BELIEFS, ATTITUDES, AND REFLECTIONS OF EFL PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS
WHEN EXPLORING CRITICAL LITERACY THEORIES, PREPARING AND
IMPLEMENTING CRITICAL LESSONS

A Thesis Presented by
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Submitted to the School of Languages of
Universidad de Antioquia Medellin in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MAGISTER EN ENSEÑANZA Y APRENDIZAJE DE LENGUAS EXTRANJERAS

November 2014

Master’s in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning
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DEDICATION
To my partner whose love and faith in me
kept me going in times of struggle.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research project would not have been possible without the support of my advisors; Dr. Doris Correa who helped me through the path of finding and designing a project I felt passionate about, and Dr. Paula Echeverri who patiently bore with my stubbornness and guided me in the research process. Furthermore, I wish to thank the three students who agreed to be part of this journey and whose honesty and commitment allowed me to learn more than I had envisioned. Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues and friends, especially Janeth, whose support and wise remarks abetted me to move forward.
ABSTRACT

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November 2014

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MEDELLIN, COLOMBIA

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Foreign language teaching and learning is an issue of high relevance nowadays in Colombia. Unfortunately, as noted by several scholars, language teaching has often been reduced to the mastery of language structures, disregarding the vast number of possibilities that language teaching provides to involve students in the discussion and analysis of issues that affect their everyday life. Achieving this shift in language teaching, however, has to start in language teacher preparation programs.

To gain a better understanding of this issue, this study explored the beliefs, attitudes, and reflections of three student-teachers, from a foreign language teaching program at a university in Medellin, towards the exploration of critical literacy theories, and the design and implementation of critical lessons. Data collected for this study included audio-recordings of group discussions and individual interviews with the three participants, their reflections in different stages, lesson plans, and class observations of their lesson implementation. Results from this study suggest that exposing future EFL teachers to
critical literacy approaches to language teaching can have different effects on their perspectives towards education and their teaching practice. Thus, those effects might be influenced by factors such as their teaching experience, their backgrounds, and their prior beliefs.

Key words: pre-service EFL teachers, critical literacies, language teacher preparation programs, teaching practicum.
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Introduction

“Schools are places where students can learn to transform society” (Gainer, 2010, p.364).

A study conducted by the United Nations in 2005 revealed that Colombia has one of the highest violence rates in the world, social injustice and inequalities are present in people’s everyday lives (UNHCR, 2012). Given this situation, there is no doubt schools should become places where students can explore those issues while gaining access to content, literacy, and a critical sense of citizenship (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008, p.50). They should also be social and cultural spaces where education breaches the gap between the classroom and the outside world (Pennycook, 2001 p. 117), encouraging learners to reflect about their context and to commit to the achievement of a more just society (Freire, 1970, p. 67).

However, to achieve this, teachers would need to go beyond the teaching of academic concepts to provide learners with the means by which they can critically analyze and understand their reality, so that they become part of the transformation of society (Freire 1970, p. 106). They would need to move from focusing on mere skill development to focusing on using education as a social practice (Luke, 2000, p. 459). Furthermore, they would need to break the reproductive role that school has traditionally played, for it has not allowed learners to understand, critic and commit to that social transformation that is needed in today’s world (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008, p. 23). Besides, teachers would need to find ways to connect the curriculum to the students’ realities and experiences in a particular context, and adapt their teaching strategies to match the social needs of those students (Giroux, 1994, p. 40).
Finally, teachers would need to beware of the content they bring to the classroom and the type of resources they use in teaching since these have an impact on students’ ability to re-think and shape not only their future but also the future of their communities (Luke, 2000, p. 449). By doing all of this, teachers would not only allow for more relevant education in terms of literacy development, but also ensure that a sense of citizenship is built to help learners make better informed decisions (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008, p.27).

Language teachers cannot be the exception in this transformation of society. Language, as defined by Cook (2008, p. 2) is “at the centre of human life”. Therefore, as Pennycook (2001, p. 76) has insisted, there is a growing need for language teachers to avoid seeing language learning as mere psycholinguistic processes, as transfer, as the ability to master skills, or as only a cognitive process. Instead, language teachers need to see language learning as a social, as well as a cultural process (Macedo, 2003, p. 32). Furthermore, language teachers need to understand and unveil that language has a cultural, social and political relevance, and adopt a more critical approach to teaching it, which requires to see language as a means to critically deconstruct, analyze and resist those discourses which maintain the status quo (Shor, 1999, p. 7).

Critical theories arise as a realm of perspectives that could help language teachers in this task, since to critical scholars language is not neutral (Janks 1993; Lankshear 1994 and 1997; Shor, 1999). Language is a practice that constructs the way learners perceive themselves, understand their history and the world around them, and envision possibilities for their future (Norton &Toohey, 2004, p. 1). Besides, while it is a tool to exercise power
and to enhance everyday life, it is also a powerful instrument to question practices of privilege and injustice and to seek social transformation (Comber, 2001, p. 173).

This view of language calls for “a new type of literacy” (Kramsch & Nolden, 1994, p. 21) in foreign language education that promotes critical reflection on the part of the learners and for a transformation in pedagogy that distances from the mere transmission of information to support learners in the construction of meaning over a mechanic acquisition of linguistic knowledge (Kramsch & Nolden, 1994, as cited in Kern, 2000). Accordingly, this critical view of language and language teaching has to start in language teacher preparation programs where traditional views of language, teaching and learning can be challenged and transformed.

Nevertheless, in Colombia, this perspective of language and language teaching has barely started to permeate language teaching education programs. Cárdenas, (2009) affirms that even though most language teacher education programs recognize the social purpose of education, the focus on transmission of knowledge and skill development is still evident. In fact, while teachers from different countries in the world have started to incorporate critical literacy practices in their teaching, striving for social transformation (Christensen, 2000; Vasquez, 1998; Cowhey 2006; Comber, Thomson & Wells 2001; Morrell 2002), a review of articles published in the last 8 years in the four most representative Colombian language journals shows that even though some Colombian language instructors have begun to be interested in critical issues (Barrera & Cantor, 2007; Castañeda, 2008; Durán, 2006; Pineda, 2004; Tejada& Vargas, 2007; Torres, 2009; Umbarila, 2010; and Vargas, 2010) only some of them, Agudelo (2007), Díaz and Carmona (2010), Díaz, Guerra, and
Rodríguez (2008), Piñeros and Quintero (2006) and Samacá and Hernández (2006) have made a case for the inclusion of critical practices in teacher preparation programs.

For instance, Agudelo (2007) reports his experience teaching a course entitled Language, Culture and Diversity at a language teacher preparation program in Medellín with students from seventh semester. His purpose was to find out about the impact of the use of an intercultural approach in the course on students’ views of culture and teaching practices. The author found that at the end of the course students had a different view of culture and its relevance in language teaching and that this new view led them to incorporate more inclusive cultural components and discourses in their lessons (p. 207). In a similar vein, Samacá and Hernández (2006) invite language teaching programs to make language teaching an interdisciplinary matter in which culture is considered a fundamental component. On the other hand, Díaz and Carmona (2010) and Piñeros and Quintero (2006) promote the inclusion of critical components in language teaching programs, to allow language teachers to become reflective of their practice, considering the needs of the context where they teach. Similarly, Díaz, Guerra, and Rodríguez (2008) advocate for the need of language teachers who teach from a more critical and political stance, making use of all their linguistic and cultural possibilities, having as a starting point a conscious reflection of their principles and beliefs about their teaching practice (p. 93).

In spite of these compelling arguments to include a critical component in language teacher education, at the practicum level, pre-service language teachers seem to be unaware of this critical view of language and language teaching in their practice. An interview to some practicum supervisors conducted during a pilot study I carried out during the second semester of 2012, at the teacher preparation program where this study took place, shows
that the few supervisors who have tried to guide pre-service teachers towards a more
critical approach to language teaching have encountered resistance. For them, this
resistance might stem from the fact that along the teaching preparation program, students
have not been faced with a view of language other than the mastery of skills and a view of
teaching English as an end. In their opinion, at their practicum stage, students have not
really been asked to consider how language teaching may have a more social role or how
they can plan their lessons in a more critical way; that is, lessons that are not only intended
to develop students’ linguistic skills, but also to awaken their awareness of their realities
and develop their sense of citizenship.

The resistance encountered by practicum advisors, and the still persistent focus on
transmission of linguistic knowledge and development of language skills found by
Cárdenas (2009) is reflected in a number of theses presented by pre-service teachers, at the
end of their practicum, in the teacher preparation program where this study took place. The
vast majority of pre-service teachers seem mostly concerned with topics such as developing
students’ language skills (Bedoya, 2008; Carmona, 2008; Castañeda, 2009; Echeverry,
2009; Giraldo, 2009; Hernández, 2009; Herrera, 2008; Patiño, 2008; Ramírez, 2009;
Suarez, 2008 and Zapata, 2008), improving students’ behavior in class (Durango 2009;
Montoya, 2008 and Perez, 2010) or fostering students’ engagement and positive attitudes in
their English classes (Alvarez, 2009; Becerra, 2009; Bilbao, 2009; Loaiza, 2008 and
Martínez, 2009).

The analysis of all these evidence, led me to realize that by the time pre-service
teachers entered the practicum stage their main concern was teaching the language in an
isolated manner, without considering the social issues that surrounded their students in the
different schools where they carried out their practicum. Therefore, there is a clear need to have language teacher preparation programs concerned with the education of teachers who view language and language teaching as possibilities to reflect and achieve social transformation. Accordingly, it would be necessary to expose pre-service language teachers to critical approaches to teaching that distance from mere transmission of linguistic knowledge, hoping that such exposure leads them to strive to engage their students in critical reflections while improving their academic skills. Hence, understanding how pre-service teachers respond to and reflect on this exposure to critical literacy theories, and their attempt to take theory to practice, would enable the actors involved in language teacher preparation programs to make informed decisions considering what this shift toward language teaching entails.

In an attempt to address this need, this study intended to see how pre-service language teachers understand and respond to critical literacy theories, specifically at the practicum stage. Therefore, I explored the beliefs, attitudes, and reflections of three pre-service teachers at an EFL teacher preparation program housed at a public university in Medellin when exploring critical literacy theories to prepare and implement critical lessons. The specific question I asked is What are EFL pre-service teachers’ beliefs, attitudes, and reflections when exploring critical literacy theories and when preparing and implementing critical lessons at their practicum sites? To respond to this question I followed four phases: First, the participants and I explored and analyzed how different scholars have implemented critical theories in their classrooms. Second, I asked participants to design a set of lesson plans that reflected their understanding of critical theories and at the same time were
connected to their school curricula. Finally, participants were asked to reflect on their process of lesson design and implementation.

The exploration of participants’ beliefs about critical literacy theories and their attitudes and reflections as they attempt to design and implement critical lessons in different school contexts may contribute to unveil how pre-service teachers understand critical literacy theories and incorporate them into their practice. Understanding this process might allow language teacher preparation programs to incorporate a critical component that tackles the needs and struggles pre-service teachers face in the journey of becoming familiar with critical literacy theories and taking these theories to practice. Moreover, this understanding of how critical theories can be put into practice, may shed some light to respond to the assertion of such theories being too theoretical or unlikely to effectively take place in the classroom, as mentioned by Ellesworth, (1989).

On the other hand, the exploration and reflection on critical literacy theories might lead the participants in this study to understand the relevance of teaching English from a critical stance, thus incorporating this approach to their practice. In order to provide a clear context for the study, I divided this thesis into six sections: In the first section, I present the theories that support the study. In the second section, I provide information about the participants of the study and the setting in which it was carried out. Next, I describe the data collection methods that I used and the way in which the data collected was analyzed. In the fourth section I give an account of the findings of the study. Subsequently, I discuss those findings and, in the final section, I provide a conclusion of the study along with its pedagogical implications.
Theoretical Framework

This study draws on critical literacy theories, understanding critical literacy education as an approach that focuses on academic skill development while engaging students in the analysis of social issues to seek their transformation (Luke, 2000). Through time, Critical literacy (CL) has been described in many different ways. It has been regarded as a tool in the processes of identity formation, cultural engagement and all forms of human expressions (Luke & Woods, 2009, p. 9). It has also been conceptualized as “a theory for practice” (Morgan and Wyatt-Smith, 2000, p. 124) or as “a theoretical and practical attitude” (Luke 2000, p. 454), which means that it goes beyond a theory that influences practice, to being a theory that involves taking a position in and about the world and striving for social transformation Luke, 2000, p. 13 and Freire, 1970; Hull, 1993; McLaren, 1989; UNESCO, 1975 (as cited in Morrell, 2002).

Contrary to traditional education which has focused on transmitting standard knowledge, CL attempts to bring meaningful real-world issues to the classroom and encourages learners to read not only words but the world behind the construction of texts (Freire, 1970, p. 68). This reading of the world helps learners to understand how language shapes who we are as part of a larger culture (Shor, 1999, p. 2). CL also allows learners to resist dominant mainstream ideologies which are marginalizing (Luke & Woods, 2009, p. 12) and to identify the connection between language and power relationships (Behrman, 2006, p. 491). Moreover, it provides learners with the knowledge to challenge the status quo and search for new alternatives for their development and the promotion of justice (Shor, 1999, p. 9).
If well it is true that there is no formula for fostering CL (Luke, 2000, p. 454) and the approach is continually being redefined in the classroom (Comber, 2001, p. 4), scholars such as McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004), Vasquez (1998), Morrell (2002), Cowhey (2006) and Comber, Thomson and Wells (2001) have provided very useful insights as to how to actually do CL in a classroom. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) present four principles inherent to CL and offer some ideas to guide learners to read from a critical stance, allowing them to see texts from multiple perspectives and to become active thinkers.

Vasquez (1998), for instance, proposes the inclusion of spaces in the classroom where critical conversations about social justice and equity can be held with young students while they also become involved in the negotiation of the curriculum. To make these conversations possible, the author has suggested the use of students’ everyday texts and experiences not as mere accessories to the curriculum but as the main components of it.

While Vasquez (1998) focuses on a critical curriculum development, Cowhey (2006) has proposed an approach which focuses on promoting the development of critical literacy while engaging students in philosophical discussions. These discussions are around common everyday issues and conflicts students are faced with, which Cowhey (2006) uses as input for educating citizens who think critically. To her, learning takes place when there is space for discussions, for the questioning and re-examination of cultural assumptions and values, so that it allows all students’ voices to be heard (Cowhey, 2006, p. 13).

In contrast to Vasquez and Cowhey whose work is mostly focused on young children, Morrell (2002) has concentrated his work on teenagers and proposes the inclusion
of popular culture into the school curriculum as an instrument to help students deconstruct dominant narratives and aim for a more inclusive society where there is equity and where there is a connection between students’ experiences and school practices. To achieve this purpose, he suggests the use of music, films and mass media as tools that portray a more inclusive perspective of culture.

