

Implementing problem-posing through speaking interactions to promote third-semester students' critical thinking skills in the Bachelor's Degree in Foreign Languages with Emphasis on English at UIS

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Bachelor's Degree on Foreign Languages with Emphasis on English

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MA. in Language Didactics

Universidad Industrial de Santander

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Bucaramanga

2026

Dedication

To my parents, Andrés and Johanna, for being a constant source of support in my life.

Thank you for your guidance, encouragement, and unconditional love. You have been my greatest motivation to persevere and achieve my goals. I love you.

To my sister, Camila, for being a fundamental pillar in my life and a constant companion. Your support and encouragement have always inspired me to grow and become a better person. I love you.

To Ramiro, for his love, understanding, patience, and constant support, thank you for being part of my life. I love you.

To Máximo, Rosa, and Luna, for being that unconditional support when I needed it.

Natalia Díaz

To my mom, Leonor, for supporting me throughout my entire journey, for always caring about my well-being, for your unconditional love, and for making this dream possible.

To my brother, David, whose example motivates me to always give my best and inspires me to stay committed to my professional goals.

To my partner, Carlos, for his endless words of encouragement and always being there for me.

Gabriela Mantilla

To God, for giving me the strength and wisdom to reach this point.

To my mother, for her unconditional love, constant support, and for being my greatest inspiration.

To Lana, for her love, patience, and for being by my side every step of this journey.

Nicolás Sandoval

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to Jessica Velandia, our thesis advisor, whose guidance, commitment, and unwavering support were fundamental to the successful completion of this research project. Her patience, dedication, and genuine care accompanied us throughout every stage of this process. We sincerely admire and respect her work as an educator and mentor.

We are also especially grateful to Professor Aleyda Estepa for kindly providing us with the space in her classes to carry out the pedagogical intervention. We extend our appreciation to her third-semester students (2025-1), whose active participation and willingness made the data collection process possible. Likewise, we would like to thank Luz Prada for her valuable advice and support.

In addition, we wish to acknowledge the members of the university community, including cleaning staff, classroom assistants, and street vendors, who generously shared their perspectives. Their contributions provided meaningful insights that enriched the development of this project.

Finally, we would like to recognize ourselves for the effort, dedication, and perseverance invested in this work. This achievement reflects countless hours of commitment, teamwork, and resilience. Through collaboration and mutual support, we were able to successfully complete not only this project but also an important stage in our academic journey.

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Abstract

Title: Implementing problem-posing through speaking interactions to enhance third-semester students' critical thinking skills in the Bachelor's Degree in Foreign Languages with Emphasis on English at UIS^{1*}

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Keywords: critical thinking, problem-posing, speaking activities, teacher education, university community, EFL

This study aimed to determine how the implementation of a problem-posing approach through speaking interactions promotes the development of critical thinking skills in third-semester students from the Bachelor's Degree in Foreign Languages with Emphasis on English at Universidad Industrial de Santander. The pedagogical intervention was organized into multiple sessions, each designed around three types of activities: exploratory discussion, reflective writing, and visual critical analysis. Based on an initial stage (Stage 0), in which students identified relevant issues from their context, two main categories were established for analysis: Teachers and UIS Community. Data were collected through observation journals, and focus group interviews, and were later analyzed to identify patterns in students' responses. Findings revealed that students developed the ability to critically analyze their experiences both in the classroom and within the university community by examining possible causes, consequences, and alternatives to different situations. Additionally, students demonstrated the capacity to adopt multiple perspectives, along with an increased awareness of their roles as future teachers. In conclusion, the implementation of problem-posing speaking activities not only promoted meaningful language use but also fostered the development of critical thinking skills by providing spaces for students to reflect on their realities and envision changes in their future professional practices.

