



An interrogation of the role of critical thinking in English language pedagogy in Chile

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to critically interrogate the role of Critical Thinking (CT) in English language education in Chile through the analysis of teacher educators' and postgraduate students' perceptions and understandings of CT in relation to their academic trajectories through university. Five postgraduate students and five teacher educators from three different Masters of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (MTEFL) programs agreed to take part in the research. Informed by a qualitative paradigm, semi-structured interviews were conducted aimed mainly at (1) unpacking teacher educators' and postgraduate students' understandings of CT; (2) investigating postgraduates' views of the place of critical thinking in their English teacher education training; (3) examining the ways in which teacher educators deal with CT in their pedagogies; and (4) identifying students' preparedness to approach reading and writing critically, as viewed by both groups of participants. Analysis of responses revealed, on the one hand, students' recognition of CT skills as necessary to succeed in academic life and, on the other, great concerns for the limited importance accorded to teaching these skills in teacher education courses. Teacher educators' responses generally showed an increasing interest in trying to incorporate the teaching of CT skills in their pedagogies, but admitted to an overall lack of consistency in the implementation process. The paper concludes with critical questions about the perceived pedagogical mismatches between teacher educators' and postgraduate students' perceptions of the role of CT in their academic journeys, and about the role of Chilean teacher education programs in addressing these issues.

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1. Introduction

Education around the globe has always been driven by dominant discourses characterized by a strong rhetoric of power and control. Neoliberalism, for instance, as a new mode of governing, control and power (Aviles and Simons 2013), has legitimized practices and ideologies that advance inequality and power differences in social formations such as class or gender (Pennycook 1999). A critical consequence of this is that the discourses

produced by hegemonic cultures constrain the possibilities of reflecting critically on the world, and on the chances to transform it for the better (Pessoa and Freitas 2012, 755). However, such emergent approaches as critical applied linguistics (e.g. Norton and Toohey 2004), critical pedagogy (e.g. Ellsworth 1992; Freire 2005), critical language teaching (e.g. Pennycook 1999) and critical discourse analysis (e.g. van Dijk 1993) have committed themselves to developing critical social inquiry aimed mainly at opening up possibilities that encourage teachers and students to ameliorate the social inequalities.

In the current climate of teacher education, Brown et al. (2004) acknowledge the hurdle in 'raising students' critical awareness of language and literacy' (3). Nonetheless, Orłowski (2011) is hopeful that schools could once be seen as a place of resistance and hope through the adoption of a 'very critical form of critical thinking' (3). This in turn places CT at the heart of education, and more specifically, of teaching and learning pedagogies. In this way, despite the scepticism of some scholars (e.g. Tang 2016) about the presence of CT in education, the view of 'CT as an essential skill' is sometimes challenged by those who question whether CT can be effectively taught and developed in educational settings (Huber and Kuncel 2016) and those who view it as a set of cognitive skills transferable across contexts and domains of life (Davies and Barnett 2015, 89). In our present work, although we recognize the place of CT as an opportunity for action, reflection, resistance and transformation, we particularly embrace the idea that CT is a defining condition of higher education that allows for the development and promotion of skills for evaluating, inquiring and judging statements and unstated judgements.

It is worth reflecting on the centrality of what is meant by critical, and how it applies to the present work. Commenting on the role of critical applied linguistics, Pennycook (2001) reminds us that the use of the notion 'critical' is not just a merely terminological addition to applied linguistics, but a term with different interrelated senses that is generally associated with CT, literary criticism, and questions of power and inequality. Thus, CT must be understood as a process of questioning the *status quo*, and of challenging ideologies and social order. This is, to a certain extent, reiterated by Pessoa and Freitas (2012) who state that:

Education should be committed to social justice, which means that teachers must not only teach the contents of a given subject, but also encourage students' critical thinking so that they can be aware of oppression and learn how to fight against it (753).

In the current climate of teacher education around the world, much reference to CT has been made in relation to the pressing need for developing learners' CT as not just a set of pre-packaged higher-order thinking skills or abilities, but as an overall approach to cultivating critical intellectuals with a profound willingness to inquire about the historical, social, cultural and political contexts and situations in which they participate. However, in Tang's (2016) view, teachers' actual teaching practices rarely focus on the cultivation and development of learners' ability to think critically. Wen and Zhou (2006) argue that teachers' pedagogies are generally characterized by 'traditional forms of teaching and learning practices that almost always prioritize memorization, rote learning and standardized testing, where the role of critical thinking is usually relegated to a second place' (78). This raises general questions about the role of CT in pedagogical contexts, and, more specifically, about the merits and virtues that lie at the heart of CT in higher education.