Finally, Comber, Thomson and Wells (2001) propose an approach that aims at going beyond the school walls. In their perspective, education involves a commitment from students and teachers to seek social justice and equity, while enhancing their literacy knowledge. This combination allows students to take action to improve their worlds and therefore build a better future. To put it into practice, they suggest using students’ concerns about the issues that negatively affect their context as class material and encouraging students to implement actions that could lead them to improving such issues.

Through these instances of ways to promote critical language teaching, teachers can help develop learners’ literacy skills and encourage them to start adopting critical stances not only in the classrooms but outside of them. Learners, on the other hand, may become interested in taking action in different ways to respond to those issues discussed in class and to improve the matters that concern them or their communities, thus becoming part of the social transformation for which critical literacy aims. Embracing this challenge is not an easy endeavor and nobody could negate the great defy teachers and language teacher preparation programs have ahead.

**Language teacher preparation programs.** Language teacher education has constantly been challenged to respond to the needs society faces. Teaching from a more
critical stance is clearly one of those needs. Nonetheless, responding to this need, and doing the above mentioned activities in the classroom requires rigorous preparation on the part of teachers. To Nieto (2004, p. 352), this preparation has to start during the teacher preparation program and needs to go beyond providing knowledge about the specific subject matter. That is to say, these programs need to prepare future teachers not only to teach the structures of a language, but to bring and discuss social issues in the classroom, so that as teachers they assume language teaching from a critical stance and become critical of their practice.

For authors such as Pennycook (2001, p.139), this preparation needs to aim for teachers’ understanding that everything we teach, the way we teach, the materials we use, the way we carry out assessment and the way we respond to students is political and has social implications that go beyond the classroom. Moreover, for authors such as Cochran-Smith (2000); Freire (1999); Grimmett (1999); Horton and Mclaren (2000); Powell (2001); Rodriguez and Villaverde (2000); Vavrus and Archibald (1998) (as cited in Kincheloe, 2008, p. 5), teacher preparation needs to be based on the premise that issues of justice are part and parcel of language teaching. If this premise is ignored, teachers would simply use their practice to unconsciously reproduce the status quo, without validating students’ cultures and identities, as noted by Bartolomé (2004, p. 117).

Furthermore, Johnson (1994) makes a case for the importance of considering teachers’ beliefs as they play a fundamental role for teacher education. Language teacher preparation programs’ curricula need to take into account the beliefs pre-service teachers bring to the programs, which are rooted in their prior experiences in the classroom. Kennedy, (1999, p. 57) asserts that based on their past experiences as students, most pre-
service teachers enter a program with preconceived ideas about education. Such ideas will influence how pre-service teachers interpret and respond to certain situations and will undoubtedly guide their future teaching practices (Johnson, 1994; Bailey et al. 1996) unless they are altered during pre-service teacher education. That is to say, one of the roles of pre-service teacher education is to uncover teachers’ beliefs and promote a shift in students’ thinking to influence their future impact in the classroom to respond to the needs of society.

**Teaching practicum.** Practicum experiences among pre-service teachers are often described as the most important part of teacher education for they provide future teachers with the opportunity to integrate their theoretical knowledge to practice (Hill & Brodin, 2004; High & Tuck, 2000; Glickman & Bey, 1990, as cited in Tuli & File, 2009, p. 113). This integration is essential to educate teachers who can learn to respond to the great range of needs students have (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 40). Additionally, the teaching practicum allows pre-service teachers to teach in a real school context (Zeichner, 1996) while they conduct research on the factors that impact the class development, either in terms of curriculum, pedagogical practices or assessment (Groundwater-smith, 1996). This is precisely the case of the practicum at the university where this study took place.

Considering all the above, Zeichner, (1996) and Darling-Hammond, (1999) insist on the need of having practicum experiences in which pre-service teachers gain a wider perspective of education and have the opportunity to try different ideas that broaden their view of teaching and learning. Similarly, Crookes (2003) makes a case for the importance of EFL teachers to “articulate their view and values concerning their practice” (p.45). In the case of prospective teachers, the teaching practicum may provide them with an invaluable opportunity to explore and acknowledge and reflect on these views. In fact, the teaching
practicum is seen as an opportunity to witness how pre-service teachers’ principles and theoretical knowledge about teaching influence their practice or, on the contrary, how their practice alters their beliefs and allows them to verify theory (Batra, 2009).

Following the same line of thought, Crookes (2003, p. 47) goes further and asserts that “it is impossible to act, as a teacher, without having theories (including values) which inform teaching actions, at least to some degree”. Thus, the author insists on the importance of having EFL teachers explore such matter. Likewise, the teaching practicum allows teacher educators to gain insight of how pre-service teachers understand and appropriate different theories, such as the critical ones, their beliefs and attitudes toward approaches to language teaching and their responses and reflections when taking these approaches to action in their classrooms. Gaining this understanding might allow language teacher preparation programs to foresee and address the challenges that shifts in education could pose for both the program and the future language teachers.

Accordingly, there is no doubt that language teacher preparation programs have a difficult task at hand if they intend to prepare prospective teachers to respond to the wide range of needs students and society in general have. Nonetheless, this difficult endeavor cannot be avoided for our society is desperately in need of an approach to education that considers not only students’ academic development but their investment in social transformation.

Bearing in mind the high relevance of the teaching practicum, the need to have more critical language teachers and to understand what this process entails, the study proposed here intended explore the participants’ beliefs, attitudes, and reflections on the exploration
of critical literacy theories, to design and implement critical lessons. This study was conducted at a language teacher preparation program practicum in Medellin by having three pre-service teachers first, explore different CL approaches to language teaching and how these have been incorporated in other contexts. Second, participants attempted to design critical literacy oriented lessons for their particular teaching context, and reflected on the process of lesson design and implementation of those critical lessons.

In the following section, I will provide more information about the setting in which classes were taught as well as some information about the course, personal characteristics and teaching experience of the pre-service teachers participating in this study.
The Setting

This study took place at a language teacher preparation program in a public university in Medellin. The program offers pre-service teachers the possibility to choose doing their teaching practicum in either English or French during the last two semesters of their major. The practicum takes place in public schools of the city or, in some exceptional cases, in private schools if these are their work place or if it is carried out in French.

The teaching practicum has two components: a research and a practicum seminar. The advisor in the research seminar focuses on guiding students into identifying a problematic issue they want to address at their practicum site, the ways to collect and analyze data, and the proposal of action strategies to improve such issue. On the other hand, the advisor in the practicum seminar, guides student-teachers in the exploration of teaching theories, and supports them in the preparation and implementation of lesson plans that respond to the needs of their students at their practicum site. In the following section, I will provide a description of the specific course in which this study took place, of the participants involved in it, and of the role that I played.

The Course

The Practicum I seminar is the first semester of a whole-year practicum. In it, the practicum advisor helps the student teachers identify an issue in the assigned classroom and propose different strategies to address it. This seminar meets weekly for two hours. Every week they have a reading assignment guided by some questions that are discussed in the next meeting. During this seminar, advisors engage students in discussions around teaching theories, assessment, classroom management and so forth. Besides, they explore student
teachers’ beliefs about teaching, and prepare lesson plans intended to address a situation they identified in the classroom. For this process, student teachers take into account their context, their students’ interests, and the school demands, which they become familiar with after observing their English classes during the first two months of their academic year.

Additionally, pre-service teachers and the advisor discuss what happens during both their class observations and their teaching hours, analyze the issues they encountered, and discuss the theories that would help them to better respond to the difficulties they are facing. Therefore, during the first semester, pre-service teachers usually try out different teaching strategies as they confront theory and practice in the classroom so that they can have a better understanding of their context and students’ needs and gain confidence in their practice.

Participants
As a practicum advisor, I was assigned a group of 3 pre-service teachers by the coordinator of the practicum; two male students and one female. They were all very committed students with fairly strong and different opinions that enriched our class discussions. Although they were close in age, their teaching experience significantly varied and this factor also brought a variety of perspectives to the seminar.

David is a 26-year-old student, with experience as a teacher-assistant in the United States and some years of teaching experience in a private university. Ever since high school he wanted to be a teacher and, as he claimed, he could not picture himself doing something different. At the moment of the research he was still working as an English teacher at a private university although his practicum was conducted at a public high school.
Carolina is a 25 year-old student. She comes from a family of teachers and so teaching became her passion. At the moment of the research she had been teaching for two years at a private language institute, and, at the same time, at an outreach English program for youth, in a public university. She had experience traveling abroad and that had certainly influenced her view of language learning and teaching. Her practicum took place at a prestigious private high school in the outskirts of the city.

Camilo is a 24-year-old student with no previous experience in teaching. He explained that when he first entered the program, he was not aware that it was intended for teachers. Nonetheless, when he found out about it, he decided to give it a chance and after four years of preparation, he ended up doing his teaching practicum in a sixth grade at a public school.

Along with these participants was I, the practicum supervisor and researcher. As a practicum supervisor, I had had the opportunity to guide other groups of pre-service teachers in this program for one year. In the process, I had noticed that, along the teacher preparation program, there was no emphasis given to the preparation of teachers who developed critical awareness of their school contexts. This fact, led pre-service teachers to focus on the transmission of linguistic knowledge in the schools where they carried out their practicum. Noticing this phenomenon increased my interest in understanding what would happen if pre-service teachers also had the opportunity to explore critical approaches and to design and implement lessons from a more critical perspective; that is, lessons that addressed social issues related to students’ contexts. I deeply believed such an interest was worth pursuing. Language teaching preparation programs need to start graduating EFL teachers who care about their students’ literacy development as well as their development
of a critical view of our world; our society needs citizens concerned with the improvement of their surrounding and the construction of a more just and inclusive society.

In the following paragraphs, I will provide details on how I conducted this exploration; the type of study I conducted, the methods that I used, the specific instruments I chose to collect the data, and how that data was analyzed.
Method

This research study intended to explore pre-service language teachers’ beliefs, attitudes, and reflections on the exploration of critical literacy approaches to education, and towards the design and implementation of critical lessons during their teaching practicum. To gain a deeper understanding of this process I selected a qualitative design since the study aimed at “understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world.” (Merriam, 2009, p. 13). Therefore, I followed a case study design for it allowed me to examine and analyze, in depth and through different data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 544), the experiences that this group of pre-service teachers encountered when exploring critical literacy theories, and designing and implementing their critical lessons. This process enabled me to see how participants’ understood critical literacy theories, and to explore their attitudes and reflections during the process of theory exploration, design and implementation of their lessons. It also provided me with the possibility of analyzing the particular phenomenon without neglecting the context in which it took place. This was particularly relevant, since the phenomenon I wanted to analyze would vary greatly depending on the context.

The Unit

This project was divided into three phases that went from February 1st to May 31st. For all three phases I brought questions to each session intended to provoke further discussion and reflection which allowed me to evidence how participants responded to the readings and, as participants answered the questions, rich discussions took place among themselves. In order to set a background for this study, participants initially reviewed
different traditional approaches to language teaching and discussed their role as language teachers. (See Appendix A – Group discussions 1, 2, & 3)

**Phase 1. Exploring critical literacy approaches to education:** The purpose of this phase was twofold; on the one hand, exposing participants to texts that portrayed the ways different scholars have taken critical literacy to the classroom. This exposure allowed participants to identify some principles behind this approach, a variety of strategies that could be used, and the different scopes that each scholar had intended for their lessons. On the other hand, this phase had the objective of analyzing the possibilities of having a more critical approach to language teaching in the participants’ specific school contexts.

For this phase, I selected five different articles. The first one was *Critical Literacy as Comprehension: Expanding readers’ response*, written by McLaughlin and DeVoogd, (2004). This article fitted perfectly with my purpose of exposing participants to a realm of possibilities to develop critical literacy in the classroom because, in it, the authors “present starting points for helping students to become critically aware, including a rationale for reading from a critical stance and ideas to foster students' engagement in critical literacy.” p. 52. Through this reading, the participants explored some principles inherent to critical literacy, such as its focus on issues of power, the promotion of reflection, transformation, and action (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p.54). After exploring this reading, participants were asked to write a reflection on the possibilities of including this approach to education in their school context. (See appendix A – Group discussion 4)

The second reading was *Black Ants and Buddhists: Thinking critically and teaching differently in the primary grades*, by Cowhey (2006). Although none of the participants was doing the teaching practicum in an elementary school, it was evident that they did not
consider children or teenagers as capable or interested in discussing social issues. This reading enabled participants to explore a realm of topics that could be brought to the classroom and different degrees of reflection that could be promoted among students. (See appendix A – Group discussion 5)

Vasquez, (2003) has traditionally advocated for the design and implementation of a curriculum that includes topics and issues relevant to students. For this reason, the third article I brought was *Negotiating Critical Literacies with young children*, by Vasquez (2004). In this reading, the author provides ideas on how such endeavor can be accomplished, and how students’ world can be brought to and analyzed in the classroom. Exploring this reading enabled participants to discuss the relevance of transforming schools’ curricula and to analyze to what extent the curriculum proposed in each one of the schools where they were carrying out their practicum, attempted to include topics relevant to students. (See appendix A - Group discussion 6)

The fourth reading was *Promoting Academic Literacy with Urban Youth through Engaging Hip-hop Culture*, written by Morrell and Duncan Andrade (2002). This reading portrays possibilities for English teachers to incorporate popular culture in their lessons to critically analyze its impact in students’ lives while enhancing their development of academic skills. The exploration of this reading provided opportunities for participants to discuss how popular trends may reflect the state of a society and how it could be used in the English class to promote students’ reflection. (See appendix A – Group discussion 8)

The last reading participants explored was *Critical Literacy Finds a "Place": Writing and Social Action in a Low-Income Australian Grade 2/3 Classroom*, by Comber, Thomson and Wells (2001). This final article showed participants the possibility of transcending the school walls and transforming issues discussed in the classroom into
opportunities to have an impact on the communities students belong to. (See appendix A – Group discussion 9)

Concluding this stage, the participants in this study were familiar with a realm of possibilities to transform their English classes towards a more critical perspective of education, having analyzed critical literacies and its principles, the strategies used by different scholars, and the possibilities, benefits and limitations of implementing similar strategies in our context.

Although this phase was mainly focused on the exploration of different critical approaches to teaching, during the seventh group discussion, participants discussed a situation in which another pre-service teacher, from a different group, encountered several issues (drugs, sexual abuse, absent parents, suicide) in the classroom where he was carrying out his practicum. Therefore, participants were asked to write a letter to this pre-service teacher, giving him advice on how to address those issues from his English classes. This additional activity allowed participants to reflect on the possibilities critical literacies provided for teachers to tackle both language teaching and a critical approach to education. (See appendix A – Group discussion 7)

**Phase 2: Lesson design.** During the second phase, I asked pre-service teachers to prepare critical literacy oriented lessons, taking into account their specific contexts and school curricula. The number of lessons was determined by the number of hours of English per week, established in each school. In this case, four hours in public schools and five in the private one where students were conducting their practicum. The purpose of this stage was twofold: to understand the participants’ reflection on the process of lesson design, and to see how participants reflected their understanding of critical literacy theories on the
lessons they designed. Therefore, once they shared their lessons with me I used a series of questions to help them reflect on how their lesson plans were critical or not, and encouraged them to propose ways to turn them into critical lessons when their first attempt had not been successful (See appendix A - Group discussion 10). Providing feedback this way enabled me to explore first how participants had understood the theories discussed during the seminars, instead of leading them into designing lessons proposed by me.