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Resumen

Título: Implementación del enfoque problem-posing a través de interacciones orales para fortalecer las habilidades de pensamiento crítico de los estudiantes de tercer semestre de la Licenciatura en Lenguas Extranjeras con Énfasis en Inglés de la UIS.³

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Palabras claves: Actividades de habla, comunidad universitaria, EFL, pensamiento crítico, planteamiento del problema, formación docente

La presente investigación tuvo como objetivo determinar cómo la implementación del enfoque de planteamiento de problemas, a través de interacciones orales, promueve el desarrollo del pensamiento crítico en estudiantes de tercer semestre de la Licenciatura en Lenguas Extranjeras con énfasis en inglés de la Universidad Industrial de Santander. El estudio se desarrolló mediante una intervención pedagógica organizada en diferentes sesiones, las cuales incluyeron tres tipos de actividades: exploratory discussion, reflective writing y visual critical analysis. A partir de una etapa inicial (Stage 0), los estudiantes identificaron problemáticas relevantes de su contexto, lo que permitió establecer dos categorías de análisis: Teachers y UIS Community. Los datos fueron recolectados a través de diarios de campo, producciones escritas y entrevistas de grupo focal, y posteriormente analizados para identificar patrones en las respuestas de los estudiantes. Los resultados evidencian que los participantes desarrollaron la capacidad de analizar críticamente sus experiencias tanto en el aula como en la comunidad universitaria, considerando causas, consecuencias y posibles alternativas frente a diversas situaciones. Asimismo, se observó un fortalecimiento en su habilidad para adoptar múltiples perspectivas, así como una mayor conciencia de su rol como futuros docentes y miembros activos de la comunidad. En conclusión, la implementación de actividades de habla basadas en problem-posing no solo promovió el uso significativo del idioma, sino que también favoreció el desarrollo del pensamiento crítico, al brindar espacios donde los estudiantes pudieron reflexionar sobre su realidad y proyectar cambios en sus futuras prácticas.

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Introduction

This project originates from our experience and observations as students in the Bachelor's Degree in Foreign Languages with Emphasis on English at the Universidad Industrial de Santander. We, as the researchers, noticed that, in the early levels of the English curriculum, speaking activities were primarily focused on developing communication skills, while the development of critical thinking was secondary. This experience contrasts sharply with the pedagogical approaches emphasized in courses such as Critical Pedagogy, Contemporary Didactic Trends, and Education and Society in the Digital Age, where critical thinking is often positioned as a central goal. Consequently, our interest in this topic was sparked by the knowledge gained from the mentioned subjects. These courses demonstrated the significance of critical thinking in English language teaching and the need to investigate pedagogical practices that foster it. As Carter (2020) highlights, critical thinking is an invaluable skill that enables individuals to question and reflect on diverse information. This skill should be integrated throughout all the program subjects centered in teaching English, rather than concentrated in just the three subjects mentioned above, as has been our experience. Following the ideas of Novoa and Sandoval (2023), as future English teachers, it is essential to implement critical thinking across different language levels, as this practice is equally expected of us in our future roles as educators.

Despite the importance of critical thinking, we, as the researchers, have observed a disconnection between its theoretical integration and its practical application in speaking activities across the five English courses throughout the program. According to Rosas et al. (2021), speaking activities in the initial stages of language learning often focus on grammatical practice and the acquisition of basic vocabulary. In contrast, more advanced

levels are expected to engage students in more complex discussions that require greater analysis and evaluation. However, our experience does not reflect the progression described by this author. Therefore, it is important to analyze the possible causes that might hinder the full development of critical thinking. Some of the causes could include the focus on vocabulary and grammatical structure, the excessive reliance on the book, and the limited preparation students receive prior to these activities.

One significant cause contributing to this issue might be that most teachers concentrate their classes on grammar, vocabulary, intonation, and pronunciation appropriate for each level. As Fulcher (2003) and Bygate (1987) suggest, these elements are fundamental for effective communication. However, as Brown (2004) argues, an excessive emphasis on the memorization of vocabulary and grammatical rules often comes at the expense of fostering critical thinking and connecting learning to students' real-life contexts, which is essential in modern education. Considering this problem, it is worth taking a look at the thoughts of Sanavi and Tarighat (2014), who claim that the topics addressed in the classrooms should relate to students' daily lives to foster learning. This possible solution implies not only teaching correct grammar in speaking and writing but also encouraging students' curiosity, reflection, and application of learning in relevant contexts.

A second possible cause for the scarcity of activities aimed at developing critical thinking in the early levels of English is the predominant reliance on the textbook, Cutting Edge (Third Edition), as the primary instructional resource by educators. According to Iman (2017), many teachers rely on textbooks as their primary classroom resource and teaching guide. Throughout our English training in the program, it was noticed that some teachers may over-depend on these uncontextualized textbooks, which often led to a lack of variety and

creativity in teaching methods. This resulted in some students losing interest and feeling that lessons were predictable because of the lack of interactive, engaging, and familiar content. According to our experience, even though the English textbook provides a structured framework for teaching and offers consistent material, it is also focused on a non-familiar context and culture for students.