The Chilean context, as Mora (2013) points out, is a case where enormous theoretical and curricular efforts to deal with the teaching and learning of CT skills have been made,

but, as a result of a number of socio-political factors that have shaped the current educational system, fail to materialize in teachers' actual pedagogical practices in the classroom. Our present work seeks to respond to the need for CT skills in Chilean academic contexts by examining teacher educators' and postgraduate students' views of the place of CT and its centrality to their academic trajectories in order to better comprehend how CT is positioned within English teacher education programs, and how to possibly cater for the needs of a society that demands individuals to think critically. Similarly, due to the scant CT research available in English language pedagogy in Chile, the present work is intended to pave the way for further theoretical discussions, methodological interventions or pedagogical suggestions on how CT can be more systematically dealt with in teacher education programs in Chile.

Our present study aims to address the following research questions:

- (i) What are the matches and mismatches between the perceptions of critical thinking held by postgraduate students and teacher educators?
- (ii) What do postgraduate students understand as the centrality and challenges of critical thinking to their English teacher education training?
- (iii) In what ways do teacher educators deal with critical thinking in their pedagogies?
- (iv) How is students' preparedness to approach reading and writing critically viewed by teacher educators?

Our goal in this work is to explore the views, experiences and understandings of CT in relation to the academic trajectories of postgraduate students and teacher educators from different universities in Chile, and to uncover the pedagogical and methodological complexities and challenges that lie at the heart of CT in English teacher education contexts.

2. Critical thinking and teacher education

Definitions of CT abound in the literature. Indeed, a careful analysis of some of the various existing definitions reflect a good deal of epistemological and ontological diversity. Prior to dissecting such diversity, it must be noted that, regardless of the theoretical perspective from which it is viewed, CT is seen as highly valued, desirable, and an increasingly essential asset (Facione 1990b; Johanson 2010; Liu 2000; Ralston and Bays 2015).

Defining CT is certainly no easy task. We all seem to be aware of its existence, yet we do not all view it the same way. In a study conducted by Paul, Elder, and Bartell (1996), only 19% of the teachers interviewed during the investigation were able to provide a sound description of CT. The lack of consensus as to what CT actually entails has been, for some, noted as a factor affecting both the teaching of CT skills (Allen, Rubinfeld, and Scheffer 2004) and the design of valid CT assessment procedures (Appleby 2006). An attempt was made in 1988–1989 to reach a possible consensus as what CT really is. This took the form of a panel of experts from different academic and professional backgrounds, who shared and critiqued their situated expertise, with the view to arriving at an agreed description and definition. The resulting product was a breakdown of the constitutive skills and subskills of CT, and recommendations for how it should be taught and assessed. The panel was dominated by academics affiliated to philosophy, followed by educators and psychologists, which probably explains the two major orientations that underlie

CT definitions, viz. philosophical (e.g. Johnson, Steven, and Zvoch 2007) and psychological. Thus, one of the first widely held definitions of CT makes reference to both philosophical and psychological underpinnings. The definition reads as follows:

critical thinking [is] purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based. Critical thinking is essential as a tool of inquiry (Facione 1990a, 2).

CT in education is often traced back to Dewey's philosophical and educational work. Dewey (1909) coined the term 'reflective thinking' and later proposed a five-phase CT model comprised of (i) suggestion, (ii) problem definition, (iii) hypothesis generation, (iv) reasoning, and (v) hypothesis testing. CT, in Dewey's (1933) view, was that which facilitated the transition from sheer experience to proper learning. From then onwards, many a definition has emerged, all of which suggest some commonalities and differences. Amongst the commonalities are, for instance, the cognitive dimension to CT. Indeed, for many scholars CT is explicitly equated with 'higher order skills', 'higher level thinking' (Geertsen 2003), 'reasoning skills' (Kuncel 2011) and Bloom's taxonomy (Pikkert and Bays 2015; Shaarawy 2014). Other researchers, however, place greater emphasis on the metacognitive component of CT. Paul and Elder, for example, define CT as 'the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it' (4). The importance accorded to CT cuts across all theoretical perspectives and ensuing definitions; nonetheless, some place emphasis on its intrinsic, yet broad, intellectual value, as is the case of Scriven and Paul (1987), who argue that 'critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief or action', (xxx). Facione (1990) defines it as 'the process of *reasoned* [our emphasis] judgement', (3). In a similar vein, Halpern (2010) underscores the intellectual exercise which lies at the heart of CT, yet he introduces, rather modestly, the element of concrete task as the scenario for the display of CT skills. Other scholars have emphasized the concrete and vital applications of CT, beyond the richness of the related intellectual activity (Ten Dam & Volman, 2004).