**Phase 3: Lesson implementation.** In this final stage, participants began to implement their lessons. The aim of this phase was to explore how participants felt when taking critical literacy theories to their practice and to understand their struggles, successes and reflections on this stage. Observations were not focused on how participants implemented their lessons or on how students responded to them because that was not the focus of this study. To finish this stage, all the participants and me gathered and discussed the results of the implementation and their reflections on this process. Moreover, I shared my interpretations of this study with the participants to confirm if what I had found coincided with their perceptions. (See appendix A – Group discussions 11 & 12).

In the following section I will provide an account of the data collection process I followed and the instruments used to gather data from the participants. Likewise, I will describe the purpose of each instrument and the schedule I followed.

**Data Collection**

Four data collections strategies were used for this study. The first one consisted of group discussions during which the participants explored critical literacy approaches to education. These discussions led participants to analyze the readings and provide multiple
perspectives so that I could understand their different beliefs, attitudes and reflections while at the same time they became aware of their own standpoints on the topics discussed (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p.109). The second method included interviews in which participants reflected on their process of lesson design and implementation. This method, as stated by Bogdan and Biklen (2007, p.103), allows the researcher to gather data about the participants’ interpretation of specific aspects, expressing this interpretation in their own words. Thirdly, the participants produced some personal documents as defined by Plummer, 1983; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984 (as cited in Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) which consisted of “any first-person narrative that describes an individual’s actions, experiences, and beliefs. Those personal documents (reflections, letters and lesson plans) mirrored their reflections and understanding of the theories. Finally, I conducted unstructured observations of the classes the participating pre-service teachers taught. Glesne (2006) considers that, through this method, researchers can observe the participants experiences in a particular setting, which was precisely what I intended to do. These observations aimed at determining whether further questions were necessary or not for the last group discussion. All of these methods were essential for the grounded analysis I did afterwards.

The process of data collection began on February 1st, 2013, when I first met my participants to formally inform them about the research project and gave them a consent form (Appendix B) to obtain their permission to collect data from both group discussions and class observations. Participants’ names were changed to protect their identity and they were informed they could withdraw from the study at any time without facing any consequences. As well, I informed them that the data collected would only be accessed by me and it would be used solely for the purpose of this study. This whole research process
ended on May 31st, when students had implemented their lessons and the results had been shared and discussed.

**Audio recordings of group discussions.** The audio recordings were done during all the group discussions in which I met with the participants. The purpose of these twelve audio recordings was to have evidence on how the participants responded to the exploration of the readings, their beliefs, attitudes and reflections towards the design and implementation of their lesson plans, and how they responded to each other’s and my own comments and questions.

**Interviews.** Eight individual interviews were conducted with all the participants. The purpose of these interviews was to gain a better understanding of the participants’ beliefs and reflections when they were faced with critical approaches to teaching. Interview questions were based on the participants’ reactions and responses during our group discussions, lesson design, class implementation, and the personal documents they produced. (See appendix A - Group discussions 10 & 11)

**Student-teacher personal documents.** These personal documents Plummer, 1983; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984 (as cited in Bogdan & Biklen 2007) consisted of three reflections, one letter, the lesson plans the pre-service teachers prepared and the supporting teaching materials they chose. Although participants were asked to write reflections every week for the group discussions, only three of the reflections were guided by specific questions in each of the phases: when exploring one of the readings, after having designed the lesson plans, and after implementing the lessons. These reflections served as evidence of the way pre-service teachers not only perceived critical literacy theories and approaches, but also of the way in which they articulated theory and practice, and their reflection after implementing their lessons. Participants were asked to write these reflections regarding
their ideas and feelings towards critical literacy approaches, and their struggles and achievements when preparing and implementing their lesson plans in the classroom. Participants were also invited to write a letter for another practicum student, giving him advice on how to address social issues from his English class. This tool provided an opportunity for participants to reflect theory on practical suggestions and enabled me to see how participants understood the critical literacy theories we had explored until that point of the study.

Lesson plans were collected between April 27th and May 24th. These lessons mirrored the way these pre-service teachers understood the theories and reflected this understanding on their chosen lessons and materials. Some aspects that allowed me to analyze their understanding were the topics and type of questions they included in their lessons, the way they structured their lessons to meet both the curricular demands and their students’ needs, the materials used and the reflections proposed throughout the preparation and implementation of the lesson plans.

Class observations. These took place between April 27th and May 24th. During this time, the participants implemented the lessons they had planned after having explored different ways in which scholars had taken critical literacies to the classroom. Each set of three lessons was developed in a period of one to two weeks, depending on the number of hours the students taught per week. As the participants implemented their lessons, I observed their classes focusing on various aspects, namely: the questions participants asked, their responses to students’ questions and answers, their stance towards the topics they had chosen for the lesson and, to a lesser extent, I took notes of students’ responses to the lessons. These data were collected in the form of an observation schedule so that it was easier to analyze it later on. I observed and videotaped two classes per participant to have a
more detailed account of what happened in at least two of the lessons implemented. The purpose of these observations was to have more elements to prepare and incorporate relevant questions in further interviews.

**Data Analysis**

Grounded theory was the approach I used to analyze the participants’ beliefs, as well as their reflections when: a) exploring critical approaches to education, b) designing lessons that reflected their understanding of these approaches and c) reporting their experience when designing and implementing those lessons. The exploration and understanding of their beliefs, attitudes and reflections were the purpose of this study. Bearing in mind that the topic of this study has not been sufficiently explored in Colombia, as well as the fact that multiple factors could influence the participants’ responses to a more critical view of language teaching, Grounded theory was considered the most appropriate approach to analyze the data collected in this study. Additionally, this approach fit well with the data collection methods selected for the research.

I followed a simultaneous process of data collection and analysis which contributed to enrich the analysis in different stages and to adjust the process of data collection as stated by Glaser and Strauss (1967). For this first stage, I used the software NVivo which, as an analytical tool, allowed me to upload all the transcripts from the audio-recordings gathered in the group discussions, the ones from the interviews and some of the documents produced by the participants, namely, their reflections and the letters they wrote. Lesson plans and class observations were analyzed and coded separately which enabled me to see how participants’ understanding of the critical literacy theories explored was reflected on
the lessons they designed and implemented, and whether they confirmed or contradicted what participants had claimed during the group discussions, their written reflections, and the interviews.

Having uploaded all the data in the software, I began coding it. As stated by Glaser (1987) and Strauss and Corbin (1990), open coding is the first step in the process of data analysis. Therefore, I conducted a line-by-line analysis, coding actions, processes, and meanings I identified in the participants. The most salient codes were: CL is not suitable for young learners, large classes and non-proficient students cannot become critical, mandated curriculum and CL cannot be combined, discouragement, skepticism, optimism, resistance, struggle, contradictions, and success. Subsequently, I proceeded to conduct a close coding in which new data was checked and compared to see if it fitted existing codes or, on the contrary, new codes emerged from it. This stage allowed me to reach the saturation of data while refining further questions for data collection and determining if new data was necessary.

The close coding led me to the third stage of data analysis which consisted in comparing the data; either codes with codes, codes with data, and afterward codes with categories and final analyses of categories with existing relevant theory. During this process of comparison, memo-writing was fundamental. Not only it allowed me to recognize the properties of each category, but to ask analytical questions, challenge my first assumptions towards the data, and start to identify the conditions under which participants responded in certain ways during the study.
In the next stage of data analysis I conducted a theoretical sampling. This process consisted in gathering data to complement and understand the properties of the categories, comparing them and identifying how they were similar or different from each other so that they formed specific sets of categories. This stage constantly encouraged me to ask focused questions to the participants to better understand and saturate the characteristics of each category.

Finally, when the data had been fully analyzed, and no new categories emerged, I focused on establishing the possible relationships among the most salient categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) which in this study were: making sense of the theory, getting ready to teach, and moving from theory to practice. In the light of those categories and their properties, I was able to conclude that all of them fell into a core category consisting on the transformation of the participants’ perceptions and responses to critical literacy theories throughout the study. Then I proceeded to compare the findings with existing theory and to write the stories of the three participants, as suggested by Guest et al. (2012, p. 15–16) and Melis (1997), allowing their voices to narrate the findings.

In the following section I will present an account of those transformations in the participants’ beliefs, attitudes and reflections which were evident in three particular moments: when exploring critical literacy theories, while preparing their lesson plans from a critical stance, and finally, while implementing those lessons.
Findings

This study intended to see how pre-services teachers responded to the exploration of critical literacy approaches to teaching and to explore their beliefs, attitudes, and reflections during the stages of lessons design and implementation in the schools where they conducted their teaching practicum. Nonetheless, their reflections and responses in the stages of this study were significantly different and, in none of the stages the three participants’ perceptions coincided completely. Therefore, attempting to provide an account of their reflections in contrast/comparison to each other would only result in a fragmented version of their process. For this reason, I will “tell the story” (Strong, 1979, p. 257; Melis, 1997) of each participant separately, allowing the reader to see the process of self-transformations, struggles, contradictions, and successes of each actor in this study.

In the next paragraphs, I will report the beliefs, attitudes, and reflections the participants evidenced in three stages: when making sense of the theory, when designing their lessons and finally, when implementing them which as a whole will enable the reader to see the participants’ transformations in their beliefs, attitudes, and reflections towards the exploration of critical literacy theories, and the design and implementation of critical lessons throughout the study. However, the participants’ beliefs, attitudes, reflections, and transformations were so different in each stage that it was more enriching to report each case separately, while making evident the variances and similarities among each other.

David

An impossible shift from discourse to action. During the stage of exploration and discussion of critical literacy theories and their possibilities in our Colombian context,
David often expressed how relevant it was to shift from traditional education into a more reflective one in order to educate critical thinkers capable of understanding and transforming their realities.

In such a politically blind country like this, it is imperative {to have critical pedagogy}. From school, from home, every day we care less about what happens in this country. We keep having the same corrupt governors, and we don’t seem to have a reaction about it. So, I mean, undoubtedly, the teacher has a political power too. How you use it, might be dangerous but if you have your students think critically, that would be a huge contribution for them to analyze the political field of this country, if you wanna change it. (David, audio recording 4, February 22, 2013)

Qualified education is probably the only way for emancipation in an unfair society like ours, and qualified means that this education {from a critical approach} actually allows students to be active and critical thinkers who are later capable of transforming positively their realities with the knowledge they acquired. (David, Reflection 1, March 11th, 2013)

At the beginning of this stage, David acknowledged the challenges that changing our education system would pose and recognized how hard it would be to change the system:

Well, there is a system that, that precedes us, and it’s been there for a long, I mean a long time. […] it’s our comfort zone too, if it’s the way it’s been done, you get used to it, it’s easier, changing is difficult, it takes time, it takes money too, it takes, uh, teachers re-training, so let’s just keep doing the same thing, that’s what we kind of unconsciously think, that’s the way, it’s the way we were taught, too, right? So, so it’s also part of our beliefs. (David, audio recording 3, February 15, 2013)

Besides, he was concerned about parents’ reaction towards the topics brought into and discussed in his classes when trying to raise students’ awareness towards social issues related to politics or sexual identity:

(…) certainly we have to be really smart about the kind of discussions we propose, the texts we expose our students to, the conclusions they reach or the beliefs we are challenging. We cannot deny our political power and the big influence we may have on students. Therefore, we probably do not want elementary or secondary school students telling their parents that in our class they learned that the politician they voted for last elections is far away from the smiley figure they have watched on TV. Nor would we like to have parents come to us and complain about the fact that in our class their child came to the conclusion that Gay Marriage should be allowed in our country. (David, Reflection #2, March 18, 2013)

However, he felt optimistic towards the possibility of having this transformation and expressed how it was part of teachers’ responsibility to encourage students to become critically literate.
I believe it is possible to be critically literate and foster critical literacy in our context; at least to a certain extent. As teachers, we have the huge responsibility of guiding students towards expanding their reasoning and looking at issues from different perspectives. (David, Reflection 1, March 11th, 2013)

In addition, he showed awareness of some consequences students faced when kept away from becoming critical.

They {students} would continue to reproduce stereotypes, and be a fixed persona. (…) they are not reflective of what they do (…) so yeah, they miss the scope of reality. (David, audio recording 4, February 22, 2013)

In sum, during this stage of exploration, David acknowledged that transforming traditional education into a more critical one would require him to move out of his comfort zone, and showed awareness of the responsibility teachers had of educating critical students who cared about society. In spite of his belief that parents would oppose to the discussion of some social issues in the classroom, David felt it was not only possible but compelling to have such discussions to make students aware of their realities. Finally, David’s perception of a critical approach to education consisted of promoting education that led students to become aware of their realities through the analysis and discussion of social issues, and who grew interested in transforming and improving them.

Nonetheless, when David came to the stage in which he designed the lessons for his high school students in the public school where he was carrying out his teaching practicum, his perspective towards critical literacy theories drastically changed. At first, David considered that by bringing sentences or strategies students were not used to seeing in class, he would make his lessons critical as he felt he was transforming what was traditionally done in his context:

I wanted to transcend from common daily routines like “I take a shower” or “I go to school”, and instead, I presented examples like “I read the newspaper” or “I laugh with my best friend”. My unit
also reflects critical pedagogy by giving students new alternatives to learn and produce in the target language, applying strategies such as collaborative work and oral improvisation. (David, interview, April 27, 2013)

Later on, David acknowledged that he was facing so many limitations in his context that they prevented him from designing critical lessons; on the one hand, he struggled to connect the mandated curriculum to a theme that was relevant to his students’ reality. On the other hand, he affirmed that his students’ low language proficiency had kept him away from even trying to promote critical reflections in his class. At this point, when considering the possibility of teaching from a critical stance in his school context, David’s optimism had significantly decreased as evidenced in the following quotes:

When content matches proficiency it is possible to do new things but not when it doesn’t match (…) What I’m saying is I can’t really spend my energy in “how am I going to make this critical?” I’m focusing my energy on my main objective: I want them to get some basic elements to actually produce something even if it’s not critical. Because it would be doing many things at the same time. (David, interview 1, April 27, 2013)

(…) looking from different perspectives a situation, a problem, an issue; and not only analyzing but acting on it, I think that’s out of my reach in this context because I want them to be able to say, for example in past perfect, “When I got back from school, my mom had already prepared my food” I mean, if I can actually get them to produce something like that I would be like “Yes! I got it!” (David, interview 1, April 27, 2013)

As he claimed, these factors certainly impeded that he moved away from grammar in his lessons and, therefore, teaching language structures became his objective. In contrast, David stated that, in a different context or at the private university where he was working, he had been able to accomplish these goals since students already had the language knowledge to hold discussions.