In the study conducted by Caro and Caro (2019), it was reflected how Cutting Edge textbooks tend to promote British cultural hegemony. This approach may limit the effectiveness of such textbooks in the Colombian educational context by not including diverse cultural perspectives or addressing topics relevant to students in this country, thereby impeding the development of critical thinking. This implies that students face unfamiliar realities, limiting their ability to relate content to their own experiences and, consequently, restricting their critical thinking skills. Richards and Rodgers (2001) state that teaching materials should be relevant and contextually appropriate to maximize the development of higher-order thinking skills, such as critical thinking. Similarly, Kumaravadivelu (2003) notes that language teaching should be sensitive to students' cultural contexts to allow for deeper and critical understanding. Therefore, the limited connection between the Cutting Edge textbook and students' lives creates a barrier to developing critical thinking.

Finally, another cause is that teachers may not provide students with sufficient meaningful context before implementing speaking activities aimed at developing critical thinking, which hampers the development of this skill. From our experience as students, it is difficult to understand complex problems without prior basic knowledge about them. This observation aligns with findings from Park et al. (2021), who emphasize that providing foundational knowledge and research experience is crucial for fostering students' ability to

analyze and critically evaluate complex problems. Similarly, Kalyuga (2007) highlights the importance of scaffolding in the learning process, asserting that students require a clear framework to navigate new and challenging concepts effectively. In a similar way, Vygotsky (1978) points out that if teachers provide adequate context, students can process information critically and develop well-founded perspectives. In this way, students will be better prepared to offer fact-based opinions rather than assumptions, allowing for more reasoned discussions. This analysis is a key component of critical thinking, as Paul and Elder (2009) state; it involves understanding the context in which a problem is situated to reason effectively and reflectively.

Research question

How does the implementation of problem-posing through speaking interactions promote third-semester students' critical thinking skills in the Bachelor's Degree in Foreign Languages with Emphasis on English at the Universidad Industrial de Santander?

Justification

Developing critical thinking skills is fundamental in English teachers' training, as it enhances future professionals' ability to analyze, evaluate, and argue effectively (Flores & Gutiérrez, 2019). This critical action research is especially relevant in our context, given that, through a search conducted in the Universidad Industrial de Santander repository, no project was found focusing on how critical thinking is developed in the English classroom through the implementation of problem-posing using speaking activities. Critical thinking is indispensable in our program, which is oriented toward teaching English from a critical perspective (Universidad Industrial de Santander, 2023).

According to the Educational Project of the Program Licenciatura en Lenguas Extranjeras con Énfasis en Inglés (Universidad Industrial de Santander, 2023), this program is committed to offering comprehensive training to its students, which includes the development of critical thinking as an essential component. There is consensus in the academic community that comprehensive training should foster the development of multiple human dimensions, such as the biological, cognitive, affective, social, political, ethical, spiritual, and aesthetic spheres (“Ley 115 de 1994, art. 5”; Maslow, 1943; Gardner, 2011, Erikson, 1950). Likewise, the importance of integrating the curriculum to respond in an articulated manner to each of these dimensions is recognized, forming a student capable of actively contributing to processes of social transformation and, in this case, critically engaging with language as a social and ideological practice (Canagarajah, 2017). In this sense, the integration of problem-posing in EFL speaking activities seeks to educate for the human community, linking the contents of teaching with its ethical, cultural, and aesthetic significance (Salinas et al., 2023) and promoting a coexistence with the environment congruent with a reflective, critical, sensitive, creative, and responsible disposition (Villegas, et al., 2019). This approach ensures that our future professionals not only acquire knowledge but also skills and values that allow them to respond effectively to the challenges of today's world (Salinas et al., 2023).

Furthermore, our graduate profile is designed to foster a critical approach, as the program promotes comprehensive training in this aspect (Universidad Industrial de Santander, 2023). This research is expected not only to enrich future graduates but also serve as a valuable resource for English teachers, offering them effective strategies to implement critical thinking in their classrooms. In this way, we, as the researchers, contribute to creating

a more reflective educational environment that prepares students to respond effectively to the challenges of the contemporary world.

