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TOWARDS BECOMING CRITICAL READERS AND WRITERS: ELT STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CRITICAL READING AND WRITING INSTRUCTION

(Research article)

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Abstract

Reading and writing underpinning all university study and beyond it are two essential skills that have significant influences on students' growth in critical thinking. Students who aim to use English for academic purposes in higher education contexts need to develop their understanding of what it means to read and write critically in English with the support of critical thinking skills. While studies exist in understanding the nature and practice of critical thinking in academic writing or reading separately, studies that investigate the critical reading and writing (CRW) process from the perspectives of readers and writers are limited. The goal of this study was to explore how critical reading and writing practices Turkish ELT pre-service teachers experienced in the CRW course have contributed to their CRW skills from their own perspective. The data was obtained from the participants' reflections collected before and after the instruction enriched with criticality. Thematic analysis revealed that our participants have had a clear sense of criticality in the way of their reading and writing practices. The findings have implications for providing a pedagogical framework to foster CRW skills in higher education instructional settings.

Keywords: critical thinking, critical reading, critical writing, English teacher education

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, higher education has shifted its attention to teaching students how to process the information they have received critically and think critically in producing their own works (Andrews, 2010; Nejmaoui, 2019). Academic activities and assignments require students to develop four academic language learning skills in English that they need to succeed at university and to turn into experts in their majors. Academic reading and writing are especially two critical skills for these students' academic adjustment (Howard et al., 2018). However, considering today's university education in which critical thinking is listed within graduate attributes, students need to go beyond basic reading and writing skills and develop their understanding of what it means to think (Moore, 2013), read (Wilson, 2016), and write critically. They need to learn how to react to, apply, analyze, synthesize information, and develop their own informed and reasoned ideas about a topic. Despite the importance of these skills in higher education and after graduation, many students' learning and using academic English do not have a great deal of experience in critical reading (Wilson, 2016) and writing (Wingate, 2011) supported with critical thinking.

Academic writing in higher education requires a number of specialized skills, for example, presenting ideas and arguments on a specific topic clearly, briefly, and in a meaningful and logical manner. In order to turn into critical writers, second language (L2) writers need to develop some other prerequisite skills such as critical thinking and reading. At this point,

reading and writing become two strongly connected parts of the same whole in the learning process (Barnet, Bedau & O'Hara, 2020). When reading critically and actively, it is essential to know how to interpret and to reflect upon what is read through writing and discussing it with others. Critical writing is therefore based upon or influenced by this critical interaction between the reader and the text (Barnet et al., 2020).

In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), in addition to improving L2 learners' language proficiency and helping them acquire effective literacy in English, one of the skills English language teachers need to focus on developing is to nurture students' reasoning and critical thinking skills (Amrous & Nejmaoui, 2016; Davidson & Dunham, 1997), which precede and is supported by critical reading and writing. Writing is especially one of the skills that have the most significant influences on students' growth in critical thinking (Tsui, 1999). Despite the reason that critical thinking is a complex concept that is not simply added into the teaching objectives, considering the important role of language teachers in contributing to the literacy skills of L2 readers and writers, it is essential to understand whether language teachers themselves are critical enough in reading and writing in English before they start teaching it in the classrooms of tomorrow.

Following the new developments in higher education and in ELT, second language teacher education has undergone considerable change over the past years. Critical thinking is such an essential skill today for language teachers to gain and transfer to their own students (De Costa & Norton, 2017). Higher education including pre-service teacher education thus aims to empower graduates to make context-sensitive, ethical, well-informed decisions in their expertise and in their daily life as well. In recent years, studies have been conducted with EFL and ESL learners especially in higher education settings with the purpose of seeing the role of critical thinking in their academic writing or reading experiences. These studies in the field either explored the link between critical thinking and argumentative writing (Fahim & Mirzaei, 2014; Nejmaoui, 2019; Tahira & Haider, 2019) or explored the link between critical thinking and reading (Balikci & Daloglu, 2016; Macknish, 2011; Wilson, 2016). However, the literature lacks research investigating whether students in the process of improving their own academic reading and writing skills in English have the necessary background, understanding, or experience in critical reading and writing in English and how explicit instruction of these skills contributes to their understanding of critical reading and writing. Studies that focus on critical reading and writing separately are rare in the Turkish EFL context (Balikci & Daloglu, 2016). There is no other study to our knowledge that investigates these two skills from the critical thinking perspective and from the perceptions of ELT teacher candidates. Following these gaps and to contribute to the ELT field, this present study explores how ELT students teachers' critical reading and writing practices experienced in Critical Reading and Writing (CRW) course offered in an English Language Teacher Education program have contributed to their critical reading and writing skills from their own perceptions. Considering the current needs of higher education and the needs of 21st-century language teachers who are expected to contribute to their own learners' critical literacy skills (De Costa & Norton, 2017), pre-service language teacher education programs in Turkey added a course titled "Critical Reading and Writing (CRW)" to their curriculum. This exploratory study has been conducted with sophomore pre-service English teachers who have taken this course, which aimed to provide them with the competencies necessary for critical reading and writing.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Critical Thinking in Higher Education