How can I relate it to the social problems that are happening in the classroom so that we can transform that reality? I think that’s out of my reach right now. Why? Just like I’m telling you, if they had a different level or if the program was different or if I could be more flexible with what I can teach them, I think I could propose something more critical but, at this point, I don’t think I can do all of it at the same time. I know it’s interesting the discussion we’re having here and certainly there are a lot of things that I can apply, but I think I can apply them in a different context. (David, interview 1, April 27, 2013)
Well, (...) I work at X and I had the possibility to actually have students reflect because of the Earth day. The reflection was about what things we can actually do to help the planet and what things they have done because we were practicing present perfect so I wanted them to tell me what things they have done. (...) What I’m teaching them actually matches the level, their proficiency so then I can look for something that they can actually be critical with the level they have. But in this school I’m teaching something that is way too advanced, my main objective now cannot be critical thinking. (David, interview 1, April 27, 2013)

To summarize, David’s beliefs towards the possibility of having a more critical approach to language teaching drastically changed during this phase and his optimism regarding the implementation of critical lessons with beginners vanished. Therefore, he did not design critical lessons for he considered his school context did not allow it due to students’ low language proficiency level, and the contents given in the mandated curriculum. Instead, he devoted his lessons to provide students with activities that enabled them to practice the language structures the school curriculum stated without connecting them to themes students could discuss or reflect on in class.

Consequently, David could not really report his experience implementing a critical lesson in his school since his objective became leading students to master language structures and, as he admitted, critical literacy was not his priority at this point. Hence, for his lessons, David designed a game and an activity in pairs in which students described their classmate’s daily routine starting backwards. This way, students would practice past perfect which was the goal of his lesson. He also provided students with a worksheet and asked them to create a timeline using the past perfect structures.

Upon the conclusion of this study, I asked David whether he would consider teaching English from a more critical perspective in his future classes, to which he asserted: “I will try the second semester, maybe I will be telling you, ‘sorry but I couldn’t do it’, right now I want to think it’s possible.” (David, Interview 3, May 24, 2013).
In the next paragraphs I will describe Carolina’s experience which was significantly different from David’s. I will emphasize on the differences and similarities I encountered between her beliefs, attitudes, and reflections in the three stages and those reported by David and Camilo.

Carolina

Negotiating her beliefs with new evidence. While exploring the possibility of having a critical education system, Carolina felt it was necessary to prepare the road for it since her school curriculum and consequently students themselves were not accustomed to this type of education:

(…) They {schools} don’t have a connection between being critical and teaching something. For them it is something apart. Because when you teach English or any subject, you focus your teaching on traditional ways of teaching topics but not related to situations, or problems or issues. Any example that you give you don’t relate it to, like “Juan went to the supermarket” but you don’t connect, you don’t give real examples. Like in the class I observe, when there is an issue or a discussion, the teacher stops it because he thinks it’s going to ruin the class. Or the purpose of the class is not to discuss about that, the purpose of my class is to do this. That is something out of class, so they don’t have the purpose of doing that. (Carolina, audio recording 8, April 5, 2013)

It is necessary to create a culture of more reflection. Due to students’ lack of knowledge of this methodology it might be difficult at first to ask them to be more reflective. (Carolina, Reflection 1, 2013)

Like David, Carolina acknowledged that shifting education towards having critical students who cared about the world was important. She felt there is a need of teaching values to students and to help them “become aware of the world that is around them” (Carolina, audio recording 4, February 22, 2013), especially because in many cases students spent more time at school and with teachers than with their parents. In addition, Carolina considered that at her practicum site language teaching had traditionally been focused on linguistic aspects and, therefore, increasing students’ critical literacy knowledge was necessary to help them gain that awareness of their world:
We live in a context where many things happen and many things are never analyzed, students are less interested in reading and little relation is perceived between literacy and language teaching because language teaching has been more focused in other linguistic aspects than promoting literacy. (Carolina, reflection 1, 2013)

Although Carolina and David had not taught from a critical perspective, both of them believed they would encounter some limitations when trying to take this approach to their classrooms. On the one hand, Carolina felt skeptical that this approach was appropriate for young students.

I was thinking that “what age is better to start using this approach?” but I think 11 is OK. I would do it with children but not too much. (Carolina, audio recording 4, February 22, 2013)

On the other hand, like David, Carolina considered that parents would exert some pressure on them for either not using the textbook proposed by the school, or for encouraging certain discussions in their classes:

We need to follow a curriculum, a syllabus. Some activities or topics may be approached that way (through critical discussions) but some others I don’t know because some parents want proofs, they want to see what the students are doing, and sometimes when they have time in classes to just talk, they [parents] might see it as a problem. (Carolina, audio recording 7, March 22, 2013)

Moreover, Carolina believed that big groups would pose a challenge when trying to find an interesting theme for all her high school students to discuss and reflect on:

(…) the amount of students. It is easier to control that kind of learning (having critical discussions) if there are less students. How can you know that all of them are excited and willing to look for the same knowledge? Especially when they are teenagers, they think they know everything. (Carolina, Reflection 1, 2013)

Furthermore, as we analyzed how teachers along with their students took different actions to improve situations in their classrooms, schools, or communities, it was evident during the discussions, that Carolina and David felt discouraged to ask students to take actions, such as writing a letter to someone, in order to improve a problematic situation. As a matter of fact, they felt it was not worth the effort as they were sure no one would answer or listen to them. The following excerpt gives an account of this belief:
(…) because we think it is worthless. We think we’re not gonna get a response. If I think, “I’m gonna write a letter to the mayor” I won’t do it. Not because I don’t have problems to tell, but because I don’t think he’s gonna answer. I don’t think they really listen to you or to any other people. So, it’s not worth it. I’m not gonna waste my time. That’s how I feel. (Carolina, audio recording 7, March 22, 2013)

Finally, as part of Carolina’s perceived challenges to have a more critical education, she asserted that “people who are more critical are less happy because you start seeing the world so wrong.” (Carolina, audio recording 4, February 22, 2013)

In sum, although Carolina was aware of the relevance of shifting the traditional nature of language education towards a more critical one, she felt skeptical about the possibility of achieving this transformation for many reasons: students’ youth, parents’ pressure, large classes, her discouragement towards taking action to solve issues that affected society, and finally, her idea of the result that being critical would carry. In addition, she believed that people who became more aware of their surroundings started to feel less happy. All these factors fought against Carolina’s conviction that critical language education should focus on the analysis of issues relevant to students’ lives to create a culture of more reflection.

Contrary to David’s process, in the stage of lesson design, Carolina started to feel very optimistic and her attitude towards planning her class was one of even excitement:

Planning a lesson with critical approach, although it is more challenging, it is more interesting because you, as a teacher, feel more involved while doing it, you really want students to be part of it and it enables you as a teacher to know your students better. (Carolina, reflection 2, 2013)

You go deeper in things. It’s not just writing a sentence Subject + Verb + Complement but writing or saying something that has a real impact or that concerns you. (Carolina, interview 1, April 27, 2013)

In spite of her optimism, Carolina acknowledged that planning from this approach was more time consuming than usual as she faced some challenges trying to connect the grammar stated by the school curriculum to lessons that actually led her students to reflect.
It was difficult and challenging for me, because finding ways to connect your intended topic and address it in class through a critical perspective was not easy, you need to think carefully how the type of activities you do in class are going to have students reflecting in class and at the same time they [students] need to reflect by using the appropriate language or structures you are studying or you want them to learn. (Carolina, Reflection 2, 2013)

Additionally, Carolina believed her students would not be willing to talk about their lives. This factor was relevant to her lesson, since her intention was to have students reflect about decisions they and other people had made in different situations, and the possible consequences those decisions could bring. “But I’m kind of worried about it because students are kind of shy to talk about their personal lives in front of other classmates.”

In summary, at the end of this stage, Carolina had started to fight her skepticism and to focus on finding ways to make her English lessons opportunities to have students discussing and reflecting while learning the language topics stated by her school curriculum. Therefore, unlike David, Carolina succeeded at designing and implementing her critical lessons. In this stage, many of her beliefs were either ratified or dismissed by the evidence gathered in her teaching process. For instance, her initial conviction about the possibilities English offered her to go beyond language structures was confirmed:

I think that the good thing about English is that it allows the teacher to think about anything because it is language what you are developing and language is the tool you use to communicate your thoughts. What they [students] will remember is not the grammar aspect but other kind of lesson. (Carolina, interview 3, May 24, 2013)

Nevertheless, getting students to listen to each other and wait patiently to participate posed a challenge to Carolina. Thus, while teaching her lessons, and despite having evidence of her students’ engagement (Class observation 1, May 17, 2013), Carolina struggled to negotiate her idea of discipline to acknowledge whether her students were interested in her class or not, as they were not behaving as she expected them to:

Some girls that usually don’t participate were doing it which was impressive. They are very motivated. I needed to assign turns because everybody was saying things so I needed to control their
participation. (…) I’m having a hard time distinguishing when students are engaged and when they are not because I’m relating engagement with discipline. I am assuming if the class was behaving properly they were engaged. (Carolina, interview 2, May 17, 2013)

Contrary to Carolina’s belief that students would not be willing to talk about their lives, the opposite took place in her class (Class observation 2, May 24, 2013) as evidenced in the following excerpt:

I felt I was knowing them [students] better, because as I said before, I never saw those students to talk about their personal interests, only fake sentences and fake things. This time they tried to share their personal beliefs. (Carolina, interview 3, May 24, 2013)

Although Carolina believed students would feel and express they were not learning English when encouraged to discussing topics other than grammar, this was not the case in her class. As evidenced during the class observations I conducted, students were constantly engaged in the discussions and were willing to incorporate the new language structures in their interventions. However, when one of her male students did question the fact that a discussion about teenage pregnancy was taking place during the lesson, Carolina went back to that belief:

(…) and what Nicolas told me, “this is not a health class”, it’s a common belief. He’s not used to use English as a subject to talk about anything. He’s thinking that English equals grammar, past tense, present tense, vocabulary, but nothing else. (…)It was hard for students to go from merely studying grammar to start discussing in class by using grammar; they thought the content was not being too related to English. (Carolina, reflection 3, 2013)

Concerning students’ behavior and the level of reflection in their answers, Carolina reported that, at first, students’ behavior was not very positive and their answers were not very reflective as shown below:

At the beginning students were participating [giving their opinions about bad decisions they identified in some situations provided by Carolina] but were not actually very reflective. Their answers sounded more like they were trying to play around with each other or were trying to sound funny to the other students. (Carolina, interview 3, May 24, 2013)
Conversely, as her lessons progressed, Carolina felt students became more engaged and their answers also showed a higher level of reflection. Besides, she felt she was able to take advantage of their interaction to reinforce the language structures she wanted them to use:

I saw that they were committed to the activities because they came to me. They asked a lot of questions, they were asking me if those situations were real because some of them were impressed by that [real situations representing actions and consequences]. Their answers were more reflective. (...) I was also writing words when they mispronounced, when they didn’t say it grammatically correct. (...) I wrote them on the board or I asked the students to tell me what he missed. The grammar came along with the content. (Carolina, interview 3, May 24, 2013).

This perception was also confirmed during the class observations I conducted in which students were not only participating in whole class discussions, but once they were working in groups they were still trying to convince each other of the reasons why no sport was specifically for men or women, which was one the issues Carolina had raised in her lesson.

There was, however, one aspect that posed a challenge for Carolina while teaching her lessons. As she claimed, following the lesson plan she had designed became a straight jacket and she felt afraid of going deeper in the discussion with students and deviating from the script of her lesson plans.

When I asked a question about a specific topic many other topics came to discussion and I could not spend a lot of time discussing on those issues because I was running out of time and I had activities to cover. (Carolina, Reflection 3, 2013)

I tried to go deeper but not deep enough. (...) When do you know you have reached the limit? Because a discussion can go forever. (Carolina, Interview 2, May 17, 2013)

I had to stop their discussion. And I thought “I could go deeper there” but at the same time I needed to continue with the other situations, because that’s what I planned. (Carolina, interview 3, May 24, 2013)

At this stage, Carolina’s process had shown a completely different development from that of David’s. She believed that not only it was possible to lead students into analyzing issues and reflecting on them in class, but that language learning could also be enhanced in that
process. Likewise, as a teacher, she felt this process had allowed her to know her students better as she could listen to their opinions, and furthermore, she felt more motivated to teach:

I felt I knew student’s better because I could hear their points of view about many issues. I felt I was interacting more with them. (Carolina, reflection 3, 2013)

It is interesting because it’s not only students who are engaged but I was also engaged. I felt I was doing more than what teachers are doing. I was teaching grammar, but I was teaching values too. (Carolina, interview 3, May 24, 2013)

In conclusion, this stage was not always smooth for Carolina and the process of implementing critical lessons pushed her to constantly challenge and negotiate her beliefs with the evidence gathered in her classes. This process also convinced her of the relevance and impact that teaching from a critical stance had, for she saw her students grow reflective and more engaged in her classes, it increased her motivation to teach and allowed her to know her students better while enabling them to use, in a meaningful way, the language structures stated by her mandated curriculum.

When Carolina was enquired whether she would continue teaching English from this critical perspective in her future classes, she was certain she would do it and actually felt bad for people who had not had the opportunity to know about critical literacy theories. In fact, she lamented not having been exposed to this type of education while she was in school.

I will promote discussions in class in which students can go deeper in topics they want to discuss. I will try to promote an atmosphere in which students start developing respect as they listen to each other, they are asked to take a role of power in the classroom where their opinions can be taken more into account by using proper arguments. (Carolina, Reflection 3, 2013)

I’m studying with you in all the approach that I know some of the students are missing. I went through this process and it’s opening my eyes, because it shows me through my job that I can do more than just grammar. I can help those students to be more respectful to each other and to discuss what the other person said through language. I would have liked to learn that way in the past, during school. I feel lonely because I know my own classmates are not doing this. (Carolina, interview 3, May 24, 2013)
In the following paragraphs I will describe Camilo’s process during the three stages, making reference to the differences and similarities I encountered in the light of David’s and Carolina’s one. His process was notably different and his lack of teaching experience played an important role in it.