Another aspect that the various definitions of CT insinuate is its (mode of) teachability. For some, CT should be embedded in the diverse scholarly activities students engage in and should not be treated separately (Pikkert and Bays, 2015), where teachers should teach by setting the example (Mayfield 2001) and by constantly engaging the students in CT processes (Yuretich 2004). Notwithstanding the diversity of perspectives, the teachability of CT is evident in most – if not all – the different conceptualisations available. Shokouhi (2016) reports that culture may be a variable that can either facilitate or hinder the teachability of CT. As the author suggests, Chinese students may struggle to develop CT skills as they have been raised in a society where positions of relative authority are not to be challenged as we, humans, are all related to one another and to nature. Paton (as cited in Shokouhi 2016) and McKinley (2013) argue, however, that CT may take different forms in different cultures, depending on the values that each particular society upholds.

In positioning the role and status of CT in higher education contexts, specifically in relation to the training and preparation of teachers-to-be, one must first acknowledge its centrality to the foundational basis of teacher education programs. First, within the confines of education CT has been acclaimed to be 'an essential skill for twenty-first

century survival and widely promoted in education' (Luk and Lin 2015, 67), and as 'a necessary learning outcome for all college students and essential for academic success' (Ralston and Bays 2015, 85). Such centrality of CT in higher education is also acknowledged by Flores (2016) who points out that 'Academic benefits of reading, as well as critical thinking are crucial in higher education, especially for the optimal professional development of students in the knowledge area' (129). Despite the wide recognition of CT as an important educational and life skill, several researchers have closely questioned its presence in higher education contexts. For instance, Huber and Kuncel (2016) doubt if CT is effectively taught in college. Similarly, Arum and Roksa (2011) have gone on to affirm that universities have become less effective at teaching critical thinking over the years. This seems to be indicative of lack of careful consideration of the systematic use, delivery and treatment of CT in educational and academic settings. A shift in this situation requires, as Ralston and Bays (2015) state, that more academic support is provided to learners so that they develop critical thought in more systematic ways. Likewise, the authors go on to suggest that meaningful connections should be made across the curriculum so the development of CT occurs in all subjects as well as in the various aspects of teachers' teaching practices (Ralston and Bays 2015, 86). A coherent and successful curriculum that systematically promotes the integration of CT into practices and activities in higher education contexts requires a re-consideration of the beliefs and philosophical assumptions about language and language learning underpinning our educational systems (Pennycook 1999).

The various definitions and issues presented above do not necessarily fit into the so-called critical paradigm at large, wherein the dominant view is that individuals must interrogate those principles ('givens' in Pennycook's (1999) view) that have been passed onto us and which we have adopted acritically. Such principles, evident in teaching methodologies, curriculum issues, language norms, and so forth, maintain a most unfair power structure. Hence, the underlying driving force in Critical Applied Linguistics (CAL for short) is 'the inclusion of a means of transformation' (Pennycook 1999, 329) of the status quo. Thus, CT – if viewed from a critical (transformative) perspective, contrasts starkly with the purely (meta-)cognitive views outlined above. Although these are all central issues to a pedagogical consideration of CT, the view embraced in the present study is in line with Facione's (1990a) conceptualization of CT, which stresses the analytical, evaluative and inferential nature of CT as a tool of inquiry.

3. Methodology

A qualitative methodology underpins the data collection procedure along with its analysis. The rationale behind the use of this methodology lies, first and foremost, in its increasing visibility and acceptance in applied linguistics over the last two decades (Dörnyei 2007), and, secondly, in the emergent nature of the data collected for this study. The discussion on the appropriateness of adopting a qualitative or quantitative paradigm in analyzing language is not a recent concern. In the 1980s, Chaudron (1986) commented on the methodological traditions that had underpinned research in applied linguistics, and said that although quantitative methods were predominantly used due to the need for precise language proficiency assessment, 'qualitative methods continue to play a great role in applied linguistics research' (710). Through the use of teacher educators' and postgraduate students' responses to semi-structured interviews, the present work intends to unpack and

comprehend the experiences and social worlds that these participants produce and reproduce through their academic trajectories at university.