As future English educators, it is crucial to go beyond merely teaching structures and vocabulary, as it should be a priority to foster critical thinking and analytical skills in our classrooms. This involves not only transmitting knowledge but also encouraging students to question, reflect, and apply what they have learned in relevant contexts. Education should empower students to become critical thinkers and effective communicators in a constantly changing world (Freire, 2017). For this reason, it is important for teachers of our program to know how to implement activities that foster critical thinking skills in the students. Developing these skills is a responsibility teachers assume, and it goes beyond simply facilitating students' progression from one level to another.

1. Objectives

1.1 General objective

To determine how the implementation of problem-posing through speaking interactions promotes third-semester students' critical thinking skills in the Bachelor's Degree in Foreign Languages with Emphasis on English at the Universidad Industrial de Santander.

1.2 Specific objectives

- To encourage speaking interactions through problem posing activities that foster critical thinking in the English classes of third-semester students.
- To analyze the students' critical thinking development along the intervention.

- To examine the impact in students' critical awareness and perspectives regarding issues related to their classes, their university community, and their local neighborhood through problem-posing speaking activities.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Theoretical basis

This critical action research is framed under three key concepts. First, critical thinking approached from Freire's perspective, which involves reflection and action that produce a social change. The second is the problem-posing approach proposed by Freire, which is complemented by generative themes and enhances critical thinking. Finally, speaking as a linguistic skill defined by Thornbury.

2.2 Critical Thinking

Nowadays, critical thinking is essential for academic success and personal growth, as it enables students to analyze information, make informed decisions, and solve problems effectively (Tahira & Haider, 2020). Freire (1973, 1997) defines critical thinking in his concept of critical consciousness as the process by which individuals challenge and become aware of oppressive societal structures through reflection and transformative action. In addition, this process involves questioning assumptions, recognizing biases, and considering multiple perspectives. Freire (1970) and Giroux (2024) emphasized that critical thinking is not simply about intellectual analysis, but rather about engaging in a process that leads to praxis, defined as the intersection of reflection and action that can produce meaningful social change.

Other scholars have also contributed to the understanding of critical thinking. For instance, Gormley (2018) highlights the importance of developing critical thinking skills in educational settings, arguing that these skills are essential for students to navigate complex problems and make informed decisions. Similarly, Vendrell and Rodríguez (2020) and hooks (1994) discuss the multidisciplinary nature of critical thinking, emphasizing its role in fostering ethical and moral reasoning as well as responsible decision-making in educational contexts. Besides, by fostering critical consciousness, learners are empowered not only to understand the world but also to transform it (Freire, 1970; Gormley, 2018; Vendrell & Rodríguez, 2020). This theory is useful for the present investigation, as it provides a comprehensive understanding of what critical thinking is, why it is essential in educational contexts, and how it can be effectively integrated. By grounding the study in Freire's ideas of critical consciousness, we, as the researchers of this study, could better appreciate the transformative potential of critical thinking skills and their role in empowering learners to engage with their social realities and contribute to meaningful change in their perspectives. For that reason, in order to develop critical thinking skills and encourage students to engage deeply with content, another concept that plays an essential role in this project is problem-posing (Freire, 1970).

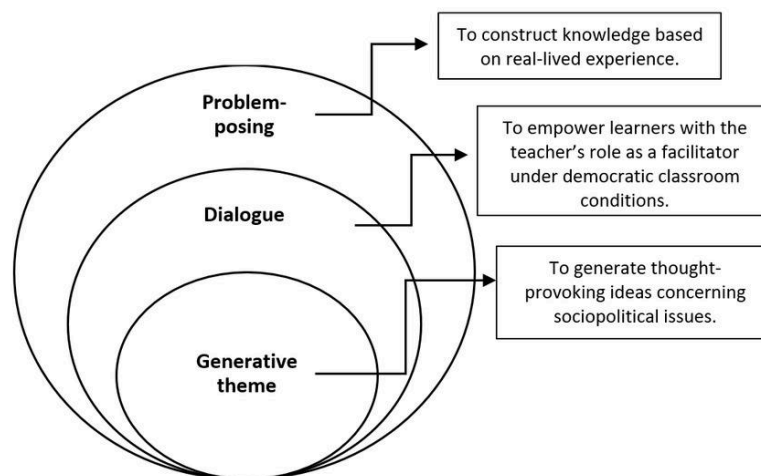
2.3 Problem-posing

As Freire (1970) emphasizes, problem-posing is a crucial educational approach that fosters critical thinking by engaging students with generative themes, empowering them to actively participate and take action in society. In this approach, students take an active role in their learning, collaborating with teachers rather than being passive recipients of information.

