



**Examining paradigmatic alignment:
A critical analysis of an ELT research article**

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ABSTRACT

Every research endeavor has its own philosophy that shapes its framework. Therefore, researchers need to clearly state how they perceive knowledge and reality in their studies, as this reveals their underlying philosophy to readers. In other words, the epistemological and ontological foundations of the research clearly depict the philosophy the researcher has adopted. Hence, these foundations need to be carefully selected and implemented alongside the study. In this respect, this study critically examines the research article “*Empowering Minds and Fostering Inclusion: ELT Graduate Students’ Experiences with Critical Pedagogy*” through the lens of philosophical foundations. Adopting a qualitative document analysis design, the current study evaluates the extent to which the selected study aligns with the assumptions of the critical research paradigm and examines the article in terms of its aim of inquiry, ontological positioning, epistemological stance, and methodological orientation, all of which is grounded in the evaluative criteria proposed by Allison and Pomeroy (2000). The findings indicate that the selected article aligns substantially with the critical paradigm, particularly in its transformative purposes, its treatment of experience as reflective, dialogic, and experiential, and its emphasis on participant voice and holistic transformation through cognitive, emotional, and relational shifts. The study contributes to paradigmatic discussions in research by showing how critical pedagogy-oriented inquiries can be evaluated using explicit philosophical criteria, thus making the underlying epistemological and ontological foundations more transparent and analytically visible.

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Introduction

Different approaches to epistemological and ontological foundations shape how research is conducted, how data are presented, and how interpretations and judgments are made. Therefore, it is quite important for researchers to adopt the appropriate underlying philosophy in their studies, as this influences the study's framework (Keser & K ksal, 2017; Nguyen, 2019). Therefore, the researcher's epistemological and ontological views are highly valuable, as they shape how the research is conducted and the research design is implemented ( elik & K ksal, 2019; Uzun, 2016).

Philosophical foundations, namely epistemological and ontological issues, therefore need to be well-defined, selected, and implemented throughout the study. In this respect, ontology concerns how the researcher investigates truth (Nguyen, 2019). On the other hand, epistemology examines how the researcher approaches knowledge (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000;

Çelik & Köksal, 2019; Keser & Köksal, 2017). As can be understood, ontology concerns realism, whereas epistemology concerns knowledge. In other words, from epistemological and ontological perspectives, we, as readers, obviously understand how the researcher perceives knowledge and approaches reality; therefore, understanding the researcher's perceptions is important in educational research (Nguyen, 2019; Keser & Köksal, 2017).

Quantitative and qualitative research designs are widely used in the educational sciences, particularly in applied linguistics and second language education. In these fields, research is conducted within paradigms that are rooted in specific ontological and epistemological assumptions, such as positivism, post-positivism, constructivism, and critical theory (Keser & Köksal, 2017; Nguyen, 2019; Uzun, 2016).

Research Paradigms in ELT

Different ontological and epistemological assumptions lead to distinct research paradigms, each shaping how research is conceptualized, conducted, and interpreted (Nguyen, 2019). A research paradigm is a coherent system of beliefs about the nature of reality and the production of knowledge that guides methodological choices (Yus et al., 2024). As stated by Mangan (2004), paradigms differ primarily in their understanding of whether reality is independent of human perception or socially constructed, and whether knowledge is derived deductively from observable facts or inductively through interpretation.

Within the educational sciences, specifically ELT, four dominant paradigms are commonly identified: positivism, post-positivism, interpretivism/constructivism, and critical theory. Each paradigm reflects a distinct ontological and epistemological stance, which, in turn, shapes the methodological choice and the researcher's role (Keser & Köksal, 2017; Nguyen, 2019; Yus et al., 2024).

Positivism vs. Post-positivism

Positivism is often associated with the rationalist and empiricist scientific method (Nguyen, 2019; Uzun, 2016; Yus et al., 2024). Ontologically, it presumes that reality exists independently of human consciousness and can be objectively observed, approached, and measured. Epistemologically, positivism holds that knowledge can be deduced from observable phenomena. In other words, "positivism holds that we cannot know anything beyond observable facts because empirical science is considered the only valid form of knowledge" (Yus et al., 2024, p.166). Hence, positivists infer causal relationships through systematic experimentation and statistical analysis. In this respect, Yus et al. (2024) state that "this philosophy aims to predict and organize the forces around humans by using measurement and observation to test hypotheses or explain events" (p.165). In the educational arena, research designs generally include controlled conditions, hypothesis testing, and pre-test/post-test designs that aim to establish generalizable findings (Creswell, 2014; Neuman, 2014). In other words, "the research conducted under the positivist paradigm thus often employs experimental, quasi-experimental, correlational, causal comparative and survey methodologies" (Nguyen, 2019, p.5). That is why positivism is also called the Scientific Method, Empirical Science, and *Quantitative Research* (Nguyen, 2019). However, this paradigm has been criticized for marginalizing beliefs, opinions, values, and sociocultural influences. That is, the interpretive and context-dependent dimensions of human experience are inherently overlooked. "Due to the fact that the social world where humans are involved is not value-free, and that it is not always possible to provide explanations of a causal nature" (Nguyen, 2019, p.5), post-positivism emerged in response to positivism.