3.1. Methods, data collection and analysis

The recruitment process was by means of emailed invitations sent to several postgraduate students and teacher educators at different universities in Santiago, Chile. Those who responded expressing their interest in the study were sent a consent form that was signed and returned to the researcher at the time of the interview.

To capture postgraduate students' views, experiences and understandings of CT, the researchers set up semi-structured interviews conducted at the participants' most preferred time and location. The interview contained 13 open-ended questions (see [Appendix 1](#)) that broadly addressed aspects of their understandings of CT, its relevance to their academic studies, development of CT skills in teacher training programs, and CT challenges when dealing with academic reading and writing. A similar method was utilized to elicit data from each of the five teacher educators. A semi-structured interview was arranged at their most convenient time and place. The interview was comprised of six open-ended questions (see [Appendix 2](#)), which addressed the same overall issues to which postgraduate students were asked to respond. The main reason for designing an interview protocol with fewer questions than the students' was based upon the assumption that, unlike postgraduate students, teacher educators would provide more in-depth responses elaborating on ideas and opinions put forward.

Literal transcriptions of the interview data included all minor and occasional lexical inaccuracies and grammatical errors encountered in the participants' speech. In an attempt to preserve the subjects' 'voice' and sense of ownership, no alterations for lexical or grammatical correctness were made to the transcribed data.

3.2. Who the participants were

For this study, five postgraduate students and five teacher educators from three different Chilean universities were interviewed.

The participants' comments were organized under four pre-identified categories. The categories corresponded to the interview questions and, more specifically, to the four research questions (RQs) which this study addresses. These categories were: *1 Defining critical thinking*; *2 Role of critical thinking in students' pedagogies*; *3 Educators' engagement with critical thinking*; and *4 Students' readiness to implement critical thinking*.

Each category is discussed below, with relevant excerpts from the interview data. Postgraduate students are represented as PS and teacher educators as TE, both followed by numerical codings from 1 to 5 to ensure anonymity.

4. Findings and discussion

This section reports on what was found in the interview data from postgraduate students and teacher educators. The data are reported in the order of the four research questions listed above.

4.1. Defining critical thinking

RQ1 – What are the matches and mismatches between the perceptions of critical thinking held by postgraduate students and teacher educators?

Postgraduate students and teacher educators were asked to share their views on what CT is to them and how it can be defined. Teacher educators' responses were quite diverse; each of them stressed different aspects of what is involved in thinking critically. First, there was an overt recognition of the complexity involved in defining CT. One of the educators, **TE4**, comments: *'Well, I don't think it's actually easy or sometimes even possible for some people to define it, maybe because it's a very abstract concept'*. Likewise, postgraduate students held a similar view regarding the difficulty of coming to a definition of CT. This was evident in **PG4's** first observation where it was indicated that *'it's actually very difficult to think about a definition of critical thinking. For me, it's difficult because I have never read or memorized a definition of this term'*. Furthermore, another student, **PG3**, also acknowledges not having read 'a formal definition' of CT, a response that taps into some key issues underpinning the principles of critical thought. This is expressed thus:

Although I've never read a formal definition of critical thinking, I believe it's something about finding other views and perspectives in what you read, when you write, listen or do any other activities (**PG3**)

Despite not having a seemingly informed understanding of CT, postgraduate students generally acknowledged that CT involves a process of critical reflection and of 'going deeper' into the understanding of meanings, as clearly indicated by **PG4** who commented that:

I believe it's something about meaning; finding other meanings in what you hear, what you read and what you write, even in what you see. Critical thinking is not just sticking by one meaning, but finding deeper meanings that some people don't think about (**PG4**)

The process of seeking 'deeper meanings', as put forward by the postgraduate student, may provide learners with the skills and attitudes for deciding what to believe or do (Cottrell 2005, 2). This practice of socially situated reflection and evaluation of ideas, concepts and assumptions entails questioning the premises of a claim within a situation that claim is raised (LLano 2015, 148). This same idea becomes evident in **PG2's** comments on CT which stress *'... the evaluation and examination of assumptions about issues and practices in our field'*. Likewise, **PG1** made a similar observation *'critical thinking for me is thinking out of the box, but more than this it's when you reflect on your ideas'*. Along the same line of thinking, the views of the following two other students concur with the overall idea put forward by other participants:

I believe it's something about finding other views and perspectives in what you read, when you write, listen or do any other activities like watching the news, talk to people in high positions, etc. (**PG3**)

it has to do with evaluation and examination of assumptions about issues and practices in our field (**PG2**)

Apart from these students' observations which generally recognized the power of CT as an enabling tool to unpack, critique and evaluate language, teacher educators' definitions and understandings of CT underscored its teachability, as shown in the following comments:

First of all, critical thinking is a teachable and learnable skill. We can teach it to students, and they can learn it and develop it. We, I, usually teach the skill or at least encourage my students to think critically when they see, hear, read or write something (TE3)

I think critical thinking is closely connected with teaching. First, I think it is a teachable ability and for us to teach it we need to know what it is, and how to define it (TE4)

Observing the educators' beliefs about how CT should be taught is of great interest and reveals their convictions of, first and foremost, the ubiquity of CT in all aspects and domains of life. This pervasive nature of CT skills, according the educators, highlights the value and necessity to teach students CT in order to equip them with the capacity to make informed judgements, sound reasoning and critical evaluations of language. Teacher educators' efforts to develop students' critically can be hampered by constraints imposed by 'the system', as TE5 indicated, which does not seem to provide the conditions for CT to be taught. Horvath and Forte (2011) point out that that availability of teaching and learning resources, time constraints, negative washback effects of testing and deeply-rooted ideologies of power can deter teachers from cultivating CT skills in their students (viii).

A central aspect of CT concerns the questioning of authority. Hanscomb (2016) points out that 'questioning the influence that power and authority have on our beliefs and actions is close to the heart of critical thinking' (115). This same idea is, to a large extent, engraved in the following educator's response:

There's a lot of philosophy involved in the concept, but in our field it has a lot to do with power differences, issues of dominance and dominant discourses, the power and the powerless, hidden messages, subliminal meanings, etc. If we think about the pedagogical side of it, it is our students who play a key role in this game. Why? They should be empowered to transform the lives of their students, not just in the delivery of content and knowledge, but in the provision of tools to unveil hidden issues in what they see, hear or read (TE4)

Although TE4's stance on what CT comprises seems to privilege the social and political transformational power of CT, in touching on the pedagogical dimension of the concept the educator acknowledges the central role of students (teachers) in committing to the transformation of their own students' lives by providing them with the tools to 'unveil hidden issues', which would most likely help them to develop a healthy scepticism towards all ideologies and discourses of authority, dominant representations of language and dominant knowledge.

Although postgraduate students' and educators' definitions of CT stressed different aspects of the concept, it is of importance to acknowledge that despite the apparent absence of CT instruction at universities it was generally agreed by most participants that CT skills are essential to all domains of life and greatly valued for academic success in academic contexts.

4.2. Role of critical thinking in postgraduate students' pedagogies

RQ2 – What do postgraduate students understand as the centrality and challenges of critical thinking to their English teacher education training?

In the study, it was found that all postgraduate students concur on the centrality of CT skills development, both for academic and professional endeavors and life at large,

which is in agreement with Koenig et al.'s (2011) view of the overarching value of CT. As **PG3** remarks, at master's level students '*have to evaluate information all the time, so yes, it's very important. Critical thinking is more than evaluate, it's about making questions, finding good reasons for something, providing support, and defending a position*'. Similarly, **PG5** adds that '*We have to read a lot and also write assignments. When we do all these assignments, we have to be able to analyze and critique the content of the readings*'. **PG3** adds that '[N]ow I understand the importance of these skills in our life'. Interestingly, though, the value ascribed to CT on the part of postgraduate students seems to have originated (as late as) at master's level. Only then did they either hear about CT or begin using such skills more systematically. In this respect, **PG2** reports that '*I think I first heard of CT in the Masters that I took and I heard the concept as related to critical action*', a view that is widely shared by nearly all postgraduate students. In a similar vein, there is agreement in that language teaching and learning offers room for the development of CT, particularly when developing reading, writing, and speaking skills, '*B[e]cause I think that when you write, you can use your own ideas, your opinion; you can use your creativity*' (**PG1**). The same occurs when '*you give them a topic, you expect them to give analytical answers and reflect on what they are saying; more than just say 'I agree' or 'I disagree'*' (**PG1**).