As stated by Freire (1970), education should be a co-created experience where students engage deeply with the material. Jewett (2021) and Freire (1973) both highlighted that through problem posing, students learn to identify problems, assess their relevance, analyze the causes, distinguish the causes of the problem, generalize to others, and develop potential solutions. Besides, the authors also agree on the fact that developing problem-posing activities in classrooms requires a meaningful dialogue focusing on generative themes drawn from students' own experiences and challenges (see Figure 1). Such elements ensure that the topics are both relevant and engaging for them. This process not only empowers students but also encourages a sense of agency in their educational path.

Figure 1

Freire's problem-posing concept



Note. From Empowering Thai EFL Learners as Critical Thinkers and Skilled Writers: A Genre-Based Approach with Critical Pedagogy. (p. 490), by Insuwan, C., & Thongrin, S., 2025, *rEFLECTIONS*.

As illustrated in the Figure 1, problem-posing can be described as a big umbrella representing Freire's principles of critical pedagogy aiming to construct knowledge based on the learners' real-life experience in their sociopolitical context. In order to implement a

problem-posing approach in the classroom, dialogue serves as the central component, and it emerges from generative themes, that are emotionally engaging topics drawn from learners' real-life experiences and stimulated by rhetorical questions posed by the teacher. Additionally, problem-posing aligns with the principles of inquiry-based learning, which emphasizes starting with a connection to the conceptual frame rather than the topic itself, allowing students to explore and understand complex concepts deeply (Davidson & Carber, 2009). These authors also propose three types of inquiry (guided, personal, and collaborative inquiry). Collaborative inquiry best suits this study since teachers and students collaborate on problem-posing and problem-solving simultaneously. In order to develop this inquiry in the classroom, teachers and students influence the problems that are posed through discussions that emerge from engaging specific materials and experiences (Davidson & Carber, 2009). By integrating inquiry, students can relate their learning to real-life experiences, fostering a more meaningful and reflective educational experience.

2.4 Speaking

The final key concept for this critical action research is speaking, since through this productive skill the objective of the study is expected to be achieved. Speaking activities in this research were understood as forms of horizontal dialogue that promote the co-construction of knowledge and equitable participation between teachers and students. This principle is grounded in Freire's dialogic pedagogy, which conceives education as a practice based on mutual exchange rather than hierarchical transmission of knowledge (Freire, 1970; hooks 1994). From a social point of view, Freire (1970) also defines speaking as an act of resistance rather than a mere act of communication that allows individuals, particularly those

marginalized by dominant social structures, to challenge the predominant narratives and to have their own voices. Therefore, the current critical action research seeks to integrate speaking activities within the framework of problem-posing and critical thinking in order to enhance students' communicative abilities by empowering them to engage in meaningful discussions and reflect on societal issues.

3. Literature Review

Nowadays, the development of critical thinking through the problem-posing approach proposed by Freire (1970) has been taking place in various investigations regarding different fields, populations, and contexts. Particularly in the EFL classroom, problem-posing has proved its benefits for students' education in several studies. In this regard, studies conducted by Suarlin et al. (2021) and Hashemnezhad (2020), on high school and university students respectively, concluded that problem-posing fostered critical and original thinking skills including critical awareness and self-expression among students, since they were able to connect concepts, reason through problems, and communicate their solutions effectively. However, the previous studies did not mention the specific topics through which problem-posing was implemented in the EFL classrooms.

Additionally, Gómez (2020), Suarlin et al. (2021), Shareef and Sadiq (2023), and Nelson and Chen (2022) conducted studies on elementary, high school, and university students with topics such as managing bullying and limitation of freedom of expression in schools. In accordance with these authors, through problem-posing, students increased interest, motivation, and inquiry in generating questions and exploring them to find critical answers in the EFL classroom. The opportunity for students to develop these skills enables them to tackle critical situations encountered in educational contexts. As problem-posing

takes part in their classes, students become more aware of relevant issues, which sparks their curiosity to learn more about them and seek critical solutions.