In the 21st century, all educational settings including language education have embraced the integration of critical thinking into the learning and teaching process. Today English language

users especially the ones using language for academic purposes at the higher education level must have the ability to use English critically so that they can develop both their critical thinking skills and disposition towards critical thinking to participate effectively in higher education (Cambridge Papers in ELT series, 2019). Despite the diverging views on the nature of critical thinking, critical thinking is defined broadly as a process “... of reasoning aimed at coming to a sound, justifiable decision, conclusion or judgment” (Vardi, 2013, p.1). As a skill at the core of higher education across the world, especially in Western societies (Moore, 2013), critical thinking is presented through students’ abilities to “identify issues and assumptions, recognize important relationships, make correct inferences, evaluate evidence or authority, and deduce conclusion” (Tsui, 2002, p. 743). Reading and writing underpinning all university study and beyond it as well are two essential skills that have significant influences on students’ growth in critical thinking (Wallace, 2003). Students who aim to use English for academic purposes in higher education contexts need to go beyond basic academic reading and writing skills and develop their understanding of what it means to read and write critically in English with the support of critical thinking skills. Similarly, teachers of English need to focus on reading and writing skills to nurture L2 learners’ reasoning and critical thinking skills, as these two skills are the observable output of critical thinking.

2.2. *Critical Reading and Writing*

One of the three broad perspectives of Davis and Barnett (2015) on critical thinking is skills perspective. This perspective has been particularly influential in academic writing, which puts great emphasis on the development of logical arguments, but critical thinking has also been widely embraced in academic reading. Since these two skills, L2 reading and writing, have been at the center of this study, they will be briefly discussed below from the critical perspective with the presentation of relevant studies that examined the link between critical thinking and reading and writing skills.

While reading in English, students as readers need to participate in a rich and interactive dialogue with text and author (Wallace, 2003) which would help them construct meaning rather than simply receiving meaning. In addition to improving their comprehension, L2 readers need to practice hearing the authors’ arguments and points of view to turn into critical readers by deeply and actively engaging with the text: asking questions of the text, making links, examining the author’s reasoning, and probing the author’s viewpoint. As exemplified with these strategies, critical reading is directly related to analytical thinking skills in which readers use higher-order thinking skills (Hermida, 2009). To be able to externalize from the text as part of critical reading, readers need to make notes from the text and write about the text to present their own position by synthesizing from a range of texts, and use their constructed meaning in what they produce as a writer. At this point, reading is linked to writing.

Academic writing in L2 requires a number of specialized skills, some of which directly relate to critical thinking. The ability to express ideas and arguments clearly, logically, and reflectively on a paper is one fundamental aspect of critical thinking. Relatedly, it is through writing that learners develop and express their critical thinking. To turn into critical writers, learners need to develop sub-skills such as summarizing, comparing texts, linking ideas in an argument, and conceptualizing how reasoning is organized within texts of different academic genres. As exemplified in these subskills briefly, critical reading precedes and feeds critical writing, which emerges as the result of the critical interaction between the reader and the text. Through the process of argumentation, writers apply their critical thinking and reading skills to their writing. However, many students are not aware of what critical reading and writing entail, nor do they know how to approach their academic texts in an efficient manner (Hermida, 2009) and how to produce their own arguments as a result of critical reading.

Integrating critical thinking in ESL/EFL education has been under discussion for decades (Li, 2016), as critical thinking as a social practice is not simply added into the L2 education and pedagogy (Atkinson, 1997). The critical role of the three related skills - critical thinking, reading, and writing - in L1 and L2 academic settings has clearly but separately been observed. Thus, further research is needed to understand how the integration of these skills into the learning process would be helpful to improve students' skills. Studies have been conducted in understanding the role of critical thinking in academic writing and reading. These studies focused either on exploring EFL learners' critical thinking skills in argumentative writing (Fahim & Mirzaii, 2014; Nejmaoui, 2019; Tahira & Haider, 2019) and examining how the critical language awareness framework can be implemented with an emphasis on writing (Huang, 2013), or examining the role of critical reading instruction on specific language skills (Macknish, 2011; Suarcaya & Prasasti, 2017; Wilson, 2016). In their experimental study where they examined the effect of dialogic critical thinking instruction on EFL students' argumentative writing, Fahim and Mirzaii (2014) concluded that "the ability to write argumentatively crucially depends on EFL/ESL learners' being equipped with an intellectual capacity for thinking in a critical manner" (p.8), which shows the importance of training learners on language skills by embedding critical thinking skills into them. Pei, Zheng, Zhagn, and Liu (2017) explored the correlation between EFL learners' argumentative writing and critical thinking. Although they found out an insignificant correlation between critical thinking skills and English writing proficiency, textual analysis of student essays showed that "strong critical thinking learners outperformed weak critical thinkers in relevance, clarity, logicity, profundity, and flexibility of argumentative writing" (p. 31). In another experimental study where Nejmaoui (2019) explored the effect of integrating critical thinking on learners' use of critical thinking skills in argumentative writing, she found out that writers who received a language course with an absence of critical thinking skills performed less than the ones who benefit from critical thinking instruction. Although the students' ability to use some critical thinking skills in their writing (e.g., using more credible evidence, addressing alternative arguments, supporting conclusions, and maintaining the logical flow of ideas in their essays) did not reach mastery level in the posttest provided, the researcher concluded that the average level they reached was the guarantee of their improvement they showed in a short amount of time they received training. Based on its results, Nejmaoui (2019) suggested that the moderate positive results obtained from the integration of critical thinking in writing for only a semester promise more positive outcomes if critical thinking is integrated into L2 writing courses for longer periods. Considerations of transferability of these skills from writing to other courses, reading, for instance, are essential to examine if students would be able to transfer these skills across the curriculum.