A rather strong criticism is made about the disregard for CT skills development at undergraduate level, which contrasts with the understanding they have developed at master's level. As **PG1** argues, '*not all the universities foster critical thinking, I think. And because of that, I think a number of teachers don't have that ability*'. Likewise, **PG2** bluntly reports that '*... I don't think we were trained to think critically when we were younger*'. **PG4** offers an equally critical remark about the lack of development of CT skills at undergraduate level:

I never remember my teachers or lecturers in my undergraduate discussing, teaching or encouraging us to think in a critical way. Of course, there were classes where we did some discussion or debates but many times these didn't really have a purpose or a clear structure (**PG4**)

The centrality of CT skills, uncovered at master's level, appears to stem from both the learning opportunities created at this level, wherein critical reading, writing, and speaking are foregrounded by the respondents and regarded as essential for successful completion of their postgraduate course and successful teaching performance. These learning activities are in stark contrast with the activities promoted at undergraduate level, which seemingly rely more on rote and mechanistic learning, where linguistic development is given utmost importance, at the expense of the development of other skills, amongst which is CT skills. This is a view expressed by the following respondent in this regard:

I believe that one of the main differences is that in my Bachelor I had to memorise a lot but not in the masters. My master's studies have been a lot about reading critically and evaluating different points of view, for example different theories or different methodologies (**PG4**)

Only one of the postgraduate students places greater emphasis on the notion of CT linked to issues of power and societal transformation: '*We always need them, all the time. If we as teachers want to change education and generate some transformation in society we have to be critical thinkers and encourage our students to be critical thinkers as well*' (**PG5**).

As per the challenges that threaten the development of CT skills, it can be inferred that they mostly point to (i) the role of university lecturers' knowledge of and/or (in-)ability to teach CT skills (Mayfield 2001), (ii) the school and undergraduate education systems, which do not foster the development of CT, and (iii) the political agenda behind its overt disregard, as can be observed as follows:

I always thought that we need more preparation in our bachelor degrees. Teachers never talk about these skills ... If I did my Bachelor degree again, I would need more support from my lecturers, I would need teaching of these skills (PG5)

Everyone could potentially develop critical thinking skills but politicians don't want a society that think critically. Politicians and people in power just want us to believe and take everything they do and say (PG4)

The centrality of CT to students' academic development is clear in these comments, which nonetheless evidence the insufficient and inadequate attention to the teaching of CT skills in English teacher education programs at undergraduate level.

4.3. Educators' engagement with critical thinking

RQ3 – In what ways do teacher educators deal with critical thinking in their pedagogies?

The analysis of the interview data yields a broad consensus over the key role of CT skills development in teacher education. Yet, the importance attached to CT, in theoretical terms, does not seem to correlate with the actual development of CT skills. TE1, for instance, argues that *'I believe CT is very important and doesn't unfortunately have the role it should have'*. The respondent later adds that *'as far as I know these skills are not taught as a subject or within a particularly (sic) subject'*. This resonates with the responses offered by TE3, who claims that *'there's very little emphasis on the curriculum to do so [develop CT], so in my view, we generally neglect it, or try to incorporate it sporadically in some activities, not like [sic] an approach ... [we] need a more solid approach to CT so we know we have to deal with it'*.

As can be observed, the teacher educators go some way towards explaining this apparent inconsistency by partly blaming the curriculum – an arena of power issues (Pennycook 1999) –, which does not make room for skills such as CT, the pre-service teachers' lack of autonomy/engagement, or other quasi-academic obligations imposed by the curriculum such as testing. Be that as it may, the causes for the actual non-existent role of CT skills development seem to always lie *outside* the teacher educators' domain. Even those teacher educators that reportedly do incorporate an element of CT in their teaching hint at rather a pessimistic view of their students' ability to actually develop such skills. This pessimistic view is shared by TE2 who strongly stresses the pre-service teachers' lack of knowledge and skills rather than ways to address the problem or indeed the lecturers' own responsibility for it: *'I don't think they ... know the differences between critique or criticize, and tend to think that adopting a critical view means seeing the negative in something'*. Later, TE2 moves on to point out the following:

Sometimes I find it difficult to generate discussions in class because students are either too worried about their devices or have no opinion whatsoever simply because they haven't done their readings, now they haven't done their readings because they were too busy, lazy, or just didn't bother (TE2)