Post-positivism can be seen as a reaction to the limitations of strict positivism, particularly within the social and educational sciences. It commits to objectivity and systematic inquiry; on the other hand, it acknowledges that reality can be perceived and grasped imperfectly due to the influence of unobservable variables and researcher bias. Thus, reality is regarded as probable rather than absolute (Nguyen, 2019; Uzun, 2016). In other words, post-positivism moderates the deterministic claims of positivism, though it does not fully abandon its foundational assumptions about an external reality. That is, even though reality is assumed to operate according to natural, universal, and generalizable laws, researchers cannot attain a complete understanding of this reality by entirely distancing themselves from the phenomenon under investigation (Yus et al., 2024). Therefore, research conducted within this paradigm frequently uses triangulation, drawing on multiple techniques, data sources, or contexts to enhance credibility and yield a more comprehensive interpretation of the findings.

Interpretivism / Constructivism vs Critical Theory

Interpretivism, rooted in phenomenology, asserts that reality is socially constructed and multiple rather than singular (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It adopts “a *relativist* ontology means that there is no single reality or truth, and reality is explored, created or reconstructed through human interactions” (Nguyen, 2019, p.5). In other words, meaning does not exist independently of human consciousness; rather, it emerges through interaction and experience in a given context. Epistemologically, knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue and shared interpretation (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000; Kutay, 2016). Thus, a *subjectivist* epistemology is adopted, which holds that “reality needs to be interpreted” (Nguyen, 2019, p. 6). This adoption highlights the essential roles of contextual and cultural factors in understanding phenomena. Methodologically, interpretivist research mainly embraces qualitative designs and techniques, such as case studies, ethnography, phenomenology, and interviews (Creswell, 2014). In other words, “the frequent research methods utilized in the interpretivist/ constructivist paradigm are case study, action research, grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology, hermeneutics, phenomenography, heuristic inquiry, naturalist, narrative inquiry, and discourse analysis” (Nguyen, 2019, p.6). Rather than emphasizing validity and reliability in a positivist sense, interpretivist research prioritizes trustworthiness criteria, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Theory is typically generated inductively from participants’ perspectives and lived experiences.

Critical theory, on the other hand, moves beyond interpretation to incorporate a transformative, emancipatory, critical consciousness among research subjects. It conceptualizes reality as historically and culturally shaped by sociopolitical, economic, gendered, and cultural forces (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Uzun, 2016). An important conceptual clarification concerns the relationship between critical theory and critical pedagogy. Even though these two traditions often share common intellectual roots and are often closely interrelated, they are not fully synonymous. Critical theory, primarily associated with the Frankfurt School tradition, provides a broader philosophical and sociopolitical framework for critiquing structures of power, ideology, and domination in society. In contrast, critical pedagogy, strongly influenced by Freirean thought, represents the educational application of these critical principles, with a particular focus on teaching, learning, and classroom practices targeted at fostering emancipation and transformative action. In this respect, critical pedagogy can be understood as a pedagogically oriented extension of critical theory rather than its equivalent. Making this distinction explicit is essential for the present analysis. Ontologically, critical theory adopts a stance of historical realism, recognizing that social reality is structured by power relations, ideological stances, and hidden relations. Epistemologically, knowledge is regarded as value-

mediated and inseparable from politics (Scotland, 2012; Uzun, 2016). Methodologically, critical theorists often employ critical discourse analysis, critical language analysis, critical ethnography, participatory action research, and document analysis (Montesano-Montessori, 2023). In educational sciences, researchers adopting a critical perspective and research studies theoretically informed by critical theory often examine, question, and transform traditional practices, policies, ideas, or pedagogical approaches as well as challenge specific social, cultural, and political norms (Bozkurt & Topkaya, 2023; McLaren, 2003; Ördem & Yükselir, 2017). In line with this, a critical perspective on the research agenda is generally used as a tool to identify and expose underlying problems, limitations, or inequities within the system (Troudi, 2010). The critical evaluation in a particular domain, such as a method, technique, policy, or norm, is carried out after specifying the *problematization* (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). This critical evaluation is intended to challenge ongoing practices and foster transformative change, generally addressing topics such as voice, inequalities, activism, the status quo, oppression and marginalization, exclusion, and power dynamics (Akbari, 2008; Kırçalı, 2021; Zaimoğlu & Dağtaş, 2025). These both help to understand social phenomena and dismantle domination and foster transformation through the critical lens.

The current theoretical framings provide a useful overview of major research paradigms within ELT. Yet, it could be further strengthened by the broader international scholarship on qualitative studies and critical research traditions. Foundational contributions by Denzin and Lincoln (2005, 2011) have importantly shaped understandings of qualitative research as a paradigmatically diverse, interpretive, and transformative enterprise, highlighting the centrality of epistemological pluralism and methodological reflexivity. Moreover, Kubota and Lin (2009) provide critical perspectives on language education by foregrounding the ideological and sociopolitical dimensions of language teaching and learning, while Pennycook (2001, 2010) problematizes taken-for-granted assumptions in applied linguistics through a post-structural and critical orientation. In line with this, Norton and Toohey (2011) further stress the socially situated and identity-oriented nature of language learning research, extending qualitative inquiry beyond descriptive accounts toward critical engagement with issues of agency, investment, and power.