There are studies in the literature that have examined EFL learners' critical reading from the perspective of critical thinking and critical literacy (Macknish, 2011; Suarcaya & Prasasti, 2017). Suarcaya & Prasasti (2017) examined reading skills of EFL university students in Indonesia from the perspective of critical literacy and found that in the written and verbal responses following a reading process, EFL readers' critical stance in their ability helped them bring meaning to the text by reconstructing and deconstructing the text. So the researchers concluded that critical reading from the perspective of critical literacy has much potential in EFL reading. Another study conducted by Macknish (2011) focused on Chinese EFL students in a Singaporean university setting who had never been taught critical reading. The study found that students who were given some authentic English texts and facilitated with peer discussions after reading were able to uncover hidden messages as a critical literacy-related process. Macknish (2011) concluded that through a constructed process of instruction, EFL students can develop their criticality by relating their critical thinking with the text's ideology and interest. Finally, in his ethnographic study of three EAP teaching-learning contexts in

Australia, Wilson (2016) looked at the relationship between critical thinking and reading from both the teaching of critical reading and EAP students' performance on critical reading. He found that students in the classes where teachers used an approach to criticality and attention to critical pedagogy, demonstrated a more intense engagement with the content of the reading and developed a more critical disposition. Wilson (2016) suggests that these critical reading abilities students gained would serve them well at the university and beyond.

As exemplified above, the previous studies in the literature focused on understanding the nature and practice of critical thinking in academic writing or reading separately and most of these previous studies were experimental. While these studies have contributed to understanding the use of CRW strategies, studies that investigate the CRW process from the perspectives of readers and writers are limited. Given the importance of demonstrating a critical approach in writing, there has not been more research on ELT students' perceptions and experiences of the challenges in implementing critical thinking in academic writing (Wingate, 2011). There is no other study in our knowledge that specifically looked at the effect of a semester long CRW course on pre-service language teachers' CRW development from their own perspectives. As the language teachers of tomorrow's classrooms, pre-service EFL/ESL teachers' critical literacy development is important to be focused on during their higher education years not only to help them develop their critical literacy skills but also to help them get prepared for the classrooms of tomorrow (De Costa & Norton, 2017).

Given the importance of the critical approach in L2 reading and writing and the essential role of critical literacy in the training of English language students, more research is required to understand this complex integration between critical thinking and L2 pedagogy. This present study focuses on students' perceptions and experiences of the CRW process, the atmosphere of which has been created under the guidance of a semester long CRW course offered to English Language teacher candidates in a higher education setting. This paper argues that CRW pedagogy can be realized in different ways, but in this study conducted in an academic setting, students' CRW skills development is supported by an explicit instruction of CRW. Through following a qualitative methodology, this present study heard the voices of the students on the effect of CRW instruction on their CRW experiences and development. Our overarching question was:

How does CRW instruction contribute to ELT students' CRW skills from their own perspective?

3. Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study is to report on the ELT students' CRW skills development from their own perspectives depending on the CRW practices they have experienced in the CRW course. Duffy (1987) defined qualitative research as "a vehicle for studying the empirical world from the perspective of the subject, not the researcher" (p. 130). We used a qualitative methodology in this study in order to obtain rich and elaborate descriptions of the participants' reflections (Silverman, 2013) and conceptualize CRW improvement of ELT students from their own perspectives.

3.1. Setting and Participants

This study was conducted as part of a second year CRW course offered in an English language teacher education program at a Turkish University where English is the medium of instruction (EMI). After critical thinking has gained attention in higher education, higher education EMI institutions focused on the improvement of these skills in academic settings. The CRW course through which this study is conducted has been added to the language teacher

education curriculum in Turkey in 2018 as a required course by the Turkish Higher Education Institute. The 14-week long course was one of the required courses in the teacher education program and focused on an improvement of higher-order critical thinking, critical reading, and writing skills of students in the program. As well as improving student language teachers' basic reading and argumentative writing skills, one main purpose of the course was to develop their critical awareness while conducting both reading and writing activities in English as their second language.