**Camilo**

**A journey of skepticism, optimism, and struggles.** Starting this process, Camilo was skeptical of the possibilities he had to carry out critical lessons in his context. To start with, he was convinced that young students were not ready to engage in discussions that led them to reflect or that they would not be interested in having those discussions. In addition, he felt that allowing students to express their opinions could be misunderstood by them, which in turn would cause misbehaviors:

> Teenagers tend to not care about everything (*sic*). Maybe the way people are raised, the context, the education they have received or what they have seen so far in their lives. It’s the way you’re raised. (Camilo, audio recording 7, march 22, 2013)

> I’m kind of skeptical because of the age of the students because I think they are too young to be critical. Because they are 10-11 years old. What if I bring something critical for them, ask them what they think, or make them think about it? But I’ve been observing the class, and if I show them that they don’t have to agree with what the professor proposes, they can confuse that with “oh let’s be rebel and don’t like anything” so I don’t know I can bring CP to the class. (Camilo, Audio recording 4, February 22, 2013)

Moreover, he felt uncertain about how to negotiate the mandated curriculum at his practicum site, which was focused on grammar, with a different approach to teaching. “(…) as a teacher how much should we defy what the institution or curricula request from us?” (Camilo, audio recording 4, February 22, 2013).

In spite of his skepticism, Camilo, as well as David and Carolina believed that critical literacy would certainly bring advantages to his classes “with critical pedagogy you take students more into account than in traditional approaches, and you can think of
engaging students in the topics. (Camilo, audio recording 4, February 22, 2013) As well, he acknowledged the relevance this type of education had for students in our context:

We do really need this theory, (...) because we are in a society in which people is (sic) easily manipulated by others, some end up acting just because someone told them to do it and not because they really have a well-formed opinion about any situation. (Camilo, Reflection 1, 2013)

Like David and Carolina, and despite his lack of teaching experience, Camilo perceived some limitations in teaching from a critical perspective “Of course there are some limitations, I think it is necessary to be careful with the level of tolerance and respect that exist for those with different opinions or preferences.” (Camilo, Reflection 1, 2013). Furthermore, just like David and Carolina, Camilo felt it was pointless to act on issues he disagreed with, either in his school or community, because he felt his actions would be neglected by people in power. Therefore, he concluded that it was not a good idea to encourage students to propose any actions either: “I don’t see people writing letters; you are by yourself.” (Camilo, audio recording 7, March 22, 2013).

To summarize, although Camilo acknowledged the need students have to be exposed to a more critical education, he started this process full of uncertainties, being students’ young age his most prominent concern, as he felt they were neither ready nor capable of being reflective of their own realities. Furthermore, he did not feel sure how to connect the school’s mandated curriculum to a more critical approach to teaching, which he defined as: taking students into account, engaging them in the discussion of relevant topics, and leading them to make well-informed decisions in their lives.

Therefore, his uncertainty was present at the moment of designing his lessons and Camilo had some difficulties challenging his belief of students not being ready to face
critical discussions, or not being able to handle them due to their low language proficiency level:

I consider it was not easy at all to plan the unit for these 7th graders, I really had doubts that these kind of themes and situations should be planned for their classes as they might not be mature enough to talk about the issue proposed, also their low proficiency level was another problem that made difficult to plan the sequence of the class, and the way they should present their own solutions. (Camilo, reflection 2, 2013)

However, in this phase, Camilo’s perspective had an enormous transformation. After observing some of his students’ presentations at his practicum site, he was amazed by how aware students were of the world around them. Therefore, he decided to change his original idea for the lessons (sports) and turn them into an opportunity to listen to his students’ opinions on social matters.

I got help from a task students presented about injustice in our country and it convinced me that they could deal with critical lessons. (...) today I saw that they are aware of injustice and they have potential. They came up with something very interesting that was corruption, taxes. They gave examples like “If Colombia were without corruption, we would be billionaires” They are conscious about the problems, so I’m thinking that I can introduce a topic that can make them think more critically. (Camilo, Interview 1, April 27, 2013)

This new evidence pushed Camilo to move away from his belief that young students are not ready to reflect and encouraged him to design a new lesson on animal cruelty which was a theme his seventh graders were interested in. Besides, his lesson planning included not only raising awareness on this matter, but encouraging students to take the issue outside the classroom so that other people in their school could be informed.

After having implemented his lessons, Camilo reported it was a positive experience, not only for him as a teacher, but also for his students, who were engaged in the lessons and whose behavior improved throughout classes. Likewise, students showed a high level of reflection when designing posters to raise awareness on animal cruelty in their schools.
I felt very well bringing this topic to the students. I think most of them were really engaged and interested in learning during those three sessions. (...) it was actually something that could help students to start developing their critical thinking skills. (Camilo, Reflection 3, 2013)

(...) they participated a lot, they were at some point interacting between them. Regarding the behaviors, after each session they were misbehaving less frequently. At the end they could be very reflective with their opinions and the posters they presented to the class. (Camilo, Reflection 3, 2013)

However, according to Camilo, his concern about students’ low language proficiency level proved right, as students struggled to express their opinions in the target language:

The problem is that, at that level, when it is too interesting, they [students] want to talk a lot and they don’t have the tools to speak in English. (Camilo, Interview 3, May 31, 2013)

In addition, Camilo felt that trying to connect the grammar notions stated by the curriculum to content that led students to reflect was a challenge. Moreover, he coincided with David and Carolina, expressing that planning this way also increased his workload:

What happened is that the conflict of using an auxiliary and then try to mix it with critical pedagogy. I think not all of the classes that we plan need to be making them reflect and participate aloud (…) because it would be thinking about more things to do: I have to explain (sic) them the form but then how I make it reflective or interesting. I consider that it is more job to do (Camilo, interview 2, May 17, 2013)

Unlike Carolina, Camilo felt he had not been able to connect the content of his lesson to the intended grammar as he felt he had concentrated merely on the content: “I think I was not able to connect grammar with the content of the unit as I was focused only on the aspect related to teaching the content to the students.” (Camilo, reflection 3, 2013). Moreover, he claimed that the amount of students (41) was difficult to handle, and coincided with David, asserting that this public school context represented a challenge when trying to promote critical discussions with students:

I consider that the amount of students was a difficulty as many of them wanted to participate and share opinions, which is good; however because of the fact that there were about 40 people wanting to say something the noise increased and it caused some discipline difficulties as there was a lot of noise from the students. (Camilo, reflection 3, 2013)

What I saw interesting about this unit is that I realized that the context is important. It is not the same a class at the Colombo (private language institute), fewer students, than in a public school. You need to make them quiet all the time to try to do a slow progress so that they produce an outcome in the target language. (Camilo, interview 3, May 31, 2013)
Finally, Camilo and Carolina encountered the same difficulty, feeling that their lesson plans should be covered as they were written. This feeling made them uncertain as to whether allow students to go deeper in some class discussions or stop those discussions to continue with the next point in their lesson plan (Class observations 1 & 2). However, while Carolina tried to address her students’ opinions using follow-up questions, Camilo’s lack of teaching experience impeded him to actually think of further questions when his students expressed opinions that opposed those of their classmates or that were not considered in his lesson (Class observations 1 & 2):

  Teaching that class was hard because I was more into covering the questions. [questions he had prepared about animal cruelty] I was trying to stick to the script that I had. I wasn’t really convinced about the fact that it is important to listen to each answer and I didn’t think about further questions. I wasn’t mentally prepared at that moment. (Camilo, interview 3, May 31, 2013)

To sum up, Camilo felt satisfied as his high school students grew more engaged, behaved better and proved reflective during the critical lessons he implemented. Nonetheless, factors such as students’ low language proficiency level, the large number of students and Camilo’s lack of teaching experience led him to believe that critical discussions could only be carried out in a context where conditions were different regarding the number of students and their language proficiency. In fact, to the question whether he would consider teaching from a critical perspective in the future, Camilo considered a critical approach to teaching could only be done in the students’ first language: “I’m not sure about implementing critical pedagogy in the future; I feel it is something you do in L1” (Camilo, reflection 3, 2013).

  In sum, the three participants were aware of the need and significance that teaching from a critical perspective had for our society. Nonetheless, they all considered that attempting to take action to improve issues that affected society was pointless and this
belief remained during the study. On the contrary, their belief that young students were not capable of reflecting on social issues was transformed once they started teaching the lessons they had designed, as they saw students grow reflective during class discussions. This evidence also led them to feel more accomplished as language teachers. Although all participants believed it was possible to teach English from a more critical stance, the struggles they faced when teaching, namely large classes and, in the case of David and Camilo, students’ low language proficiency led them to acknowledge this was a difficult endeavor.

Regarding their attitudes toward the possibilities of having a more critical approach to language teaching in Colombia, there were remarkable transformations in the participants as they moved from phase to phase in the study: optimism turned into resistance, pessimism and skepticism turned into optimism and excitement, and later into resistance and uncertainty. Thus, at the end of this process, only Carolina who worked at a private high school felt committed to continuing teaching critically and did so during the following semester, while David and Camilo felt the context of their public schools deterred the possibility of teaching from a critical stance.

As evidenced in this section, the three participants of this study had such dissimilar processes, and their beliefs, attitudes and reflections towards the exploration of critical literacy theories, lesson design and implementation were so different, that presenting each story separately allows for a better understanding of their transformation throughout the study. In the following section I will discuss the findings transversally, considering the reflections and transformations participants experienced during the course of this research.
Discussion

This study was set out to explore the beliefs, attitudes, and reflections of three pre-service teachers toward critical literacy theories during three different phases: First, while analyzing critical literacy theories and considering the possibilities of having a critical approach to teaching English in our Colombian context. Second, while designing critical lessons, and third, while reflecting on the design and implementation of their lessons.

Becoming a critical teacher is not an easy endeavor. This journey is full of struggles as you have to negotiate the understandings you had already constructed about education with the new theories you read. This added to the fact that you do not become critical just because you read about critical theories; this is a process that requires a conscious effort to analyze and deconstruct your way of looking at life, to ensure that the decisions you make mirror your critical stances in and out of the classroom. All these factors played a role in my research as participants not only had to read, understand and reflect on these critical theories, but to show how critical they had become through their lesson design and implementation over a period of four months.

Nonetheless, as participants struggled to understand what being a critical teacher entailed, I decided to focus my analysis on their challenges making sense of the theories we explored and their process reflecting their understanding of those theories, rather than on their step-by-step process of building their lesson plans. I made this decision based on the fact that making sense of theory became a very significant issue in this study, to the point that one of the participants decided not to design lesson plans from a critical perspective.
Data suggest that David, Carolina, and Camilo’s beliefs, attitudes, and reflections ranged within a spectrum of discouragement, skepticism, optimism, resistance, struggle, contradictions, and success in different phases, but these feelings were not static throughout the study. On the contrary, they were continuously transformed as the participants were faced with different stages of this research.

Some of these responses coincide to some extent with the ones found by Crookes and Lehner (1998 p. 324) in a similar study conducted in an ESL context in which participants felt pessimistic towards the possibility of having critical classes due to their lack of freedom in schools; consequently, they showed resistance when exploring and discussing critical literacy theories in their classes. Likewise, Shor, (1999 p.290) asserts that the road to CL is not easy and it is unpredictable, full of struggles, oppositions, advances, and so forth, which usually cannot be addressed in a single semester.

Having explored the participants’ beliefs allowed me to understand the great influence those beliefs had in the way they responded to the literature we explored, and the decisions they made for their lessons, since beliefs tend to shape teachers’ practice Davis & Wilson, 1999; Gebel & Schrier, 2002; Johnson, 1992; Richardson, Anders, Tidwell, & Lloyd, 1991; Woods, 1996 (as cited in Kuzborska, 2011). Moreover, this influence of the participants’ beliefs in their practice reinforces what Bartolomé (2004, p. 97) stresses, regarding the importance of “examining teachers’ own assumptions, values, and beliefs and how this ideological posture informs, often unconsciously, their perceptions and actions.” Additionally, as it will be evidenced throughout the phases of this study, participants’ reflections on their beliefs and on the exploration of the different readings would sometimes be confirmed by their actions, but some other times contradicted by them.
It is difficult to determine whether the beliefs participants expressed during this study were present at the moment they entered this teaching program, or if they were influenced and shaped throughout the years of preparation to become language teachers as suggested by Johnson (1994). Regardless of this factor, it is evident that the three participants, who pertained to the same teaching program, seemed unaware of the social role language teaching should play. This situation coincides with the findings presented by Cárdenas (2009) indicating that teaching preparation programs are still promoting a view of language teaching focused on skill development as opposed to a view of it as a social and cultural practice (Macedo, 2003, p.32). Unfortunately, this situation might also evidence that not only language teaching programs are not challenging future language teachers’ traditional beliefs about education, but that they are validating and reinforcing them.

Starting this phase, the three participants coincided in feeling discouraged towards taking any actions to improve unfair situations they encountered, as proposed by some of the readings analyzed, since they felt the government or people in power would not listen to them. This hopelessness was also reflected on their teaching practice as they felt it was pointless to ask students to take action by expressing their disagreement or proposing some solutions to situations they wanted to improve, since it would also make students give up if they were ignored.

Hence, when planning their lessons and teaching from a critical stance, Carolina, Camilo, and David decided they would go as far as raising awareness in students, for instance about animal cruelty, but not to the point of encouraging them to take action. This finding clearly indicates that teachers’ beliefs and perceptions about the mechanisms of power in society undoubtedly shape their teaching practice and, in this case, also prevent
teachers from encouraging students to become an active part of the transformation of their realities as advocated by Freire (1970, p.67).

On the other hand, the three participants felt skeptical toward discussing social issues in their classes, probably due to their lack of experience teaching from a critical stance. In David’s case, his reluctance towards bringing topics that tackled students’ realities to the English class came from the belief that parents may not agree with addressing controversial topics such as politics and sexual identity in class. This perceived limitation, however, was not rooted in his teaching experience.

Therefore, his skepticism may have stemmed from his own fear of facing students’ reactions when raising those issues in class; traditional language teaching is easier to control whereas students’ enquiries and opinions thrust teachers to the unexpected. In addition, David’s fear could also be rooted in a history of violence in Colombia which have caused citizens, -teachers included- to be afraid of openly expressing their opinions to avoid retaliation. This situation might lead teachers to evade the discussion of controversial issues in which their beliefs could clash against other people’s intolerance, thus keeping students away from engaging in critical dialogues in class, through which they can develop a critical view of their learning and the society they are part of, as noted by Crookes and Shin (2005 p.114),

Camilo and Carolina felt uncertain about young students being able to reflect or handle relevant discussions in the classroom. As Carolina and Camilo had not been exposed to this kind of teaching approach, nor had they seen it during their class observations at their practicum sites, this may have led them to believe it was not possible.
Likewise, the playful and mechanical nature of activities teachers tend to bring to the English classes could make it seem as if students were not ready to handle reflective discussions in class, which in turn trivializes content as stated by Pennycook (1990, p.13).

At this point, and with my intention of tackling the participants’ resistance, perceived limitations of CL, and hopelessness, I encouraged participants to respond to each other’s opinions and to deconstruct, through questions, the possible source of their fear to try this approach, their discourage, and resistance despite having had no exposure or contact to the situations they referred to.