Table 1 below summarizes the fundamental metaphysical assumptions of alternative research paradigms, as conceptualized by Guba and Lincoln (1994, as cited in Keser & Köksal, 2017). In this framework, Guba and Lincoln (1994) clearly summarize research paradigms and three foundational dimensions: ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (the nature of knowledge), and methodology (the procedures by which knowledge is produced). Within this understanding, positivism assumes a naïve realist ontology and an objectivist epistemology, employing experimental and hypothesis-testing methods; post-positivism, on the other hand, advocates critical realism, acknowledging that reality can only be imperfectly apprehended and hence emphasizes probabilistic knowledge claims and falsificationist strategies. In contrast, critical theory adopts a historical realist stance, viewing reality as socially and politically constituted, and uses dialogic and transformative methodologies grounded in value-mediated inquiry. Lastly, constructivism, similarly rejecting objectivism, is basically rooted in relativism and adopts a subjectivist epistemology, regarding knowledge as co-constructed through hermeneutic and dialectical processes. This paradigmatic typology points out that methodological choices cannot be separated from ontological and epistemological foundations; rather, alignment among these dimensions is essential for achieving theoretical and methodological coherence in research studies.

Table 1. *Basic Beliefs (Metaphysics) of Alternative Inquiry Paradigms*

Item	Positivism	Postpositivism	Critical Theory	Constructivism
Ontology	naive realism- “real” reality but apprehendable	critical realism- “real” reality but only imperfectly and probabilistically apprehendable	historical realism- virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender values; crystallized over time	relativism-local and specific constructed realities
Epistemology	dualist/ objectivist; findings true	modified dualist/ objectivist; critical tradition/ community; findings probably true	transactional/ subjectivist; value-mediated findings	transactional/ subjectivist; created findings
Methodology	experimental/ manipulative; verification of hypotheses; chiefly qualitative methods	modified experimental/ manipulative; critical multiplism; falsification of hypotheses; may include qualitative methods	dialogic/dialectical	hermeneutical/ dialectical

Since each research paradigm possesses distinct foundational assumptions, choosing a particular paradigm inherently situates a study within a specific ontological, epistemological, and axiological framework. Therefore, researchers have the responsibility to articulate their paradigmatic stance and to explain how this position shapes their research design in addressing the problem under investigation. “In fact, how they select the most appropriate paradigm for their research topic depends on how they view the truth, what they know and how they know it, along with their theoretical perspective(s) about the research topic, the literature that exists on the subjects and their own value system” (Nguyen, 2019, p.3). In other words, researchers’ philosophical foundations regarding the nature of reality, knowledge, and values, together with the theoretical framework that informs their interpretation of the phenomenon, shape their research process, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. In sum, Figure 1 below depicts how these philosophical foundational orientations subsequently inform the methodological choice, which structures and guides the overall research process.

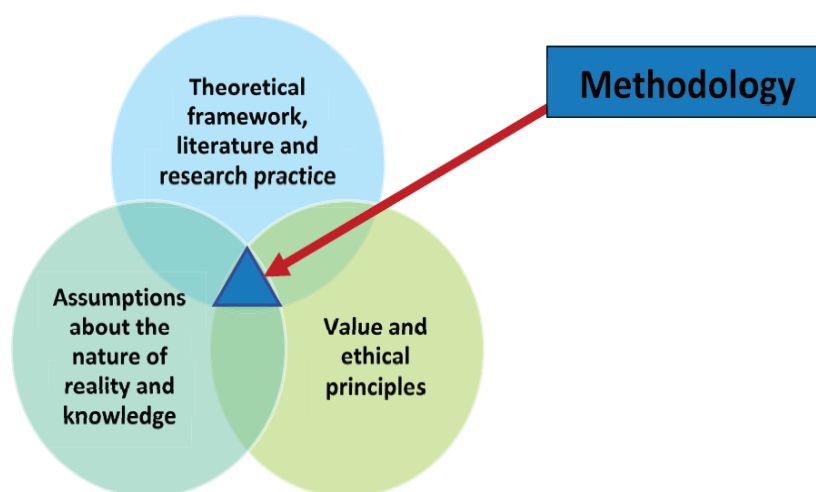


Figure 1. Methodology as intersection of three parts, as cited from Nguyen (2019, p.4).

Literature Review

Holliday (2002) argued that a researcher's intellectual and ideological stance is central to the research process. In arguing for the clear placement of intellectual structure in research, he advocates that researchers must explicitly recognize their own position within the research because this stance shapes how they regard reality, conceptualize problems, choose methodologies, and interact with participants. In other words, a researcher's ideology functions as a lens that informs every stage of inquiry from framing research questions to interpreting findings, consequently influencing how the research context and participants are perceived, engaged with, and approached. That is, Holliday (2002) underscores the inseparability of epistemological and methodological choices from the researcher's philosophical and ideological commitments, highlighting the need for reflexivity to ensure transparency and coherence in qualitative research. In this respect, the scholarship on paradigmatic coherence has become a central concern in the educational research arena. Scholars have examined whether studies genuinely reflect the philosophical assumptions they claim to adopt and showcase their paradigmatic positioning coherence regarding the alignment between the nature of the study and its ontological, epistemological, and methodological stances.