As a result, CT development is left to the discretionary judgement of each individual lecturer as to whether to incorporate it or not into their teaching, when to do it, and how to do it. **TE1**, for example, reports that *‘I guess every teacher or professor tries to incorporate a critical element in what they do and how they do it.* In this couple of cases, this self-reported incorporation, however, is minimal and tainted with laboriousness, as expressed by **TE5**:

[CT] It’s probably the most important ingredient to achieve successful communication in all areas ... to show reasoning and thinking when they speak and write. I would say most teachers do their best and use them, but in most cases, we don’t see good results

The TEs report that CT skills – or rather, the lack of CT – become more evident when pre-service teachers are asked to perform reading or writing tasks, in the main. A possible explanation is offered by **TE5**, who – as **PG4** remarks – contends that lecturers and pre-service teachers seem more preoccupied with understanding surface linguistic forms, despite the fact that teaching and learning a language that is widely regarded as imperialistic (Phillipson, 1994), creates a number of CT learning opportunities, both from a mainstream and a power-oriented perspective.

When students read, they spend a lot of time understanding the language, the form, the grammar, and this probably prevents from going deep down (**TE5**)

First, we need to state that English is a dominant language in the world and this is something students should be aware of, because dominance leads to a series of issues, like inequality, power, colonization (**TE2**)

Lastly, it becomes evident that two realities coexist, on relatively amicable terms, in the TEs’ consciousness: on the one hand, there seems to be a fervent conviction that CT skills are essential in teacher education programs; on the other hand, TEs do not deem it necessary to act upon this perceived need, yet their criticism about the non-existent or poorly developed CT skills in their students is bitter and often repeated. Take **TE1**’s remark:

CT permeates or should permeate all subjects across the curriculum, so it’s not about a particular skill or a specific language area. The first thing that comes to mind is when my students make oral presentations ... there’s no reasoning and they just repeat, repeat what’s on the slides (**TE1**)

4.4. Students’ readiness for critical thinking

RQ4 – How is students’ preparedness to approach reading and writing critically viewed by teacher educators?

CT is recognized and fully embraced by the Commission of European Communities (2016) as a competence for lifelong learning, an attitude of critical appreciation and curiosity, and recognized as central to scientific and technological progress of individuals, has been ‘widely promoted in basic and higher education in recent decades in many countries’ (Luk and Lin 2015, 67). However, as noted by Braxton and Nordvall (1985), it is customary that university classes do not promote students’ CT. This was a common sentiment that pervaded most educators’ responses. Fully aware that CT skills are not taught at university, **TE1** made the following remark:

Well, they are not prepared because we don't teach them the skills, so who does it? Society? The family? Social media? Our students have been spoonfed for so long that no preparation whatsoever at university could change this situation. We would need to start a new country, new society, new school system, everything!

Perhaps partly due to a society and educational system that has favored conformity over critical thought, TE1 is of the strong opinion that long-standing spoon-feeding practices at university could be a reason for a generation of students with underdeveloped CT skills. The questions raised by this educator require careful consideration about the shared societal responsibilities of cultivating CT in individuals and, more specifically, in university students.

Strongly stressing the role of learners' social milieus in their readiness to approach reading and writing critically, the following educator observes that:

One of the factors is the socioeconomic factor. You know, where the students come from, where they studied, the school they went to, the family and friends they had, all these social factors in most cases determine the ability or, I should say, the capacity of the students to think critically. And also the practices at home, like reading practices at home; did they ever see anyone in the family read? So I can't really say yes or no. It really depends (TE3)

The influence of socio-cultural and historical factors on students' critical understandings of language and textual practices is recognized by Brown et al. (2004). They argue that students' capabilities to engage in academic literacy practices and to develop critical awareness of professional knowledge production are often hampered by powerful dominant cultures of compliance and managerial control imposed by neoliberal ideologies shaping today's education. Although the above educator's initial reaction to the question stressed the socioeconomic factor, the response then addressed the desired shared responsibilities of various agents in society to better prepare students to critically deal with reading and writing in academic contexts.