The participants were 51 second-year student language teachers who were enrolled in the CRW course. The participants took this course after they completed two sections of the Academic Reading and Academic Writing Skills courses in their first academic year in the program, where they already practiced how to read and write academically in English. This was a course in which students demonstrated a more intense engagement with the content of their reading and writing - an indication of a developing critical disposition. The participants were informed of the research activity at the onset of the course. Participation in this research was voluntary and all 51 students who enrolled in this course volunteered to participate in the study.

3.2. Data Collection Procedure

The main purpose of the CRW course was to teach students how to analyze and summarize selected authentic texts in English taken from academic journals, books, opinion columns, and websites, and also how to synthesize information from different reading resources to create their own original academic texts. Working with these texts, they were expected to utilize skills that are fundamental to developing critical awareness including their critical reading skills while concurrently developing their higher-order critical thinking skills. The course was offered in two sections (25 students in Section 1; 26 students in Section 2) by the same instructor using the same course syllabus. First, all volunteered participants were expected to write a reflective paper by using the guideline provided by the course instructor, which included three sections students need to reflect on: Thinking, Reading, and Writing. This paper was completed until the end of the second week following the in-class discussion on critical thinking. The purpose of this first reflection paper was to encourage students to examine their own thinking, reading, and writing process and reflect on their current characteristics and experiences before taking the CRW course. During the first half of the course, participants followed the course schedule in which they had in-class discussions on critical thinking, critical reading and completed in- and out of class individual and collaborative reading tasks to practice critical reading (critical and active reading strategies, identifying arguments, and evaluating the validity and soundness of arguments in the selected texts, writing a critical analysis of an argumentative text, etc.). Following the critical reading practices they have conducted, participants completed an assignment where they critically analyzed a text selected by the course instructor. This first assignment was composed of three sections - introduction, summary, and analysis, each of which was completed following the critical reading guidelines by the course instructor.

This process was followed by the second part of the class where students practiced how to create their own original academic argumentative writings by following critical writing strategies such as finding and evaluating resources, synthesizing information from different reading resources, and employing writing strategies including causal analysis, advocacy of ideas, persuasion, evaluation, refutation, interpretation, and definition. This course was finalized with a final argumentative paper in which students constructed an effective argument involving library and online research that showcases their understanding of critical reading, writing, and argumentation skills. After the participants submitted their second assignment at

the end of the instruction, they were expected to write a final reflection paper again by following the guidelines provided by their instructor.

3.3. Data Analysis

102 total student reflections were analyzed and coded manually using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase inductive thematic analysis: (1) Going through the entire dataset to get familiar with the data; (2) Generating initial codes, (3) Putting the codes into related thematic categories; (4) Reviewing potential themes by eliminating potential contradictions and overlaps, (5) Defining and naming themes, and (6) Producing the final report with the relevant evidence (quotes) from the data.

To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, a collaborative analysis was conducted jointly by the two members of the research team. Following an iterative analytical process, the researchers combined the descriptive codes representing similar topics into potential themes and conducted constant comparison to investigate overlaps and contradictions among the themes and identify any relationships. As the researchers built thematic categories and sub-categories, individual perspectives were discussed and final themes were determined. Representative verbatim quotes were selected to describe the emergent themes from various participants to depict a well-balanced picture. Each data extract is presented with pseudonyms.

4. Findings

Based on the thematic analysis of the student reflections, we present our findings under three main themes related to the research question. The main themes emerging in the data are as follows: Theme 1: Turning into critical readers: Reading with a critical eye, Theme 2: Turning into critical writers, and Theme 3: Fostering CRW with improved critical thinking.

4.1. Theme 1: Turning into critical readers: Reading with a critical eye

The first main theme has been named "turning into critical readers", as the analysis of final reflective journals included explicit evidence of participants' critical reading skills development from their own perspectives on the process and specific practices that they thought led them to turn into critical readers. The changes in their perceptions of critical reading had been categorized with the following critical reading evidence each of which has been frequently and explicitly represented in the participants' reflections: using active reading strategies fostering critical reading; reading not only for information but for ways of thinking; raising questions while reading; developing their ideas on issues; evaluating the language of the author.