Uzun (2016) offered a systematic and conceptually grounded examination of research paradigms in educational inquiry, with particular emphasis on the role of critical theory in qualitative research. He analyzed how paradigmatic commitments are reflected in a study and questioned the extent to which the selected teacher education study aligns with the core assumptions of critical theory. In this respect, the findings indicated that the analyzed article had substantial paradigmatic coherence with critical theory across all evaluative dimensions since the article conceptualized the study within a politically and socially embedded discourse, approached reality as a socially constructed, situated the study within historical realism, and showed methodological alignment. He provided a practical and analytically robust example for assessing paradigmatic consistency in qualitative educational research and highlighting the necessity of paradigmatic coherence in the studies.

Keser and Köksal (2017) investigated how researchers' epistemological and ontological assumptions influence educational research design and methodology. Through an in-depth analysis of three English Language Teaching studies, they put forward that researchers intentionally select theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches that align with the nature and objectives of their inquiry. The study highlighted that perceptions of knowledge (epistemology) and reality (ontology) are essential to shaping research design, data collection, and reporting of findings. In line with the results, they further argue that explicitly recognizing and documenting the philosophical foundations in educational studies is highly important for ensuring rigor and transparency in educational research.

Similarly, Çelik and Köksal (2019) examined the ontological and epistemological assumptions of three research studies to determine whether they align with their philosophical underpinnings. In other words, they adopted an analytical approach where they critically evaluated three educational research articles through a philosophical lens. In this respect, they questioned how each study positions itself ontologically (e.g., objectivist vs. relativist conceptions of reality) and epistemologically (e.g., positivist vs. interpretivist understandings of knowledge production), and whether these positions are consistently reflected in research questions, data collection procedures, and interpretive claims. Through this comparative analysis, they highlighted the importance of aligning philosophical foundations with the

selection of methodological framing in research studies. They drew attention to the fact that research quality in educational studies highly depends on the intersection between technical rigor and philosophical foundations. Their study was also conceptually robust in evaluating research coherence, contributing to the growing body of scholarship that calls for both explicit ontological and epistemological positioning in educational studies and strengthening the philosophical foundations of research.

The scarcity of the limited body of literature that explicitly examines the paradigmatic or philosophical analysis within the ELT shows that this type of study remains relatively under researched and points out a gap. In other words, although research in ELT demonstrates considerable methodological diversity, including from quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method designs, there is comparatively little scholarly attention that systematically examines the ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions that guide researchers' methodological choices. Research dealing with critical paradigmatic examinations helps especially novice researchers regarding how to theorize, plan, and implement theoretically and methodologically robust studies. Therefore, there is a clear need for further studies that examine the coherence between the nature of the study and its ontological, epistemological, and methodological stances in ELT. Expanding this line of literature enhances both the conceptual transparency and methodological rigor, contributing to a more reflexive, critical and theoretically informed ELT research culture.

Current Study

As demonstrated above, philosophical foundations and paradigmatic issues fundamentally influence how research is framed, conducted, analyzed, and evaluated. In the present study, the aim is not to generate new empirical findings but to critically examine an existing qualitative study in English Language Teaching through a paradigmatic lens. Specifically, this study evaluates the extent to which the selected research aligns with the assumptions of the critical research paradigm. Drawing on the evaluative framework proposed by Allison and Pomeroy (2000), the present analysis examines whether the selected study demonstrates transformative intent, historical realism, value-mediated epistemology, and dialogic methodology. This study, in this respect, seeks to analyze a recent article *Empowering Minds and Fostering Inclusion: ELT Graduate Students' Experiences with Critical Pedagogy* in depth, in accordance with four defining criteria of the critical research paradigm: (1) aim of inquiry, (2) ontological stance, (3) epistemological stance, and (4) methodological orientation.

Beyond merely applying an existing evaluative framework to a different target article, the current study contributes to the growing body of paradigmatic analyses in ELT by offering a more critical and interpretive engagement with the alignment between stated research claims and underlying philosophical assumptions. By doing so, it moves to foreground issues of epistemological coherence and implicit paradigm positioning. Furthermore, by focusing on a recent study situated within the Turkish ELT context, the analysis provides context-sensitive insights into how critical paradigm principles are put into practice in contemporary educational research. In sum, Table 2 clearly illustrates four main philosophical approaches to research, drawn from Allison and Pomeroy (2000, p. 94).

Table 2. *The evaluative framework proposed by Allison and Pomeroy (2000)*

Issue	Positivism	Post-Positivism	Critical Theory	Constructivism
Inquiry Aim	Explanation, Prediction, and Control	Explanation, Prediction, and Control	Critique and Transformation, Restitution and Emancipation	Understanding the subjective meaning of the individual in its various constructions and reconstructions
Ontology (Nature of Reality)	Naïve Realism — there is a reality that we are able to apprehend; aims to determine what is there	Critical Realism — there is a reality but it is only imperfectly apprehendable and therefore predictable only in terms of probability	Historical realism — virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values; crystallised over time	Relativism — reality is multiple and will be constructed differently by people, depending on the meaning they make of their world
Epistemology (Nature of Knowledge)	Dualist / objectivist; findings are “true.” Verified hypotheses are established as facts or laws	Modified dualist / objectivist; critical tradition / community; findings probably true. Non-falsified hypotheses are probable facts or laws	Subjective, value-mediated findings which account for cultural and historical insights	Transactional / subjectivist; created findings. Findings are read as significant when individuals’ accounts of their reality converge
Methodology	Experimental / Manipulative; verification of hypotheses, chiefly quantitative methods	Modified experimental / manipulative; falsification of hypotheses, may include qualitative methods	Methods seen as involving dialogue with participants as sources of information	Hermeneutic; information fed back to participants for confirmation of correct interpretations

