathy, critical reflection, and raising awareness of broader social issues.

Despite the contributions, several limitations are worth mentioning. To start with, the use of convenience sampling restricts the generalizability of the findings. The study was conducted with a relatively small sample of children and pre-service teachers, which may not reflect other EFL contexts. Also, the reliance on self-reported experiences and artifacts could have added subjective bias, because participants may have described their experiences in idealized ways. Next, due to the exploratory, short-term nature of the study, long-term effects of CP instructional practice on EFL learners' development cannot be reflected.

Important challenges for CP implementation are also highlighted. Pre-service teachers struggled to balance curriculum demands with the incorporation of social issues, thereby confirming the institutional constraints mentioned in the literature. They also questioned the age-appropriateness of discussing sensitive or controversial social justice themes with young learners. Future studies should analyze CP implementation across diverse educational contexts to evaluate its feasibility and outcomes. Longitudinal research could provide valuable insights into the impact of CP on learners' language development, identity formation, and critical consciousness.

Additionally, research focusing on the developmental appropriateness of CP strategies for children could contribute to identifying ways to adapt social justice themes to different age groups. Comparative studies involving different sampling methods would also strengthen validity and transferability. Lastly, teacher education programs should evaluate how effectively they prepare pre-service

teachers to address the emotional, intercultural, and critical dimensions of language teaching.

### Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest is reported.

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## Appendix 1

### Guiding Questions for Focus Groups

1. In your opinion, what are the most important roles that an English teacher fulfills?
2. What topics or activities do you believe help develop critical thinking in students?
3. Do you think that topics such as equality, vulnerability, equity, among others, should be addressed in English classes? Why?
4. What skills have you acquired during your outreach practicum to prepare you as a future English teacher?
5. What do you think about having had the freedom to modify the guide provided by the instructor? Why?
6. Do you believe that the English classroom can be a space where students seek solutions to improve society? Why?
7. Were your students able to discuss, consider, and promote changes in society in response to inequity? Please explain your answer.
8. Do you believe that through dialogue and discussions in English class, equal conditions can be promoted? Why?
9. Did you use dialogue and open communication as a strategy to share ideas, thoughts, and ideologies and to seek solutions to social problems? Please explain your answer.
10. Do you believe that through different learning activities in English class, students' awareness can be raised to foster critical thinking and interest in social issues? Why?

Source

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