A rather pessimistic outlook on students' readiness to engage critically in academic reading and writing practices is given by the following educators:

In my opinion, students don't do much academic reading or writing at university, as part of their teacher training courses. I mean critical thinking doesn't really come automatically as a result of reading (TE2)

Definitely not. Some students can be very capable of using, applying and showing these skills when they give opinions or write more extensively, so the lack of preparation of some other students is maybe related with their schooling experiences, home reading and writing experiences (TE5)

Despite the generally clear consensus between these two educators' observations about students' lack of CT preparation, each stresses different problematic social and educational forces that impede a fluid and systematic development of CT skills. In line with comments discussed previously, these responses seem to reveal not only the lack of a significant presence of CT in the curriculum, but an insufficiently consistent alliance across curricular subjects, and between home and schooling practices, issues which may well be synthesized in the fact that 'critical thinking often remains a secondary goal in the English language classroom' (Mehta and Al-Mahrooqi 2015, 25).

Overall, what becomes clear from teacher educators' views on the students' preparedness to approach reading and writing in a critical manner is, first and foremost, that

attempts and practices aimed at developing students' CT skills in academic contexts have been mostly sidelined. Secondly, more efforts are needed to heighten the place and role of CT in English language curricula in order to better provide learners with skills for academic success, and, therefore, to address more effectively issues of under-provision of a socially just education system to socio-culturally disadvantaged learners.

5. Conclusions

The present work set out to examine the role of CT in English language teacher education in Chile. Through the analysis of teacher educators' and postgraduate students' beliefs and understandings of critical thought in their pedagogies, this paper aimed at interrogating the relative status of CT in higher education within the Chilean context.

Some of the conclusions that can be drawn from the study are, for instance, that CT comes across as a highly valued and much-needed skill to develop. However, the study reveals that CT is very poorly developed at teacher education level. Indeed, both groups of participants provide their own views on the possible causes that hinder such development, amongst which are: An overriding concern for linguistic forms at the expense of CT development; the cross-curricular nature of the skill, which means that no-one feels compelled to take curricular responsibility for its development; and teacher educators' pessimistic view of teacher education students' ability to develop such skills at that level. Consequently, CT development, for the most part, takes place at master's level, where the learning opportunities created at this level, together with the ensuing learning tasks assigned to the postgraduate students lend themselves well for examining, assessing, and judging content critically.

On another note, the study reveals that CT is largely conceived of as a (meta-) cognitive skill, whose role in academic scholarly work proves crucial, particularly -yet not exclusively-, in reading and writing. By default, only occasional associations are made between CT and the critical examination of issues of power.

While it is clear that a more systematic impetus for developing learners' CT skills is needed in English language education, this could be problematized by the insufficiently explored ways of encouraging, sustaining and evaluating CT in reading and writing (Mehta and Al-Mahrooqi 2015). This is partly reiterated by Willingham (2008) who indicates that although CT is the primary goal of schooling, it is not successfully met. Possible routes to lessening the effects of absent CT practices in English language teaching and learning may include, first and foremost, a reconsideration of CT as a purely cognitive skill to a more socially-informed activity. Moon (2008) argues that although true critical thought dwells in the mind, it should be preferable to utilize such more generic term as 'critical activity'. A broader reconceptualization of the construct might involve not just whether learners use it or not, or whether or not it is taught, but rather questions about what academic activities and social practices require learners' critical engagement, for which purposes, and under what circumstances.

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Appendix 1

Interview questions for students

1. In your view, what is Critical Thinking?
2. Do you remember when you first heard about Critical Thinking?
3. Within the context of Chile, in your opinion, what is the role of CT in teaching training programs?
4. Were you taught Critical Thinking skills in your undergraduate studies?
5. Did you have to use Critical Thinking skills in your undergraduate studies? If yes, can you please explain in what way?
6. Are Critical Thinking skills necessary to complete your studies at the Master's course in Chile?
7. Do you believe that you will need CT skills in your teaching practices?
8. Do you find CT skills difficult to master?
9. Can you describe a learning situation where you are required to use CT skills?
10. In which particular areas of language learning do you find CT skills to be most needed?
11. In which areas of language learning do you use them the most?
12. Do you think CT skills are needed in academic reading and writing? How do you use them?
13. Do you think you require more support to learn how to use CT skills in academic reading and writing? Who should provide such support?

Appendix 2

Interview questions for teacher educators

1. How do you define Critical Thinking (CT)?
2. How do you view the role and place of CT in teacher training programs in Chile?
3. Are CT skills taught in teacher training courses?
4. Are there any areas of language learning in which learners show lack of CT skills? If yes, how are students supported?
5. Can you describe a learning situation where students are required to use CT skills?
6. Do you think students (teachers-to-be) are well prepared to approach academic reading and writing critically?