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to critically analyze a published research article through a paradigmatic lens. The purpose is not to generate empirical data but rather to examine the epistemological, ontological, and methodological positioning of a selected study within the critical research paradigm. In other words, the study employs document analysis because it is appropriate for paradigmatic examinations, enabling systematic scrutiny of how research is conceptually framed, methodologically designed, and analytically interpreted.

Selection of Article

The article selected for analysis is “*Empowering Minds and Fostering Inclusion: ELT Graduate Students’ Experiences with Critical Pedagogy*” by Zaimoğlu and Dağtaş (2025). The study was selected for its recent explicit focus on empowerment, inclusion, and critical pedagogy in English Language Teaching (ELT). Given its thematic emphasis on critical awareness and longitudinal engagement for cognitive, affective, and relational transformations, the article provides a relevant case for examining alignment with the critical research paradigm. In other words, the selection was purposeful, as the aim was to analyze a study that explicitly engages

with critical pedagogy in ELT. Its qualitative, longitudinal design and focus on lived experiences further strengthen its appropriateness for paradigmatic evaluation.

Analytical Framework and analysis

The analysis was guided by the criteria of the critical research paradigm by Allison and Pomeroy (2000). According to this framework, research aligned with the critical paradigm should be characterized by four dimensions: These four criteria (e.g., aim of inquiry, ontological perspective, epistemological perspective, and methodology) functioned as analytical categories throughout the paradigmatic evaluation. In other words, the selected article was subjected to qualitative content analysis surrounding the four paradigmatic criteria. The analysis involved a close reading of the study's introduction, methodology, findings, and discussion sections. Particular attention was paid to:

- How the researchers stated the purpose and articulated the contribution of the study;
- How reality and social structures were conceptualized;
- How knowledge claims were framed and justified;
- How participants were positioned within the research process;
- How data were collected, interpreted, and represented.

More specifically, the selected article was evaluated across the aforementioned four dimensions, and these dimensions were operationalized as predefined analytical categories within a deductive qualitative content analysis approach. The analysis followed a systematic multi-stage procedure. First, the selected article was read multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of its overall structure, arguments, and methodological choice. In the second stage, relevant segments of the text were identified and coded according to the four predefined paradigmatic categories. The unit of analysis was defined as meaning-bearing segments, such as sentences and paragraphs, depending on the density of conceptual content. In the last stage, initial codes were reviewed and refined to ensure consistency and alignment with the analytical framework.

Through explicit and implicit textual evidence, the indicators of ontology, epistemology, methodology, and purpose were identified. Passages in the selected article were examined for how reality was conceptualized, how knowledge claims were justified, how participants and social actors were positioned, and how research purposes were articulated. Coding was conducted manually through repeated close reading, and each segment was systematically assigned to one or more of the four analytical categories.

Apart from explicit methodological statements, attention was also paid to the discursive construction of key concepts, such as empowerment, inclusion, transformation, and critical pedagogy. This helped the analysis to capture not only stated methodological positions but also underlying philosophical assumptions embedded within the article. Regarding the trustworthiness of the analysis, it can be stated that the interpretive process was carried out through repeated readings of the selected article to ensure consistency. In other words, this iterative engagement contributed to the credibility of the coding decisions by allowing emerging interpretations to be continuously refined. As mentioned before, the analysis followed a systematic and transparent coding procedure based on predefined analytical categories derived

from Allison and Pomeroy (2000). This deductive structure helped ensure dependability by maintaining consistency across coding cycles. Even though the study did not involve multiple independent coders, analytical rigidity was maintained through iterative self-review and re-examination of coded segments to minimize interpretive bias. Finally, reflexive note-taking was used throughout the analytical process to document emerging interpretations. This reflexive engagement sustained the confirmability by making the interpretive stance explicit and traceable. Taken together, these procedures were employed to strengthen the overall trustworthiness of the document analysis.

Researcher Positioning

In line with the study's paradigmatic transparency, it is important to acknowledge the researcher's epistemological and ontological positioning, since interpretive qualitative inquiry is impacted by the researcher's theoretical understanding and commitments. In this respect, this study has adopted a critical interpretivist orientation, which views knowledge as socially constructed, context-dependent, and linked to power relations, ideology, and discourse. From this standpoint, the researcher does not claim neutrality but rather adopts a deliberately critical stance in examining the selected study. This positioning aligns with the view that analytical interpretations are inherently impacted by the researcher's theoretical commitments. Therefore, the interpretations presented in this study should be understood as situated readings informed by a critical epistemological lens rather than as value-free or objective evaluations.