Moreover, Shareef and Sadiq (2023) and Hashemnezhad (2020) both highlight the importance of critical inquiry in fostering deeper student engagement. Shareef and Sadiq (2023) argue that posing diverse, critical questions stimulates thoughtful analysis, while Hashemnezhad (2020) adds that Freire's model cultivates critical consciousness, encouraging students to think democratically, ask meaningful questions, and take ownership of their learning. On top of that, Jewett (2021) and García-Soler (2023) underscore that engaging with problem-posing activities allows learners to confront and reimagine their own realities, empowering them to enact change and seek equity in an often unjust world. These conclusions were drawn from their studies on adult ESL and university students using topics related to personal experiences. These perspectives suggest that Freire's model not only promotes critical thinking in EFL contexts but also opens pathways toward educational justice and personal empowerment, aligning learning with social transformation.

As students go through this process of inquiring about relevant problems and critical solutions, they also improve their productive skills in the language as they constantly speak or write their ideas in order to communicate them. As outlined by Gómez (2020), Nelson and Chen (2022), and Felipe and Orrego (2017) in their studies, the constant implementation of speaking activities helps students become more expressive of their opinions and collaborate with their classmates, which enhances their confidence and proficiency in their speaking skills. Furthermore, as problem-posing improves students' critical thinking skills, it also increases their engagement in writing. Nelson and Chen (2022, 2023) demonstrated in their research that students were more eager to generate and explore questions during pre-writing

discussions. This boosted their metacognitive skills and made them more invested in the writing tasks. With the improvement of these productive skills, students have more tools to become active learners in English class since they are able to participate confidently with fewer language restrictions.

In addition, in a classroom setting that implements problem-posing, the roles of the teacher and the students are different from the traditional ones. Under this approach, Felipe & Orrego (2017) and Hashemnezhad (2020) state that teachers hold the role of a facilitator who guides students through their learning process, addressing their questions, and providing support as they learn. Besides, according to Nelson and Chen (2022), students take an active role as they generate and answer questions while working with relevant materials, which improves their critical thinking skills. In their studies, these authors agreed that the facilitative role of teachers also encourages students to tackle real-world issues, motivating a curriculum designed to foster a democratic, risk-taking environment. Such roles are crucial in a student-centered approach since students can independently investigate relevant issues and take initiative in addressing them, without the teacher being directly responsible for the whole process.

Continuing with the abovementioned roles in the classroom under a problem-posing approach, teachers are in need of using students' context to enhance their understanding of different topics. In Nelson and Chen (2022) and Felipe and Orrego (2017) studies, it was observed that by using images and scenarios socially and culturally relevant to students' lives, teachers were able to foster discussions that led to narrative creation and deeper analysis, encouraging students to connect classroom activities with personal preferences and local events. These findings suggest that when students see their realities reflected in educational

content, they become more invested in learning. This approach not only supports meaningful discussions but also cultivates a learning environment where students feel that their voices and experiences matter since they feel familiar with the topics.

Finally, according to Gómez (2020), there are some challenges that teachers may encounter when implementing the problem-posing pedagogy in their EFL classrooms. The first one is that students might struggle with language barriers since they may not have developed enough proficiency in their communicative skills, which can hinder critical discussion. The second one is when students do not feel comfortable with their teamwork, which does not allow them to exchange different perspectives. The last challenge encountered by the author is the possible lack of interest in the topic, because if students do not feel invested in it, they do not actively participate in the activities proposed. For that reason, it is essential for teachers to provide students with topics that resonate with their experiences, along with scaffolding language development in a comfortable group setting where they get to become open-minded risk-takers.

4. Methodology

4.1 Qualitative research

This study is framed under a qualitative research approach, which, according to Creswell (2013), explores the subjects' personal subjective experiences and perceptions from an epistemological position. Qualitative research is focused on understanding how people interpret and make sense of their experiences, social contexts, and phenomena. Furthermore, this approach captures rich and detailed insights into participants' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, involving the collection of non-numerical data, such as interviews, observations,

and texts (Creswell, 2013). This qualitative approach is appropriate for understanding students' perspectives on their growth in critical thinking through problem-posing, which directly aligns with the purpose of this study.