4.1.1. Using active reading strategies fostering critical reading

Throughout the instruction this study is based on, participants had the opportunity to discuss and practice basic critical reading strategies. Our analysis of student reflections evidenced participants' comments on the instruction process and the utilization of some specific critical reading skills (e.g., deep reading or careful eye reading). As exemplified in the following excerpts, in their reflections, they described the reading strategies they used for critical analysis of the texts in details and explicitly stated the following active reading strategies: slow reading of the texts to pay attention to the details in the text; annotating important parts of the text that they thought would lead them to better comprehension; evaluating each evidence presented by the author to understand the text better; doing further research on the text content using other sources to be able to look at it with a different eye. For example, the majority of the students claimed in their reflections that they did a deep reading while analyzing the texts:

"If I read a text for studying now I completely focus on it and I read it slowly for better understanding. While I am reading I also highlight the parts which I see are important." (Ayse)

“I am still a curious reader but now I have curiosity and show curiosity while reading by questioning and trying to get reasonable answers for my questions. Searching for reasonable outcomes helps me to summarize an event easily. Because I know what I am looking for.” (Ezel)

One other common reflection participants stated in terms of using active reading strategies was the appropriate evaluation of evidence in the texts to understand the text better and evaluate the reliability of the ideas presented in the text.

“After taking this course, I can confidently say that I now look into evidence when I read something that has information I didn’t know before. I also look up other research that’s been done if I didn’t quite understand it, so that I can look at it in different perspectives.” (Melek)

“Before, I didn’t pay much attention to the author or consider the author’s sources, but thanks to this course, I learned how vital the bibliography used in the text is. Now I pay a lot of attention to the bibliography of the texts I read to understand better how reliable the text is.” (Selin)

Another benefit participants expressed with reference to critical reading was using reading strategies actively and critically to make judgments about how a text is argued. Most commonly, participants established an understanding of an essay or article by underlying or highlighting the chief points, making annotations in the margins, and summarizing.

“In our annotated bibliographies and critical analysis, we have learned how to summarize the key parts. I get better at summarizing an argument I heard or read. It is mainly because I know what areas I need to focus on, and how to summarize better.” (Seda)

4.1.2. Reading not only for information but for ways of thinking

The second sub-theme emerging from the data with reference to critical reading was the participants’ descriptions of the change they observed in their way of reading which describes how they started to read by looking for ways of thinking about the subject matter and started to exercise their judgment about what they are reading rather than only reading for information. One change they commonly emphasized was their attempts in identifying and assessing how the main claims of the text were developed or argued. As exemplified in the following excerpt, they distinguished the kinds of reasoning the text employed by examining how the text was organized and how the authors analyzed the issues with the evidence. In her reflection, Selin summed up this thought by especially emphasizing how her ways of thinking have changed and were reflected in the way how she read:

“Thanks to this lesson, I have often had the opportunity to question my own thoughts. I have learned to pass this information from outside through certain stages in my mind and produce my own thoughts, that is, to optimize the opinions of others for myself, while I had a structure that can easily believe everything I hear and see without research.” (Selin)

For the participants, this new way of reading was a new way of thinking to advance their understanding as exemplified in Ezel’s reflection below:

“To understand better, if necessary, I annotate and highlight the parts that are important to remember. To gather evidence from this text, I evaluate the sources the author used, the author and the publisher. Because I need to have a trustable source to read and combine with my arguments.” (Ezel)

4.1.3. Raising questions while reading

While reflecting on their critical reading experiences, many participants drew on the improvement of their questioning skills while reading texts. Focusing on questioning as a comprehension strategy was one way for them to become critical and strategic readers. From

the perspectives of readers, questioning has been a strategy that triggered their curiosity to learn more about the text, what the author tells, and better comprehend what they read. Three excerpts below in particular are representative of participants who explicitly mentioned that asking critical questions and trying to find answers to these questions helped them actively engage with the text and extract meaning from the content and critically reflect on what they have read.

“I try to make sure I understand the main idea or argument the author provides is accurate or convincing. To do this, during and after the reading, I often ask myself questions about the text and I do research.” (Begum)

“...With asking the right questions now we can summarize and find the thesis of the text. We now know that this will help us understand better and then write better.” (Piraye)

4.1.4. Developing their ideas on issues

One other aspect that emerged in our dataset was that different from their previous reading experiences, students as readers started to develop their own ideas on issues they read substantially. Supporting their critical reading improvement, they stated that they attempted to identify claims in the texts and develop ideas about the context and explicitly demonstrated an awareness of how developing their own ideas on the text ideas and comparing their own ideas with the authors make them better and critical readers. Ruya and Bartu’s comments below are two representative examples on the importance of developing their own points of view on the author’s ideas. Ruya explained that she first had done in-depth research on the topic of the text by checking other relevant resources to ensure whether or not the text she read was a reliable source. She also added:

“...In this way I can identify different views of point and I am willing to consider every each one of them to have different ideas about the topic. Then I compare my thoughts and author’s thoughts to understand the text better” (Ruya)

“I pay attention to how the thoughts presented in the text are defended, and I criticize this from my own point of view.” (Bartu)

Another participant explained how she primarily checks the reality of the issues in her current reading and points out the obvious ideas and the assumptions they rely on:

“I know now that assumptions are not true facts. That's why when I think deeply about assumptions, I usually think by adding my own comments. I evaluate how true the evidence is and how false it is.” (Selma)

4.1.5. Evaluating the language of the author

In the process of evaluating the persuasive appeals of a text, critical readers are expected to consider the style and language of the author and the tone and language of the argument the author presented (Barnet et al., 2020). The participants of this research explicitly reflected on this aspect of critical reading, which evidenced their improvement in the evaluation of the author’s language and writing style. As exemplified below, the participants stated that they learned the authors’ writing styles were not incidental and superficial, and developing awareness on how authors present ideas and adopt a variety of style elements depending on their purpose and target audience (e.g., reasoned judgments, emotions, etc.) makes them critical readers.

“Until this course, I did not consider the audience for whom the author is writing and I did not evaluate the writer’s tone and use of language appropriate to the subject and the audience.”

However, I found out that these elements are important for critical reading and writing. Now I definitely consider these elements too.”(Begum)

“...Considering the audience definitely helps because if the writer is writing something to the children, I criticize it in this way. I pay attention to evaluate the writer’s tone and use of language appropriate to the subject and the audience.” (Olcay)

4.2. Theme 2: Turning into critical writers

We named the second theme “turning into critical writers” given that participants reflected on the gradual improvement of their critical writing skills during and after the instruction they have received. Regarding the research question, participants described four different positive changes in their writing that resulted from their critical reading and writing experiences in this course: having audience awareness as a writer; reading for thinking and to write critically; doing self-evaluation as a writer; and finding reliable sources.

4.2.1. Audience awareness

During the critical reading and writing course, participants of this study practiced and worked on developing well-reasoned arguments of their own. Based on their experiences, most of the participants emphasized the crucial role of audience awareness in persuasive writing, although the ways in which the participants matured varied. In her reflection, Piraye described the new ways she tried, one of which was her effort in developing the content of her writing considering her intended audience.

“..In this course, I learned some new ways to think. For example, imagining who my audience will be and then thinking according to this...While writing, I think of a specific audience because I believe if we know our audience and their needs our writing will be more effective.” (Piraye)

Similarly, some other participants emphasized the important role of the audience in shaping their writing purpose and content.

“I usually like to write in a more striking way of writing because it is important for me to influence the reader.” (Melisa)

In their reflections, some participants described their concern on audience awareness by sharing writing strategies they personally have used to increase their writing’s effectiveness and understandability for the audience (e.g., evaluating their writing). Hacer and Ayse’s reflections below are one of these common representations:

“When writing nowadays I started to write for an audience. For example, I write nowadays for a general audience, so that everyone can understand what I write even if they do not have any knowledge about the topic. To help my readers, I try to evaluate my writings.” (Hacer)

“When I criticize my own papers now, it is clear that I can write with coherence, the reader may find fewer weaknesses in my writing. My ideas are more organized and the reader can understand me better.” (Ayse)

Several students also shared how important their readers were for them and what they do to present their voice was to increase their audiences’ curiosity. For example, in her reflection, Naz described how her writing style has been determined in part by her audience:

“I have written many articles expressing my views, and one of my top goals now here is that it has been to arouse curiosity in the reader. After reading an article, it is clearly a difficult goal to make the reader curious and encourage research on the target topic.” (Naz)

4.2.2. Reading for thinking and to write critically

Critical writing occurs after some preliminary processes of intensive critical reading such as finding and evaluating sources to synthesize and integrate into the written product, making judgments on the selected sources, distinguishing the kinds of reasoning presented in these sources examining evidence (Barnet et al., 2020). Participants of this study have practiced the use of these critical reading strategies in the process of writing their argumentative paper. In their reflections, referring to some of these strategies, they reflected on how their critical reading of texts and their thinking about the texts enabled them to develop their own argument on the topics and the content of their own writing as well as improve their critical writing.

“...it was useful for me to read many articles by comparing them and to add a critical perspective. Because, I learned that I need to study texts more consciously and deeply. Also, I try to enumerate a clear and logical thought on my topic, I think critical thinking is the decision-making stage. Because I have to read and comment before writing.” (Aysen)

“The main difference I gained in the class is the concern for the reliability. When creating a text the most difficult part is finding and adapting scientific resources into my papers. Its harshness is all about my will to indicate my own point of view. So I read the sources that would be used in my paper over and over again to understand the ideas given in those sources. So finally, it would be possible to evaluate my paper objectively.” (Ahmet)

“...When I read the papers, I used some strategies which facilitated the process of critical writing a lot for me. When I follow the highlighted sentences, I can see what I should include and exclude from my writing. I took notes on top of the paper about the organization of the paper such as I should put this information in the 2nd paragraph.” (Seda)