Results and Discussion

Aim of the Inquiry

The analysis demonstrates that the study is ideologically positioned within transformative learning through the lens of critical pedagogy. In other words, the study situates critical pedagogy not as an instructional technique but as a transformative lens through which the reconfiguration of power and identity is challenged, the sociopolitical nature of language education is highlighted, and the critical reflective practices are fostered. The study also proposes "conscious action toward socially responsive teaching" (Zaimoğlu & Dağtaş, 2025, p.13). Moreover, the lexical choices in the title, such as empowering, inclusion, and experiences, are not descriptively neutral; rather, they signal a commitment to addressing the criticality inherent in graduate ELT. The authors furthermore state the aim of the study as follows:

"Grounded in Mezirow's transformative learning theory and Freirean principles, the study explores how engagement with the sociopolitical dimensions of language education challenged participants' assumptions and transformed their cognitive, emotional, and relational understandings of teaching." (p.1).

"By prioritizing student voice and lived experience, this study investigates how ELT graduate students experience, interpret, and negotiate the principles of CP in their courses and in their teaching practice" (p.2).

The findings suggest that the study aligns closely with the critical paradigm's objectives, encompassing criticism, emancipation, questioning, and transformation (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000). Knowledge is framed as a means to raise awareness and foster transformation in both ideological and pedagogical senses. Hence, the aim of the study could be evaluated in terms of the critical paradigm and critical pedagogy.

Ontological Perspective

The ontological assumptions underpinning the study reflect historical realism. In other words, reality is not conceptualized as fixed or value-neutral; rather, it is portrayed as socially constructed and historically conditioned by political, cultural, linguistic, and institutional forces. In this respect, Allison and Pomeroy (2000) maintain that reality should be regarded as a subjective and historical entity formed by political, ethnic, and social values. In this respect, the authors mention as follows:

“Within a Turkish context, many ELT programs still situate themselves in technocratic and depoliticized frames overall, taking priority over the situational, social, political, cultural, and historical contexts of language.” (p.2)

The authors situate the participants of the study, namely ELT graduates and teachers of English, within broader sociopolitical contexts, referring to them as practitioners of dominant language ideologies, carriers of institutional power dynamics, and as participants in the exam-driven, grammar-oriented nature of language education in the Turkish context. In other words, the results show that reality is constructed as a form of social-historical realism in the selected study. Moreover, educational practices and language education are explicitly framed as ideological sites in which power dynamics are reproduced. For instance, classroom authority, curriculum design, and language norms are presented as socially regulated constructs rather than naturalized givens. Moreover, the authors explicitly state that “language learning is not a neutral act but is embedded in ideologies acting upon the learners’ access, their agency, and their sense of belonging to a community” (p.2). In other words, the findings illustrate that the authors’ ontological stance resonates with the critical assumption that social reality is shaped by hegemonic discourses, that educational contexts are embedded within broader structures of domination, and that language is a space where power, identity, and cultural capital are transmitted. Therefore, based on its portrayal of ELT as a contested and historically hegemonic space, the study seems closely aligned with historical realism.

Epistemological Perspective

The epistemological orientation of the study is explicitly subjectivist, aligning with critical theory, which holds that knowledge should be based on a subjectivist perspective and interpreted accordingly. In the selected article, the authors approach knowledge from the participants' lived experiences, reflective accounts, and interpretive meaning-making processes. In other words, the study does not assert objectivity in a positivist sense; rather, it views participant reflective journals and semi-structured interviews as culturally, historically, and individually articulated narratives, lived experiences, and beliefs. In this respect, the findings point out a subjectivist orientation.

Moreover, the authors draw attention to the fact that participants' understandings of critical pedagogy-oriented language teaching are shaped by educational trajectories, sociocultural backgrounds, and institutional positioning. In this sense, the findings illustrate that the authors view knowledge as constructed through dialogic engagement and transformative reflection. The authors' remarks are as follows:

“Educators have difficulty operationalizing it in institutional contexts governed by standardized curricula and norms of classroom management” (p.14).

“...they [findings] present not only new insights into the power of CP in graduate-level ELT education, but also larger issues (even of multiple institutional interests) for classroom practice and educational policy in Türkiye” (p.14).

“Without institutional backing, transformation risks remaining an individual aspiration rather than a collective educational shift” (p.15).

“As the participants' journeys show, becoming a critically reflective and ethically committed teacher is not a one-time event, but a continuous act of learning, unlearning, and becoming” (p.15).

Furthermore, the selected study acknowledges the authors' interpretive role in shaping thematic categories and analytical framing. In other words, the study moves beyond descriptive reporting and embraces value-mediated knowledge production. Instead of presenting generalizable conclusions, the authors situate their “small-scale qualitative case study” (p.4) findings within a specific graduate ELT context, thus highlighting the notion that educational knowledge is context-bound and ideologically framed. The findings, from this perspective, point out that this epistemological stance in the study also closely aligns with the critical paradigm's rejection of neutrality. As stated by the authors:

“While the study offers in-depth insights into the transformative learning experiences of graduate students enrolled in a single course on CP, its findings are context-bound and shaped by the specific institutional, cultural, and curricular dynamics of a foundation university in Türkiye” (p.15).

Methodological Orientation

The methodological design reflects qualitative, dialogic, and transformative longitudinal engagement consistent with critical inquiry. In this sense, the authors mention as follows:

“Data were collected from eight participants through weekly reflective journals structured around Gibbs' Reflective Cycle that guides individuals to reflect systematically on their experiences and follow-up semi-structured interviews” (p.1).