In spite of their skepticism, the three participants were optimistic towards the possibility of transforming language education into a more critical practice, and asserted they considered it of significant relevance in their context. Their conviction and optimism in this first stage seemed to originate from their awareness of the harsh social and political history Colombia has experienced for many years and the need to have more critical citizens. However, as I was their practicum advisor, they may have also felt that they should please me with their answers, which led them to show a positive attitude towards this approach to teaching.

Participants’ attitudes towards critical literacy theories were more evident during the stage of lesson design and implementation. In this phase, the participants took the language notions stated by the school curriculum and selected a topic of their students’ interest to connect them. They could decide how far they wanted to take their students –explore some social issue, raising awareness, propose or take some action, etc.-, and my role as a
researcher and advisor became less visible as my intention was to allow participants the freedom to reflect on their initial lesson plans their understanding of the theories studied.

Having set this phase this way allowed me to evidence that, when moving from theory to practice, the participants’ reflections and attitudes were significantly transformed. In David’s case, his vehement discourse making a case for a more critical approach to language teaching to transform society, shifted into resistance towards planning or implementing a lesson from a critical stance. Although David justified his resistance on students’ low language proficiency level, as well as on his struggle to connect content to the mandated curriculum, other factors may have played a role.

First of all, it is not possible to neglect that helping students to achieve the linguistic ability to cope with reflective discussions in class is a process that requires more work than providing them with grammar rules to memorize, as David seemed to assume. This may be one of the factors that caused the gap between David’s initial reflections and practice, preventing him from reaching what Freire called praxis, the articulation of theory and practice that turns into action and social change. On the other hand, it may have been too difficult to move away from his comfort zone, focusing on the teaching of language structures clashed against the possibility of seeing language as a means to promote social justice. This may have happened because his teaching experience and beliefs about language teaching and learning were probably permeated by traditional approaches to teaching and not really by the discussions and reflections held in the seminar, despite having adopted a critical discourse in this process. In this regard, Hawkins and Norton (2009) state that students who have grown being part of specific schooling systems and ideologies may show resistance when challenging their beliefs. Similarly, Bailey et al.
(1996) argue that when pre-service teachers are faced with difficult situations in the classroom, they are likely to return to teaching the way they had previously been taught. Therefore, it would take some time for pre-service and in-service language teachers to reflect and challenge themselves to move away from the traditional view of education they have been exposed to.

Conversely, Carolina did not struggle as much to move from theory to practice. Although she acknowledged planning was more demanding, her experience in this phase revealed it was possible to connect language and critical reflections in her lessons, even though she was teaching a large class and her students’ language proficiency level was not very high either. In this case, having experienced classes in which the teacher she considered invaluable cared about students, not only academically but as human beings, could have influenced Carolina’s desire to become that kind of teacher, even though she still struggled to negotiate her role in the classroom.

Camilo’s beliefs and attitude towards having a more critical approach to teaching languages suffered a significant transformation, from skepticism to optimism. This transformation may have been influenced by two factors. On the one hand, while observing classes in his school, evidence showed him that not only young students were aware of their realities, but they were also interested in expressing their opinions about those matters and proposing solutions to them. On the other hand, his lack of teaching experience may have facilitated the appropriation of new approaches to teaching, allowing class readings and discussions to permeate his beliefs more easily. However, since research on critical language practices is not very common (Pessoa & Urzeida-Freitas, 2012, p. 7), there is not
much evidence to speculate if inexperienced teachers would be more likely to adopt critical theories than experienced ones.

At the end of this study, my role was that of an observer who later on enquired participants about specific aspects I had observed in their classes or about gaps, contradictions and transformations evidenced during the whole research process. This phase of the study also enabled participants to further reflect on the whole process of becoming familiar with critical literacy theories, and taking those theories to practice.

As David’s resistance did not allow him to move past the exploration of critical literacy theories and discussion of its possibilities in our context, he could not report his experience teaching from a critical stance for his lessons kept focused on the mastery of language structures. This teaching practice continues to be very common among language teachers who stick to the curriculum proposed by their schools without adapting it to meet students’ social needs, as pointed by Giroux (1994, p. 40). Unfortunately, if this remains the tendency, even after teachers have gotten acquainted with a more critical approach to teaching, the road to involving students in the betterment of their communities while enhancing their academic knowledge will be harsh.

In Carolina’s case, not only her reflections towards the importance of teaching from a critical perspective became more vehement, but she constantly made a case for the importance of including this approach in the curriculum of the teaching program she was part of. In fact, she felt sorry for her classmates who were missing out the possibility to realize they could teach languages from this stance. This conviction in her reflection came from seeing her students’ engagement in the classes she planned, and from seeing them
grow more reflective from class to class while increasing their language knowledge. Also, she started to feel more accomplished as a teacher as she considered her students trusted her more.

Implementing lessons that asked for students’ opinions on issues that mattered to them, and in which language was seen as a means to reflect, negotiate meaning and build new knowledge, generated students’ reactions that validated and reinforced Carolina’s conviction to continue teaching English as a social practice. However, facing challenges such as not being sure how long or how deep a discussion should be, how to distinguish between students’ engagement and excitement from misbehavior, or how to respond to students who felt English class was not the space to discuss social issues brought anxiety for her. This anxiety probably comes from her lack of experience teaching from an approach she is not very familiar with. Moreover, as her students were neither accustomed to expressing their opinions nor to learn content in their English lessons, it might take them a while to accustom to being in a class where they are encouraged to use language in more meaningful ways. Nonetheless, Carolina’s struggle to decide on the length and depth of class discussions, concurs to the one faced by the participants in a similar study reported by Pessoa and Urzeida-Freitas (2012 p. 11), in which language teachers at a university also expressed uncertainty about how much time they should stay focused on an issue when teaching through critical themes.

Conversely, Camilo’s process was one of struggle during the last phase. Despite having evidence of his students’ engagement and capacity to reflect on social issues, he asserted that teaching from a critical stance was not possible in a context where classes were large or students did not have a high language proficiency level. This feeling was,
however, rooted in the fact that his students used L1 to express their opinions during class discussions. It is undeniable that large classes pose a challenge for teachers to give each student a voice, and to understand and reflect on the struggles, assumptions and beliefs students bring to the classroom. Although this factor cannot become an excuse to continue disregarding the political role language teachers have, it does raise the issue of how to overcome it so that students from public schools, who are generally less favored by educational policies, engage in critical discussions that led them to re-think and shape their future and the future of their communities (Luke, 2000, p. 449)

It is probable that Camilo’s lack of teaching experience, which favored his shift from skepticism to optimism and commitment during the phase of lesson design, hindered his positive attitude towards teaching from a critical stance on this last stage. On the one hand, he did not feel students were learning the language for there was not an explicit focus on grammar explanations. On the other hand, as the students’ participation increased, he related their talking to misbehavior, as many students would try to speak at the same time. This feeling was pervaded by Camilo’s traditional understanding of discipline in which students are to remain quiet and doing as they are told. This view of discipline corresponds to the one described by (Freire, 1970 p. 73) in his concept of banking education\(^1\) and constitutes a major challenge to be overcome by teachers who still perceive themselves as the figure of authority in the classroom.

Lastly, Camilo’s belief that students’ opinions were not relevant, which may come from his experience in traditional schooling practices, was probably another factor that did

\(^1\) A concept used by Paulo Freire to refer to traditional education which conceived students as passive, empty containers in which educators, who were the only authority, had to deposit knowledge.
not allow him to address the issues students raised in class, and instead continue covering his lesson plan as it was written. Moreover, the students’ low language proficiency level was another factor that led Camilo to believe that a critical approach to language teaching was only possible in the students’ first language. This finding is opposite to what Carolina found in her practice and such difference could be explained by Camilo’s lack of teaching experience or by the dissimilarity in their teaching context, private versus public high schools. In Carolina’s case, as it was a bilingual, private school, students had higher exposure to English which gave them more elements to express their opinions in the target language, even though language was not always accurate. In Camilo’s case, students belonged to a public school where exposure to English was reduced to three hours a week which made him face a harder process of scaffolding that he could not manage.

Finally, it is important to consider that there are several factors that might have affected the way participants responded to the exposure to critical theories and the transformations in their beliefs, attitudes, and reflections: their social and school backgrounds, the context of their practicum sites, their teaching experience or lack of it, as well as the very limited time they had to explore and reflect on critical approaches to teaching, to design their lessons and to implement them. Additionally, it might be possible that David did not find in critical literacy a feasible approach to language teaching which resulted in his resistance towards designing and implementing critical lessons.

As a teacher researcher, I also faced some challenges in this process. The greatest one was to understand that despite my passion for this critical approach to language teaching, I had to accept that my participants, who were at the same time my students, resisted these theories at some point. In this process of understanding, I moved from feeling
frustrated to feeling curious as to why my students resisted those theories, to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon. Analyzing my frustration led me to reflect on the following question: How could I be critical if I try to impose a view of education on my students? In response to this question, I decided that my role as their advisor was to facilitate their relationship with theory by helping them cope with the anxiety and frustration it caused on them, and not to make sure that they indeed created critical lesson plans. Additionally, I understood that asking my students to design lessons based on the theories we explored without exposing them to an example of a lesson that could be developed in our local context, made their experience of lesson design harder than it already was. This is definitely an aspect I would consider doing differently in future courses.
Conclusions

This study was set out to understand how pre-service teachers responded to the exploration of critical literacy theories, their beliefs and reflections while designing and implementing critical-literacy based lessons. The findings of this study suggest that: a) the three participants acknowledged the need of having a more critical approach to education in Colombia, b) the participants’ previous teaching experience and beliefs about language, language teaching and learning, and the role of the language teacher probably influenced their decisions when designing and implementing their lessons. This influence was evident when moving from theory to practice and it was reflected on the participants’ struggles, resistance, contradictions and successes in this process. c) Participants’ beliefs, attitudes, and reflections were transformed throughout the study.

Exposing pre-service teachers to the exploration of critical literacy theories allowed them to analyze and understand the importance of shifting language teaching in Colombia into an opportunity to reflect with students about the issues that affect their lives and, at the same time, enhance their academic skills. This exploration also gave pre-service teachers the opportunity to reflect upon the apolitical nature of education in Colombia and led them to discuss how it was reflected in society in general.

Additionally, this study made evident that even though participants showed awareness of this need to have a more critical education in Colombia, they were constantly influenced by traditional views about language teaching and learning and very often those views overshadowed their decisions when planning their lessons, turning their lesson plans into an instrumental approach to language teaching.
Finally, asking the participants in this study to reflect their understanding of the theories we explored in their lesson plans and then in their implementation was an invaluable source of information for this research. This process enabled the participants to challenge their traditional views of language teaching and confront their beliefs with this critical approach and, at the same time, it provided me with the opportunity to witness their struggles, resistance, contradictions and gains in this process. Contrasting the participants’ claims during the phase of exploration of theories with their reflections and attitudes during the phases of lesson design and implementation made evident that there is a long road to traverse with pre-service teachers until acknowledgment of the relevance of CL theories mirrors their teaching practice.

Upon the conclusion of this study only one out of the three participants continued to foster critical reflections in her English classes. Nonetheless, it gives hope for the field of critical literacies for it is a great achievement in such a short period of time. Therefore, results might be completely different if more time is devoted to this process of exploration, analysis and reflection of the relevance of critical approaches to language teaching.

This study has shed some light on how student teachers, in the field of foreign language teaching and learning, understand and respond to critical literacy theories. There is however, need for more studies at the local level to allow further understanding of this subject. Future research assessing the influence traditional schooling has on teachers’ beliefs and the subsequent decisions they make in their teaching practice, could facilitate the attainment of this understanding. In addition, exploring the impact critical literacy-based lessons have on high school students can enrich the field of critical literacy for it
would provide more arguments to make a case for the inclusion of this approach to teaching and learning, not only at the university, but also at the high school level.

**Pedagogical implications**

This study has implications for pedagogy, especially for language teaching programs. At a conceptual level, it is important to understand that language learning is no longer a mere psycholinguistic process Pennycook (2001, p. 76), and that schools today are far from being spaces where knowledge is simply transmitted. Instead, language teaching programs need to understand “how language is socially constructed and how it produces change and is changed in human life” (Pennycook, 1990, p. 21). This understanding would lead language teaching programs to educate teachers who are aware of their students’ realities but most important who care and commit to allowing students to transform those realities. At a practical level, teacher education programs would need to acknowledge that as many pre-service teachers grew up in traditional schooling systems in which they may develop resistance towards new views of education, the process of challenging their beliefs and reflecting on the importance of language teaching as a social practice cannot be relegated to a single course. Thus, challenging student teachers’ beliefs towards the role language teaching has in our society, from the beginning, is paramount for any teacher preparation program where it is assumed that language teachers have the responsibility to start a transformation of this society through the content they bring to their English classes and the reflections they engage students in. This way, students can become an active part of the betterment of their realities. Hence, although the practicum stage is a fundamental component of language teacher preparation programs, at this point it might be too late to
incorporate a different frame of reference for teaching for pre-service teachers whose beliefs are already rooted in many years of experience as students.

On the contrary, a critical component should be integrated as the main axis of the entire program. Though this axis should not focus only on “how to teach” from a critical stance, but on how language teaching has a social impact and allows for transformation of students’ realities. It should lead student teachers to acknowledge social relations of power and deconstruct them, analyze their own biases and understanding of language and language education before they can foster those reflections with their own students.

Therefore, language teacher preparation programs would need to provide pre-service teachers with the tools to a) critically analyze their practices to become part of the transformation of society through education b) understand that their teaching has to respond to the needs of their students c) beware that their views of language and language teaching will shape the content and strategies they bring to the classroom and d) develop a view of language and language teaching that moves from a transmission process to become a social practice that enable students to reflect on and shape their future and the future of their communities.

Furthermore, it is necessary that language teacher preparation programs guide pre-service teachers to analyze and reflect on and understand how traditional approaches to education have historically effected the way our society is unfairly constituted and how such constitution has eventually become accepted by its citizens, remaining unquestioned, unchallenged, and unfortunately reproduced and reinforced through education. Therefore, it is paramount that teacher preparation programs set their curricula in such a way that they
prepare language teachers who are not only aware of the unfair structure of society, but teachers committed to turning their classrooms into spaces where students can learn to transform their realities.

Nonetheless, language teacher educators would need to be aware that the process of educating teachers who view their practice with critical lenses is not easy and that, as suggested by Crookes and Lehner (1998 p. 327), expectations should not be very high from an initial experience with critical literacy theories, especially if participants own lived experiences have not made them critically aware of how their culture and society operate. This awareness would then lead teaching programs to structure their curricula in such a way that students have several spaces to reflect on their own view of education and to become cognizant of their role in society. Thus, language programs would need to be revised in attention to questions such as: Should all subjects be taught from a critical perspective? Should language subjects be taught critically so that pre-service teachers see how this approach to language teaching would look like in the classroom? Should pre-service teachers’ beliefs be explored so that they can be challenged and deconstructed throughout the whole major? All of these questions remain open to exploration.