4.2.3. Self-evaluation as a writer

It was also very common for the participants to have experienced self-evaluation in their writings and to describe themselves as critical writers. Our analysis of reflections revealed that a clear majority of students evaluated their essays with their strengths and weaknesses with a reader's eye. Below are two representative examples from the reflections:

“I learned how to evaluate my own writing according to my strengths and weaknesses. I try to evaluate my writings. I mostly try to look if my outline and coherence of the writing is good, my evidence is enough, or my claims are well explained.” (Melike)

“In the end, after I'm done with writing. I read and evaluate myself as a means of its strength and weaknesses as a reader does. It is very important to criticize yourself with a reader's view instead of a writer's eye.” (Ezel)

Some participants stated that they were not used to detaching themselves critically from their writing. After this instruction, they learned how to evaluate the whole writing process, to revise and edit their drafts. By self-evaluation, they could be more aware of their strengths as a writer and see more clearly what skills they should work on to improve themselves.

“Moreover, I didn't double-check and read the essays I wrote before but now, I read the text I have written and analyze if it has any spelling, grammar mistakes or there is anything to adjust. Whenever I introduce a thesis I support my idea with scientific evidence that was provided by professionals in the field. This is important for me and my audience as well to sound meaningful and trustable to my reader.” (Canan)

4.2.4. Finding reliable sources

For a critical writer, the sources' quality and integrity is crucial to the writer's own credibility and to the strength of their argument (Barnet et al., 2020). The last sub-theme of becoming critical writers was on participants' efforts in finding and evaluating sources for

reliability. In their reflections, the participants described themselves as critical readers and researchers searching for reliable sources. As exemplified below, their reflections evidenced that they read various sources to see the different perspectives and did a comprehensive search to find reliable and useful sources before writing.

“I have started to use more reliable sources. Now I read academic sources, rather than just searching on Google and clicking the first web site.” (Burak)

“I realized that all the articles that I wrote were completely far from academic writing. I learned to find reliable sources to support my own argument and in this way I write confidently while defending my argument.” (Selin)

4.3. Theme 3: Fostering critical reading and writing with improved critical thinking

Our analysis of students’ reflections showed that the practice of critical thinking and its integration into academic skills are essential in improving their thinking and relevantly reading and writing skills. From the students’ perspectives, at the beginning of the course, they seemed reluctant to take part in critical discussions and they were not familiar with thinking reflectively, rationally, and reasonably. As explicitly mentioned in their reflections, each procedure followed in the course enabled participants to arrive at a deeper understanding of ideas and concepts. The students could move beyond basic reading comprehension and opinion-based writing to a deeper understanding of reading and writing. Below are sample reflections from some participants who explicitly stated that the practice of critical thinking changed their thinking, concurrently their reading and writing habits.

“...Before, I was blindly confident when sharing a subject or an information I know, and I was thinking like I know it well and it cannot be wrong. But now I always think that what I just said might be wrong, and I may need further research about it. I am now more open to debates and counter ideas, and I know that I can be wrong too.” (Melike)

“I realized that I improved myself a lot because I am willing to assess my assumptions and I approach my subject from various perspectives to support and make it clear. Also, I have fun while I discover different ideas because I have an opportunity to learn new ideas and express my subject better.” (Ece)

“Now I can sum up my thoughts on issues correctly in front of people. I can reach the conclusion with words, examples and comparisons that can express myself correctly. I find it realistic to use evidence both when exploring different ideas and when presenting my own ideas. Because it gives me confidence that my idea is on the ground. It's also very important for me to give different ideas a chance and recognize them. In this way, my ideas can also have a chance to be recognized by others.” (Zehra)

“After completing this class I have realized that I’m more open to new ideas than usual and I’m always ready to reflect on my assumptions. I always look forward to gaining new insights and acquire information by reading and researching now. Furthermore, I always make sure I read about both sides of the argument and find some points that I agree with on the counterargument.” (Ruya)

5. Discussion

As reported in our findings, it is apparent that our participants as ELT pre-service teachers have had a clear sense of criticality in their critical reading and writing skills depending on the practices they have gained in the CRW course. Each theme and its subthemes emerging in our data are linked to the critical thinking, reading, and writing skills participants have practiced throughout the course. Thus, the findings of this study confirm the importance of training students on critical reading and writing skills by embedding critical thinking skills into them

(Fahim and Mirzaii, 2014; Nejmaoui, 2019; Macknish; 2011, Wilson, 2016). Our participants who had been exposed to an approach emphasizing criticality and encouraged to a more intense engagement with critical reading and writing practices explicitly mentioned in their reflections that they developed a more critical disposition in reading and writing in English especially on the specific themes that emerged in this present study.