“Data were collected through two primary qualitative methods: *weekly reflective journals and semi-structured interviews*. Using multiple data sources allowed for triangulation of findings and a more comprehensive understanding of each participant's transformational learning journey” (p.5).

Data collection methods, such as weekly reflective journals over 14 weeks and semi-structured interviews, aim at revealing participants' articulation of their evolving beliefs,

individual experiences, and pedagogical transformations. In this respect, the findings show that the study supports Allison and Pomeroy's (2000) methodological orientation in critical theory since the authors place dialogue and dialogic engagement at the center of the study. In the study, the authors also suggest that participants were not treated merely as passive data providers but were encouraged to critically reflect on their own positionalities, pedagogical assumptions, and ideological orientations. This reflective dimension further aligns with dialogic methodology, in which knowledge is co-constructed through interaction.

“Reflective cycle provided a structured format for weekly journals and helped ensure that students engaged in critical, in-depth reflection on their experiences” (p.7)

Moreover, the study does not involve participatory action research in a strict sense; however, it employs core dialogical principles: sustained engagement, reflexivity, and meaning negotiation. Specifically, the authors do not document graduate students' perceptions of critical pedagogy in the study; instead, they question how engagement with critical pedagogy reshapes their sociopolitical awareness, transforms their professional identity, and shapes their pedagogical mindsets and practices. Participants' narratives appear to reflect increased critical consciousness, particularly regarding issues such as linguistic representation, classroom power relations, and the hidden curriculum.

“They [findings] reflect the complex, dynamic, and multi-dimensional nature of the participants' developmental processes in response to critical pedagogy” (p.7).

“Her reflection illustrates a shift from a purely content-oriented focus toward a more critically engaged pedagogical stance. While the transformation is still in its early stages, the narrative demonstrates a growing capacity to interrogate normative discourses within educational content, which is a hallmark of the CP framework” (p.9)

“This reflection marks a clear transformation in how P5 perceives the nature of teaching. Rather than treating ELT as a neutral, skill-based enterprise, she begins to interrogate its ideological underpinnings” (p.9).

Furthermore, the analytical process and longitudinal nature of the study lay the ground for tensions, contradictions, and shifts in participants' thinking, perspectives, and mindsets rather than reducing their experiences to static categories. In line with this, the authors mention as follows:

“Through ongoing reflection and whole-class conversations, they [participants] began to challenge their old beliefs and to develop more critical, broad-ranging perspectives on English language teaching. In other words, these reflections indicated a shift from procedural thinking, focused on how and what to do in the lesson, to critical consciousness about the pedagogical choices they were making as they began to engage with the sociopolitical dimensions of language teaching” (p.9).

“Participants experienced significant relational shifts in how they viewed their roles and relationships in the classroom. As their understanding of CP deepened, they began to reimagine the teacher–student dynamic from a hierarchical one to a more dialogic and egalitarian model. Many came to see teaching as a collaborative endeavor and started valuing student voice and agency more than before” (p.11).

“...a multilayered change process that occurred cognitively, emotionally, and relationally, resulting in conscious action toward socially responsive teaching” (p.13)

The authors’ methodological choices highlight the study's emancipatory nature by positioning reflection itself as a transformative act. In other words, Overall, the findings demonstrate a high degree of paradigmatic congruence between the selected study and the critical research paradigm, since evidenced by its explicitly transformative aim oriented toward empowerment and inclusion, its historically and ideologically grounded ontological stance, its interpretive and context-bound epistemology, and its dialogic and reflective methodological orientation that helps the co-construction of meaning, thus highlighting the emancipatory potential of reflective inquiry in ELT research.

Conclusion, Implication and Limitation

The present study was set out to examine the extent to which “*Empowering Minds and Fostering Inclusion: ELT Graduate Students’ Experiences with Critical Pedagogy*” aligns with the assumptions of the critical research paradigm. Drawing upon the evaluative framework of Allison and Pomeroy (2000), adapted from Guba and Lincoln (1994), the analysis focused on four key dimensions: aim of inquiry, ontological positioning, epistemological stance, and methodological orientation.

The findings indicate that the selected study shows substantial paradigmatic congruence with critical theory. First, in terms of its aim, the study moves beyond descriptive reporting and adopts an interpretivist and transformative orientation, rooted in empowerment and inclusion. This transformative intent reflects the core critical assumption that research should not merely interpret social reality but question and potentially reshape it. By foregrounding ELT graduate students’ development of critical consciousness through dialogue, reflection, and experiential learning, the study shows parallelism critical theory’s main aims, such as criticism, transformation and emancipation (Uzun, 2016). Hence it is situated within a transformative and emancipatory perspective. Ontologically, the research reflects historical realism, since educational experiences are framed as intertwined within broader sociocultural and institutional structures. Language teaching is not viewed as neutral pedagogical procedures, it is regarded as a space shaped by ideology, power relations, and historical backgrounds. This positioning strengthens the study’s critical coherence. Epistemologically, the privileging of participant voice and lived experience aligns with a subjectivist, value-mediated understanding of knowledge. Rather than asserting universal and generalizable truth, the study acknowledges the situated and interpretive nature of its findings. Methodologically, the dialogic, reflective, and transformative engagement with participants further supports its critical orientation, even though the design does not fully include participatory action research. This type of selection in methodology both captures and reflects individuals’ transformative experiences and aligns with the study’s broader philosophical underpinning, sustaining the alignment among its ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions. In other words, the research methodology is a coherent vehicle through which critical and transformative change into language teaching practices is targeted.