This study suggests the value of incorporating a critical approach to language teaching in teaching preparation programs and offers insight on the challenges student teachers may encounter when taking critical literacy theories to the classroom. However, results may vary significantly if student teachers are allowed to explore and reflect on such theories for a longer period of time. Additionally, this study did not focus on the long term impact reflective discussions had at the classroom level in the high schools where the pre-service teachers were carrying out their practicum. Further research should aim at analyzing
how teaching experience or lack of it impacts the way people respond to a critical approach to teaching. Likewise, it should focus on gathering evidence on the influence that teaching from a critical stance has on the students exposed to it and address questions such as the following: Do students become more reflective? Do critical discussions have an effect on high school students’ discourse or behavior?
References


Ramírez, L. (2009). Pre, while, and post reading tasks to promote the students’ written production of their own narrative texts. (Unpublished thesis). Universidad de Antioquia, Medellín, Colombia.


APPENDIX A

This appendix illustrates step by step the stages and activities developed during this study.

UNIT PLAN

Beliefs, Attitudes, and Reflections of EFL Pre-service Teachers when Exploring Critical Literacy Theories, Preparing and Implementing Critical Lessons.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are EFL Pre-service Teachers’ Beliefs, Attitudes, and Reflections when Exploring Critical Literacy Theories, Preparing and Implementing Critical Lessons.

GENERAL OBJECTIVES:

1. Review traditional language teaching methodologies and explore the participants’ beliefs regarding language teaching and learning.

2. Explore and discuss Critical Literacy theories, its benefits, limitations, and possibilities for our context.

3. Report participants’ beliefs and reflections about the readings.

4. Analyze different ways in which scholars have taken critical literacies to the classroom to provide participants with examples.

5. Examine how those critical approaches to language teaching could be adapted so that they fit our contexts.

6. Ask participants to design critical literacy-based lessons and report their experience during this process.

7. Ask participants to implement those critical lessons and reflect on this process.

8. Explore participants’ attitudes and reflections during the stages of lesson design and implementation.
# GETTING STARTED - SESSION 1

**OBJECTIVES:**
1. To get to know each other: working experience, school contexts, etc.
2. To present the course, discuss content and assessment procedures.
3. To explain the research project.
4. To sign consent form.

**DATE:** Friday, February 1st.

**MATERIALS**
- Photocopies, audio recorder.

**ESTIMATED TIME**
- 90 minutes (A seminar session)

**ACTIVITIES**

1. **Students’ introduction:**
   - Personal Information.
   - Teaching experience.
   - Expectations.

2. **Administrative Matters**
   - Reglamento de la Práctica.
   - Course program.
   - Layout of the course.
   - Responsibilities
   - Goals
   - Assessment procedure.

3. **Project description**
   - Implications of being part of the project.
   - Consent Form

4. **Reading Assignment**

**PRODUCT**
1. Audio recording showing the way participants reacted during the session.
2. Signed consent forms
GROUP DISCUSSION 2

“Exploring participants’ beliefs about language teaching and learning”

| OBJECTIVES: | 1. To explore the participants’ beliefs regarding language teaching and learning.  
| | 2. To analyze how the participants see their role as language teachers.  
| | 3. To start setting the ground to introduce critical approaches to language teaching. |
| DATE: | February 8th |
| MATERIALS | Photocopies, audio recorder. |
| ESTIMATED TIME | 90 minutes (A seminar session) |

| ACTIVITIES | 1. Answering questions about the reading. |
| | • Why should your learners learn English?  
| | • Do people need to speak English perfectly to be good teachers?  
| | • What’s perfect English?  
| | • Are native speakers of English better teachers than non-native ones?  
| | • What’s the best method to learn a language?  
| | • Should teachers keep a line between them and students? Why?  
| | • What’s our role in an English class? (figure of power, transmit knowledge, teach English, teach values)  
| | • What can students learn about in English class?  
| | • Can students’ realities be part of the English class? |

2. Homework:  
• **Assigned readings:** Underwood, M. (1987) Chapters 2, 3. (Know your school. Know your students.)  

• **Presentations:** For next session, each student will prepare a short presentation about different approaches to teaching included in the readings.

| PRODUCT | 1. Audio recording showing the way participants reacted during the session and their responses. |
## GROUP DISCUSSION 3

**“Presenting and discussing different teaching approaches”**

| OBJECTIVES | 1. To explore participants’ understanding and opinions regarding different approaches to language teaching.  
2. To analyze the benefits and limitations of different approaches to language teaching.  
3. To discuss the importance of getting to know who students are and their school context. |
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| ACTIVITIES | 1. **participants’ presentations**  
- Each participant is in charge of presenting two different approaches to teaching. At the end of each presentation all the participants discuss what the benefits and limitations of each approach are.  
  - What does this approach allow students to gain? (in terms of language, for their life)  
  - What is this approach preventing students from gaining? (in terms of language, personally)  
  
2. **Discussing the readings**  
- Is it important to know the context where you teach? Why?  
- Should we know who our students are? Why?  
- How can students’ realities affect their performance in class? Their engagement? Their learning process?  
- Can students’ contexts be taken into account in the English class? How?  
  
3. **Homework:** For next session participants will read McLaughlin and DeVoogd. (2004) Critical Literacy as Comprehension: Expanding readers’ response. |
| PRODUCT | 1. Audio recording showing the way participants reacted during the session and their responses. |
### GROUP DISCUSSION 4

**“Discussing first reading on Critical Literacies”**

| OBJECTIVES | 1. To explore participants’ understanding and opinions regarding critical literacies.  
2. To analyze if participants consider critical literacies as a feasible approach to language teaching in our context.  
3. To analyze what CL attempt to develop and some of its principles. |
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<td>ESTIMATED TIME</td>
<td>90 minute (a seminar session)</td>
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| ACTIVITIES | 1. Discussing the reading  
• What is CL?  
• What does it attempt to develop?  
• What are some of its principles, according to the reading?  
• How are those principles reflected in the examples given by the author?  
• Is it possible to carry out this theory in our context?  
• Would it be relevant?  
• Do we need this type of education? Why? Why not?  
• How is this approach to education similar or different from the one we currently have in the schools where you teach?  
• How would the methodology in this approach be different from the methodologies we discussed before? |
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• Based on the article McLaughlin and DeVoogd. (2004) Critical Literacy as Comprehension: Expanding readers’ response, participants will write a reflection on the possibilities of including this type of education in our context.  
• **Assigned Reading:** Mary Cowhey: Black Ants and Buddhism. |

| PRODUCT | 1. Audio recording showing the way participants reacted during the session and their responses.  
2. Students’ written reflection number 1 |
# GROUP DISCUSSION 5

**“Discussing an approach to CL – Its possibilities with children”**

| OBJECTIVES | 1. To explore participants’ understanding and opinions regarding this approach to CL in elementary school.  
2. To analyze if participants consider this approach to teaching as a feasible approach for our context.  
3. To challenge participants’ assumption that CL is not possible with children or young students. |
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<td>ESTIMATED TIME</td>
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| ACTIVITIES | 1. **Discussing the reading**  
- How did you like the reading?  
- Is it possible to carry out this theory in our context?  
- Would it be relevant?  
- Do we need this type of education? Why? Why not?  
- Can children and teenagers in our context be taught in a critical way? If so, how? If not, why not?  
- Can they reflect on their realities?  
- How is the methodology followed in the text, different from the methodologies we discussed before? From the one followed where you are carrying out your practicum?  
- What can students gain from this approach to teaching?  
- Will they improve their language proficiency? How?  
2. **Homework:** For next session participants will read Vasquez (2004) Negotiating Critical Literacies with young children |
| PRODUCT | 1. Audio recording showing the way participants reacted during the session and their responses. |
### GROUP DISCUSSION 6

**“Discussing an approach to CL – Making social issues part of the school curriculum and the community”**

| OBJECTIVES                                                                 | 1. To explore participants’ understanding and opinions regarding the inclusion of social issues in the school curriculum.  
2. To analyze if participants consider this approach to teaching as a feasible approach for our context.  
3. To challenge participants’ assumption that CL is not possible with children or young students. |
| DATE:                                                                     | March 15\textsuperscript{th} |
| MATERIALS                                                                 | Photocopies, audio recorder |
| ESTIMATED TIME                                                            | 90 minutes (a seminar session) |
| ACTIVITIES                                                                | 1. Discussing the reading  
- How did you like the reading?  
- Is it possible to carry out this theory in our context?  
- Would it be relevant?  
- Do we need this type of education? Why? Why not?  
- Can children and teenagers in our context engage in philosophical discussions? If so, how? If not, why not?  
- Can they reflect on their realities?  
- Can social issues become part of the school curriculum? Why? Why not?  
- How is the methodology followed in the text, different from the methodologies we discussed before? From the one followed where you are carrying out your practicum?  
- What can students gain from this approach to teaching?  
- Will they improve their language proficiency through this approach? How? |
| 2. There is no homework for next session                                   |
| PRODUCT                                                                   | 1. Audio recording showing the way participants reacted during the session and their responses. |
### GROUP DISCUSSION 7

**“Discussing the possibilities of Critical Literacies in our particular context”**

| OBJECTIVES | 1. To confront participants with a situation that would require taking CL to the classroom.  
2. To see, through the advice participants give to their fellow pre-service teacher, the possibilities they see in CL to tackle both, language teaching and a critical approach to education. |
| DATE: | March 22\(^{nd}\) |
| MATERIALS | Photocopies, audio recorder |
| ESTIMATED TIME | 90 minutes *(a seminar session)* |
| ACTIVITIES | **1. Analyzing a situation**  
- Students will consider and discuss a situation in which a practicum-student faces several social issues in the classroom (drug abuse, absent parents, sexual abuse, and suicide.)  
- Are these situations common in our society?  
- Are they considered in the schools’ curriculum?  
- Should they be analyzed in the classroom? Why? Why not?  
- Can they be discussed in the English class?  
- Is it relevant to include these discussions in the lessons teachers design? Why? Why not?  
**2. Homework:**  
- Participants will write a letter providing this teacher with advice to address those social issues from his English class.  
- Participants will read Morrell and Duncan Andrade (2002): Promoting Academic Literacy with Urban Youth through Engaging Hip-hop Culture. |
| PRODUCT | 1. Audio recording showing the way participants reacted during the session and their responses. |
GROUP DISCUSSION 8 (First Part)

“Discussing possible ways of taking CL to the English class in our context”

| OBJECTIVES | 1. To read and discuss the different letters with pieces of advice participants wrote for their fellow pre-service teacher and analyze the possibilities they see in CL to language education. |
| DATE:      | April 5<sup>th</sup> |
| MATERIALS  | Audio recorder |
| ESTIMATED TIME | 45 minutes (half of a seminar session) |

| ACTIVITIES | 1. Discussing the different pieces of advice students gave to the pre-service teacher who is facing various social issues in the English class where he is carrying out his practicum.  
- What was the most difficult part of writing this letter?  
- What do you think about your classmates’ suggestions?  
- Do you agree with your classmates’ opinion? Advice?  
- Is that piece of advice feasible? Why? Why not? |

| PRODUCT | 1. Audio recording showing the way participants reacted during the session and their responses.  
2. Letter |
## GROUP DISCUSSION 8 (Second part)

### “Discussing an approach to CL – Its possibilities with teenagers”

| OBJECTIVES | 1. To explore participants’ understanding and opinions regarding this way of taking CL to the classroom.  
2. To analyze if participants consider this approach to teaching as a feasible approach for our context.  
3. To discuss the possibilities participants find in connecting their students’ experiences with the school practices.  
4. To analyze how popular trends may reflect the state of a society and how this issue can be discussed in the classroom. |
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<td>ESTIMATED TIME</td>
<td>45 minutes (half of a seminar session)</td>
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### ACTIVITIES

1. **Discussing the reading**
   - How did you like the reading?
   - Why did the authors consider it was important to include non-canonical literature?
   - Is it possible to carry out this theory in our context?
   - Would it be relevant?
   - Do we need this type of education? Why? Why not?
   - What kind of texts could you use in your English classes to engage students?
   - How would you approach those texts?
   - What kind of music do teenagers in your schools identify with? Why?
   - How do those genres voice students’ feelings? Realities?
   - How could you take the issues portrayed in those genres, to the classroom?

2. **Homework:**
   - Participants will read Critical Literacy Finds a "Place": Writing and Social Action in a Low-Income Australian Grade 2/3 Classroom, by Comber, Thomson and Wells (2001).

### PRODUCT

1. Audio recording showing the way participants reacted during the session and their responses.
2. Letter
# GROUP DISCUSSION 9

**“Taking CL out of the school walls”**

| OBJECTIVES | 1. To explore participants’ understanding and opinions regarding this way of taking CL to the classroom and out of the school walls.  
2. To analyze if participants consider this approach to teaching as a feasible approach for our context.  
3. To analyze how popular trends may reflect the state of a society and how this issue can be discussed in the classroom. |
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<td>ESTIMATED TIME</td>
<td>90 minutes <em>(a seminar session)</em></td>
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</table>
| ACTIVITIES | **1. Discussing the reading**  
- How did you like the reading?  
- Why did the authors consider it was important to involve students in the transformation of their neighborhood?  
- Is it possible to carry out this theory in our context?  
- Would it be relevant?  
- Do we need this type of education? Why? Why not?  
- Can students impact their communities? How?  
- Can that impact be promoted through the English lessons? How?  
- How can English teachers contribute to the transformation of students’ communities? |
| | **2. Homework:**  
- Participants will design a set of lesson plans to be implemented during two weeks. They will follow the school syllabus (given grammar notion) and adapt it to reflect their understanding of CL. They have 1 week to present the first draft. |
| PRODUCT | **1. Audio recording showing the way participants reacted during the session and their responses.**  
**2. Lesson plans** |
### MEETING # 10 (INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW)

**“Discussing how lesson plans reflect participants’ understanding of CL”**

| OBJECTIVES | 1. To see, through the lesson plans participants designed, how they understand CL and reflect their understanding on the themes and activities proposed.  
2. To determine whether the participants’ claims of their understanding of CL are confirmed or contradicted by their lessons.  
3. To analyze the challenges participants encountered when designing their lessons.  
4. To analyze the benefits participants found when designing their lessons.  
5. To challenge participants with some questions that could take them to reflect on the critical nature of their lessons and modify them if necessary. |
| DATE: | April 19th |
| MATERIALS | Audio recorder |
| ESTIMATED TIME | 90 minutes (a seminar session) |

| ACTIVITIES | 1. Participants share their lesson plans and materials and explain their rationale behind their design, how it fits their school context and students’ needs.  
2. Participants answer the following questions:  
  - Did you achieve the purpose of planning your lessons from a critical perspective?  
  - How do your lessons reflect some principles from Critical Literacies? If it does not, why did you decide not to plan your lessons from this approach?  
  - What benefits or difficulties did you encounter when planning the lessons? Why?  
  - How is planning a lesson from a critical approach, different or similar from planning other lessons?  
  - Did the readings discussed in class, provide ideas or examples for planning these lessons? Did you use any of those ideas? If so, which? If not, Why not?  
  - Can some of the principles of Critical Literacies be integrated with the curriculum you are currently following at school? If so, how? If not, why not?  
3. Homework:  
  - Participants will make any necessary changes to their lesson, trying to answer the questions discussed during the interview.  
  - Participants will write a reflection on their process of designing their lesson plans, following the same questions. |

Note: Participants are reminded their lesson implementation would be video-taped by me.

| PRODUCT | 1. Lesson plans  
2. Audio recording  
3. Reflection number 2 |
## MEETING # 11 (INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW)

### “Discussing participants’ experiences during the stage of lesson implementation”

| OBJECTIVES | 1. To explore participants’ feelings and reactions after implementing their lessons.  
|            | 2. To analyze the challenges participants encountered when implementing their lessons.  
|            | 3. To analyze the benefits participants found when implementing their lessons.  
|            | 4. To challenge participants with some questions and comments gathered during the class observations. |

| DATE: | May 10th - 17th - 24th |

| MATERIALS | Audio recorder |

| ESTIMATED TIME | 90 minutes (a seminar session) |

### ACTIVITIES

1. Participants share their experiences after having implemented their lessons during the first week and answer the following questions:
   - How did you feel bringing these lessons to your students? Why?
   - How did your students respond to the lessons?
   - Were you able to promote language learning and critical reflections? How? Was it easy? Difficult? Why?
   - What difficulties did you face teaching these lessons?
   - Was implementing these lessons different from implementing your previous lessons? How?
   - Did you perceive any benefits teaching this way? Which? Why?
   - For your future lessons, would you consider teaching from a critical approach? Why? Why not?