The findings of this study generally align with some findings of previous critical reading and writing studies. For example, the sub-themes we categorized in this study in terms of turning into critical writers correspond to the argumentative writing abilities participants of Nejmaoui's study (2019) developed as the result of the potential effects of critical thinking instruction such as using clearer and credible evidence in developing their arguments, addressing alternative positions and arguments, supporting conclusions, and maintaining the logical flow of ideas. The findings about critical reading align with the findings of previous critical reading studies as well. For example, in their studies where they explicitly taught critical reading strategies through guided practices to EFL learners in Iran, Talebi and Talebi (2015) concluded that EFL learners who are aware of the strategies such as inferencing, annotating, questioning, and summarizing after the explicit instruction of critical reading strategies could become more independent, responsible and critical L2 readers. Similar to Macknish (2011) and Suarcaya and Prasasti's (2017) findings on developing critical reading skills through critical reading practices, and engaging EFL learners in written and verbal responses following a reading process, our findings showed that the students could engage in critical reading discourse after being provided with scaffolding and practices in critical L2 reading. Very similarly, the findings of Wilson's (2016) study revealed that EAP students developed a critical disposition and had an intense engagement with the content of the reading after critical pedagogy was integrated into their reading course. To sum up, aligning with some findings of the previous studies, the participants of the present study could improve their criticality by relating their critical thinking skills with critical reading and writing practices and this substantiates the importance of the integration of critical thinking in CRW courses in higher education.

The findings of this study were in line with the results of these studies as it pointed out ELT students could foster critical reading and writing with improved critical thinking. However, different from the previous studies in the literature, the instruction process the current study is conducted provided its participants the practice of both critical reading and writing. Given the importance of demonstrating a critical approach in integrated reading and writing, there has not been more research on students' perceptions and experiences of the challenges in implementing critical thinking in academic reading and writing. The findings of this study contributed to the understanding of using a critical pedagogy in a CRW course and developing ELT students' critical dispositions in both reading and writing considering their perspectives on their own development. Since these students have little chance to practice these skills out of the classroom environment, such a combination supported with critical thinking was thought to maximize critical thinking and reasoning abilities of students as well as expand their criticality in reading and writing skills (Barnet et al., 2020).

The findings emerging from the students' reflections revealed that students were unaware of the importance of pondering over the arguments while reading, evaluating evidence in a source, and presenting evidence in an argument. After the instruction, the students reported that they turned into critical readers as they used active reading strategies fostering critical reading including reading not only for information but for ways of thinking, raising questions while reading, developing their ideas on issues, and evaluating the language of the author.

Moreover, the education they received encouraged them to turn into critical writers, and they had audience awareness as a writer, used critical reading skills to foster their critical writing, read for thinking and to write critically, did self-evaluation as a writer, and evaluated sources for reliability. These themes emerging in this study are valuable in understanding the ELT students' perceptions on their own development as well as designing the content of critical reading and writing courses taught at the higher education level. Although the themes emerging in this study are context-specific and relate to a specific instruction given to a group of participants, based on our findings, we argue that these skills participants reflected on as part of their own development should be transferred from this specific critical reading and writing courses to other courses across the curriculum (Nejmaoui, 2019) to be able to see whether they would be able to transfer these skills for a long term efficient use and further practice of the skills for a better conceptualization.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study investigated how ELT students' CRW skills changed from their perceptions of their own development depending on the CRW practices. The nature of the CRW implementation in this study turned ELT students into critical readers and critical writers by fostering their CT skills. Even though there were 51 participants from the same educational background included in this study, and the data obtained from 102 reflections was genuine, the findings might differ in different contexts. More research is required in this field.

The process of conducting this study and the findings have provided some implications for explicit instruction of CT in L2 higher education. Firstly, the explicit instruction of CT should be provided in a CRW course to develop EFL students' understanding of CT. As concluded in this study, when students are exposed to an instruction enriched with criticality and critical pedagogy, they demonstrate a change in the way of their reading and writing in becoming more critical readers and writers. Different from previous studies, our aim in this qualitative study was to present the voices of the teacher candidates on their own development in the process of becoming critical readers and writers. Therefore, the themes emerging in the study are important in both understanding what skills participants themselves specifically focused on to improve in this process and in making implications for the design of an effective critical reading and writing course for ELT students in Turkish higher education context. Although we cannot generalize the findings to all other contexts, in the future pedagogical implementations of critical reading and writing courses, the instructors can foster their students' critical reading and writing skills through more closely guided and informed reflection on the specific themes presented in this paper.

Finally, the present study suggests that CT is teachable in higher education and fosters ELT students' CRW skills. However, the number of studies that investigate the integration of CT in L2 pedagogy is limited as most of the studies are experimental and have focused on students' experiences in implementing CT in academic reading and writing separately and rarely from the students' perspectives. While our study contributes to the literature on critical reading and writing skills development, it would be useful to conduct this study in other similar contexts with different groups of students with close analysis of students' works they produced throughout the instruction.

7. The Research and Publication Ethics Statement

The ethics committee approval has been obtained from the affiliated university (28/10/2020-.2020/08).

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