Making explicit the paradigmatic foundations of the selected article, the present study contributes to philosophical transparency by examining the extent of the alignment among research aims, ontological assumptions, epistemological stance, and methodological orientations. While the analysis shows a strong and consistent alignment with the critical research paradigm, it also attends to how this alignment is articulated across different dimensions of the study. In doing so, the study moves beyond a purely confirmatory account and stresses the importance of not only establishing coherence, but also critically examining how such coherence is constructed, expressed, and maintained along with the study. In this respect, the analysis also suggests that the selected article moves beyond rhetorical affiliation with critical pedagogy and shows a more form of paradigmatic alignment. This is evidenced by the coherence between its transformative aims, its treatment of social reality as historically and socially constructed, its value-mediated approach to knowledge production, and its methodological emphasis on participant voice and reflexivity. In other words, the study does not solely employ the language of critical pedagogy, but enacts its principles across multiple dimensions of the critical research paradigm. Additionally, the study also highlights the importance of clearly documenting philosophical underpinning in research studies, as suggested by Çelik (2019), Keser & Köksal (2017), and Uzun (2016).

An important theoretical consideration emerging from this analysis concerns the relationship between critical pedagogy and the critical research paradigm. While research informed by critical pedagogy is often assumed to align with the critical paradigm, such alignment is not necessarily guaranteed. Tensions may arise when research studies adopt the discourse of criticality without fully embodying its ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments. For instance, limited transformative intent, insufficient engagement with power structures, or a lack of dialogic and participatory practices could indicate only partial alignment with the critical paradigm. In this regard, the current analysis moves beyond taking ‘critical’ claims at face value and instead evaluates the extent to which such claims are performed in practice. The findings suggest that the selected study largely succeeds in operationalizing the core principles of the critical research paradigm. In conclusion, the selected study is a robust example of substantively critical qualitative inquiry in ELT. In other words, the study, stemming from the principles of empowerment and inclusion, both theoretically and practically operationalizes the assumptions of the critical research paradigm. Consequently, it can be argued that the study reflects the core tenets of critical qualitative inquiry, rather than merely borrowing its terminology.

The current study also has broader implications for ELT research and for paradigmatic reflexivity in educational inquiry beyond its case-specific analysis. From an ELT research perspective, this study stresses the importance of systematically interrogating whether studies that adopt critical terminology genuinely reflect underlying critical assumptions. This highlights the need for greater paradigmatic awareness among researchers when designing, conducting, and reporting qualitative studies. Considering methodological practice, the study reinforces the value of paradigmatic self-evaluation as an analytical tool. Systematic frameworks such as Allison and Pomeroy (2000) enable researchers to move beyond surface-level thematic interpretations and engage in deeper assessments of epistemological coherence. In this respect, the study advocates for more explicit and structured paradigmatic reflexivity in

qualitative research within educational research. The analytical insights of the current study further propose a more practical contribution for novice researchers. In other words, a set of guiding questions can be used for evaluating paradigmatic coherence in educational research. These questions could be considered as an evaluative tool to support paradigmatic self-assessment and to encourage more transparent alignment between philosophical assumptions and methodological enactment in ELT research. In other words, these questions help to support critical self-reflection during the research design process.

- (1) To what extent is the aim of the study consistent with its underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions?
- (2) How are reality, knowledge, and truth conceptualized within the study, and do these fundamental conceptualizations align with the study's research paradigm?
- (3) The extent to which knowledge claims are justified in relation to the study's epistemological stance (e.g., constructivist, interpretivist, critical)?
- (4) Do the methodological choices (e.g., data collection and analysis procedures) align with the study's philosophical stance, or do they reflect implicit tensions between paradigm and practice?
- (5) How does the researcher's positionality shape interpretation and knowledge construction?
- (6) To what extent is there paradigmatic consistency across all stages of the research process, from conceptualization to interpretation and reporting?

The present study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged in interpreting the findings, despite its analytical contributions to the field. First, the analysis is based on a single empirical article, which limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other studies within educational research or ELT. While this case-specific approach is effective for in-depth paradigmatic examination, it inherently constrains the scope of broader claims. Second, the analysis's interpretive nature is inherently subjective, as identifying ontological, epistemological, and methodological dimensions relies on the researcher's judgment. Even though systematic reading procedures were employed as stated above, alternative interpretations of the same textual evidence may still be possible. Third, the analysis is guided by the evaluative framework proposed by Allison and Pomeroy (2000). While this framework provides a coherent structure for paradigmatic evaluation, its exclusive use could limit the exploration of alternative paradigmatic models or analytical perspectives. Finally, the researcher's critical interpretivist positioning inevitably shapes the analytical process. Although reflexivity was maintained throughout the study, it should be acknowledged that interpretive decisions are shaped by the researcher's theoretical understanding, which may affect how paradigmatic alignment is identified and interpreted.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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