**Note:** During the class observations different aspects emerged and they were discussed with each participant during the interview. E.g.:

- Not addressing students’ questions
- Students’ questioning of the nature of the themes brought to class
- Students’ engagement in the lessons
- Use of English/Spanish during the lessons
- Participants’ anxiety to cover the whole lesson plan
- Classroom management
- Teachers’ beliefs/bases regarding the themes brought to class
- The role of teaching experience

2. **Homework:**
   - Participants will write a reflection on their process of implementing their lesson plans

### PRODUCT

1. Audio recording showing participants’ responses during the interview
2. Written reflection number 3
### GROUP DISCUSSION 12

**Sharing participants’ experiences on the process of exploring CL, designing lessons from a critical perspective and implementing them in their schools.**

**Checking researcher’s interpretations with participants.**

| OBJECTIVES | 1. To explore participants’ experiences and perceptions in this research process.  
2. To analyze the challenges and benefits participants encountered in this process.  
3. To provide an opportunity for the participants to learn about their classmates’ experiences.  
4. To share and check my findings and interpretations with the participants. |
| DATE: | May 31st |
| MATERIALS | Audio recorder |
| ESTIMATED TIME | 90 minutes (*a seminar session*) |
| ACTIVITIES | 1. Participants share their experiences and perceptions of this research process.  
2. They express their opinions about their classmates’ comments, experiences, successes and challenges.  
3. They discuss the possibilities of teaching languages from a more critical perspective.  
4. Participants express their intentions or not to continue trying to take CL to their English classes.  
5. Researcher shares findings and check with participants in her interpretations coincide with how they perceived this process. |
| PRODUCT | 1. Audio recording showing participants’ responses during the final session. |
APPENDIX B

This appendix is a sample of the consent form participants signed to participate in this study.

UNIVERSIDAD DE ANTIOQUIA
CONSENT FORM

Title of the study: What are EFL pre-service teachers’ beliefs, attitudes, and reflections when exploring Critical Literacy theories, designing and implementing critical lessons?

Researcher: Claudia Patricia Gutiérrez

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH:
The purpose of this research is to explore the beliefs, attitudes and reflections of three (3) EFL pre-service teachers, during the exploration of critical literacy theories, and the preparation and implementation of lessons, using a critical literacy approach. This study will also involve some practicum advisors at Universidad de Antioquia, Medellín, as crucial providers of information to understand how they perceive pre-service teachers at the practicum stage, regarding their attitudes toward language teaching.

WHAT WILL MY PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?
If you decide to participate in this research, you will be asked to give a maximum of three interviews that will last for approximately one hour. However, if you are a pre-service teacher, you will be asked to, additionally, participate in weekly focus groups interview that will be audio recorded. You will also be observed during the implementation of the lessons you will design during the seminar, and you will be asked to write some reflections to be analyzed as part of the data collection process.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS OR BENEFITS TO ME?
your participation in this project will not represent any risks nor benefits to you.

HOW WILL MY CONFIDENTIALITY BE PROTECTED?
Some of the comments made by you during the data collection process might be used in publications as a result of this study. However, your name will not be used without your permission.

WHOM CAN I CONTACT IF I HAVE ANY QUESTIONS?
In case you have any questions about the research, you can send an e-mail to claudia.udea@hotmail.com who is the researcher, or call her at 301 565 69 40. You can as well call Paula Echeverri, my research advisor, at 219 57 99.

Remember that your participation in this project is voluntary. If you decide not to participate or withdraw from the study at any time, there will not be any consequences to you.

Your signature at the end represents that you have read this consent form and are willing to participate in the study. You will receive a copy of this form for your record.

Name of participant:_______________________________________________

Signature:________________________________________________________________

Date:____________________________________________________________________

I give my permission to be quoted directly in publications using my name.
APPENDIX C

This appendix is a sample of the class observation protocol I used during the lesson implementation of participants.

CLASS OBSERVATION

| Grade: ________________________________ | Teacher: ________________________________ |
| Place /Date/time: ________________________________ | Number of students: ____ |

Context & Class description:

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<th>Teacher’s development of the lesson designed</th>
<th>Students’ attitudes towards the lesson</th>
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<th>Teacher’s response towards students’ opinions</th>
<th>My questions to the teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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APPENDIX D

This appendix is related to three instances of the lessons designed by the participants of this study, in which they were asked to take the critical literacy theories explored into practice.

DRAFT OF CRITICAL LESSON PLAN - DAVID

MATERIALS: 40 copies of “40 Every Day Actions!”, a set of cards with the expressions of Appendix 2, a couple of playing balls

OBJECTIVES: Students will understand and be able to express actions that occurred in the past before other actions took place. Students will write and talk about events in their daily routines.

AGENDA – 1st Lesson (55 min.)

- Every Day Actions (5 min.)
  I hand out to Ss a piece of paper with “40 Every Day Actions!” (See Appendix 1). I encourage Ss to answer orally the questions above the verb chart. They may check out verb lists or dictionaries at this point.

- Passing Ball Game (15 min.)
  I divide the class in two halves. Each half gets a ball. I call out one the verbs in the list and one of the students is expected to say the past or past participle of the verb. If he says it right, he gets to pass the ball to another of his teammates. I call out another verb and so on. Once a student answers incorrectly, it is the other team’s turn. Every verb that a student gets right grants a point to his team. To avoid having the same Ss always answering over and over, every time a student participates, he must pass the ball to someone in his team who has not.

- Your Routine (15 min.)
  Ss get to work on the task that is below the verb chart in “Every Day Actions!” (See Appendix 1). Once they are finished, I ask a few volunteers to read aloud one or two of their routines.

- What about today? (20 min.)
What about TODAY?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(✓) Yes, I have.</th>
<th>(X) No, I haven’t.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have taken a shower.</td>
<td>I haven’t listened to music.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I haven’t talked to my best friend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…</td>
<td>…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…</td>
<td>…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Ss work on their routines, I write this chart on the board. Once I checked out their routines, I ask them to look at the chart and classify their routines as affirmative or negative, depending on whether they have or have not done today what they mentioned in their routines. This is a practical way of having Ss refresh their knowledge on Present Perfect, which they have studied earlier this year. Refreshing this grammar component will allow me to introduce Past Perfect, which is the core grammar element behind this lesson, and this is the first time Ss will study so. After Ss complete their own chart, I have some of them come up to the board and write their ideas.

**APPENDIX 1**

*40 Every Day Actions! – 20 of these verbs are **REGULAR** and the other 20 are **IRREGULAR***

- Which ones are Regular and which ones are Irregular?
- How do you form the Past and Past Participle of **REGULAR** verbs?
- Do you know the Past and Past Participle of the **Irregular** verbs in the chart?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Enjoy</th>
<th>Know</th>
<th>Run</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Be</td>
<td>Feel</td>
<td>Laugh</td>
<td>See</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buy</td>
<td>Finish</td>
<td>Learn</td>
<td>Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call</td>
<td>Forget</td>
<td>Like</td>
<td>Talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close</td>
<td>Get</td>
<td>Listen</td>
<td>Think</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DRAFT OF CRITICAL LESSON PLAN – CAMILO

Lesson plan N° 1

Unit: Animals in Colombia.
Day: Tuesday
Time: 7:00-7:55

Main aim: By the end of this unit students will be able to reflect on the way animals are treated in Colombia

Grammar: Vocabulary, present simple.

Materials: Flashcards.

Lesson Sequence

1. Explanation (15 minutes): Teacher will show students flashcards with images of different animals with the goal of increasing students’ vocabulary. After showing the images, teacher will make some general questions to the students: E.g.: What is your favorite animal? Why do you like that animal?

2. Discussion (15 minutes): Teacher would make some general questions to the class, for example: Would you like to have animals at your home? The idea would be to get students opinion on having pets.

3. Activity (15 minutes): Teacher will pose a situation about an animal abandoned in the street, through brainstorming the class will propose some actions that can be done in that case.

- Follow up: For next class students will be asked to think of animals that we can find in a farm.
UNIT: Men vs Women/ Stereotypes.

TOPIC: writing a persuasive letter.

TIME: 11:00-1:00 PM

Lesson aim:

- to express ideas, views, insights through the writing of a persuasive letter.
- to learn and practice about writing a persuasive letter.
- to discuss about gender stereotypes.

Key Vocabulary: persuasive, persuade, stereotype, pursue.

Materials:

1. Video Beam.
2. Persuasive letter worksheet.
3. Video: Billy Elliot Movie Trailer. Taken from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=phCEwSmHpOE
4. PPP.
5. Peer-editing criteria

1. Write three compliments for the author of letter
2. Write three suggestions for the author of the letter
3. Circle, underline, or use editing marks to make corrections to the letter. Look for spelling, grammar, or punctuation errors.

Lesson Sequence:

Warm Up (10 Minutes): Billy Elliot Introduction. Images discussion and reflection on Stereotypes. (PPP)

Opening (20 minutes):

1. (15 min) Watch Billy Elliot’s trailer and write a short paragraph (5 sentences paragraph) describing what you infer/think the story is about. One or two students could read their paragraphs to share with the whole class.
2. (5 min) Discuss some questions related to the Trailer’s content (PPP).
What’s your reaction to this? (A picture of a boy dancing ballet)
Does this seem better? (A picture of the same boy boxing)
Is this showing a Stereotype? Explain. Why or why not?
What’s Billy’s special talent?
Why do you think Billy Elliot’s father did not like him doing ballet?
Are there certain sports that are for girls and others for boys?
Is it fair that some things are labelled as girls or boys?

Core Activities: (90)

Writing a persuasive letter.

1. **(10 mins)** I will explain to students what a persuasive letter is, I will show them in a PPP some aspects to take into account when writing a persuasive letter. I will show them an example of a writing letter emphasizing on the most important aspects (those included in the PPP) a persuasive letter should have.

2. **(60 min)** Each students tells a number (1 or 2). Students who are number 1 are going to be Billy Ellioits and students who are number 2 are going to be Billy Elliot’s father. Each student is going to write a persuasive letter addressed either to Billy or to Billy’s father. Billy is going to persuade his father, explain him why he should let him be a ballet dancer and Billiy’s father is going to persuade Billy to practice boxing. They will use the ‘‘planning ‘‘worksheet before writing the letter. Once they have answered the questions in the planning worksheet they will continue with the writing of the letter.

3. **(20 mins)** They will exchange letters and peer editing will take place.
APPENDIX E

This appendix reflects an instance of the letters written by the participants of this study, giving advice to the practicum student who was facing challenges in his classroom, related to various social issues such as sexual abuse, drugs, etc.

David

Hi there fellow teacher! Just like you, I happen to be doing my practicum and I hope I can soon graduate as a Foreign Language Teacher at UdeA. The reason why I’m writing to you is because last week when we were in the middle of our session with Claudia Gutiérrez, our Practicum Adviser, she said you were having a really hard time at your school due to complex social issues such as sexual abuse, drug abuse and absent parents. By no means do I pretend to offer magical solutions or advice that allows you to deal appropriately with all of this, but I want you to know that your concern is my concern as well.

I want to be honest with you and so you need to know that in five years I have taught English, I have never been in such a complex educational setting; needless to say that I would be lying to you if I said right now that I could place myself in your shoes. However, I can truthfully tell you that I’m highly worried about what you’re going through. I know that eventually I’ll be facing the same dilemmas you’re overwhelmed by at the moment. After all, it only takes to watch or read our country’s news to realize how inhuman our society has turned into.
This is why I would like you to know that no matter what you do or how outstanding teacher you may be or become, there will always be things that are out of your control. Remember you’re a teacher and not a parent, a psychologist, a social worker or an adult friend. Therefore, focus on what you can do as a teacher, and that is to guide, to set a positive example, and above all, to listen to your students, which is usually something they lack at home.

The subject matter in this case, whether it is English or French, becomes a secondary objective for you. It’s hard to imagine that a female teenage student would be willing to use the Simple Past to tell a story of something that happened to her when she’s been repeatedly abused at home. What you can try to do, though, is create an opportunity to listen to her, make her feel you care for her and let her know studying might be the only chance she has to turn her situation around.

Listening to her requires first that she’s willing to talk to you and feels like she can actually talk to you about something she would rather not tell most people. This is when building rapport with students should become your first goal. Again: You’re not trying to be their friend. You should still look to be regarded as an authority figure, but one who is respected not because it’s the teacher in control of grades but because it’s someone nice and respectful. Someone who cares more about what’s going on with their students and not that much about the grammar lecture he has planned for today’s class or the quiz that is scheduled for the next one.

Whenever you have a chance, use the target language as a vehicle to discuss and reflect about what affects them on a daily basis. Focus more on meaning rather than on
form and allow them to use Spanish whenever they mean to say something that’s relevant to build rapport and trust among all of you. Make them feel like your class is an oasis for them to escape repetition drills and tightness which students are usually exposed to at school. Let them be autonomous about what they want to read, draw, listen, watch, write or discuss. Then again, a foreign language is a good tool to enhance all of these possibilities.

I know it might sound too easy to do but all I’m saying is that don’t try to impose your class, your rules or the contents you’re supposed to cover up, but instead give students a voice and a chance for them to feel comfortable with you, with one another in the class, and finally to make their own decisions about their learning.

I look forward to hearing from you.