4.2 Research Design

Critical Action Research is a methodological approach that combines critical theory principles with action research practices (Mills, 2017). This author emphasizes the fact that this approach prioritizes reflective investigation and social justice in order to empower participants and facilitate transformative change within the educational context. According to Freire's theory of critical pedagogy, this approach is coherent as it promotes critical consciousness and empowerment through education, enabling individuals to challenge and change oppressive structures (Freire, 1970). Through systematic and intentional investigation, educators can confront and challenge the existing power structures and inequities in order to promote a more inclusive and equitable learning environment (Mills, 2017).

The principles of critical action research align with the objectives of this study, which seeks to empower students through the immersion in discussions about socially relevant topics fostering problem-posing which allows them to develop a way of thinking in order to participate critically not only in the classroom but in the society as well. Likewise, the current study matches the values of critical action research as it portrays the following key characteristics of being: Democratic - Allowing people to actively participate; Participatory - Fostering a community of learners; Empowering - Offering freedom from harmful, limiting circumstances; and Life-enhancing - Facilitating the expression of individuals' full human potential (Stringer, 2004, as cited in Mills, 2011).

4.3 Population and Sample

The population chosen for the current study consisted of students from the Bachelor's Degree in Foreign Languages with Emphasis on English at UIS. From this population, the study used a sample integrated by students in the third semester of the program taking the Upper Intermediate English subject. The students' proficiency level is estimated to be between B1 and B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference. At this stage, students are generally able to communicate their opinions, feelings, and experiences using relatively clear language, while gradually developing the skills needed to engage with more complex topics and interactions, according to the Council of Europe (2020). We, as the researchers, selected participants according to criteria such as their English level and the course schedule that aligned with the objective of the study. According to Campbell et al. (2020), this sampling method is known as purposive sampling, where participants are intentionally chosen because they meet specific criteria relevant to the research.

4.4 Data Collection Instruments

Among the several tools available in the qualitative research method that are of assistance when gathering data, focal group interviews and observation journals were the ones that best suited the purpose of the study.

4.4.1 Focus group Interviews

Interviews facilitate the exchange of information between the interviewer and interviewee(s) on specific topics (Mills et al., 2009). According to this author, structured formal interviews employ a predetermined set of questions for each participant, incorporating

both open-ended and closed-ended formats. Besides, this approach ensures consistency while also allowing for in-depth responses, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the students' perspectives. For this research, focus group interviews were selected as it is a qualitative research technique that explicitly uses group interaction as part of the method, where data emerge through discussion among participants (Kitzinger, 1995). This kind of interview was conducted in order to understand how students collectively expressed and shaped their critical thinking skills progress after the interventions. The focus group interview questions are presented in Annex (B), while the transcripts of Focus Groups 1 and 2 are included in Annexes (C) and (D), respectively.

4.4.2 Observation Journal

As noted by Emerson et al. (2011), an observation journal is a useful tool used in qualitative research that enables researchers to document real-time reflections and observations in the field. Additionally, by serving as a chronological record of events, interactions, and reflections, the journal not only preserves essential data for later analysis but also strengthens the research's reliability and validity by ensuring a systematic documentation of observations (Angrosino, 2007). Furthermore, Mills et al. (2009) have emphasized the importance of using observation journals within the Productive Pedagogies framework to evaluate classroom practices and improve pedagogical processes. This instrument was employed to make ongoing decisions throughout the interventions as it documented each session by date in order to record their development. It also included the objective of the class, the activity implemented, and the reflections on the students' and teachers' interactions. The observation journal is presented in Annex (E).

4.5 Ethical Considerations

This critical action research is guided by the ethical principles of voluntary participation, privacy, and anonymity. Thus, before starting with the systematic collection of data, consent forms were given to the students (Annex F), which allowed them to explicitly accept their participation in interviews for the research by signing with their personal information. Lastly, the treatment of data during the present research is regulated by “Política de Tratamiento de Datos Personales” published on the web page of Universidad Industrial de Santander, as well as in the National current law “Ley 1581 de 2012” along with “Decreto 1074 de 2015”.

5. Methodological Design of the Pedagogical Intervention

5.1 Pedagogical intervention

In order to develop this critical action research, a didactic sequence (Annex A) was designed based on Freire's problem-posing approach using generative themes to enhance students' critical thinking skills. The present pedagogical intervention was conducted during the first semester of the 2025 academic year, from March to May, with an Upper-intermediate English group at UIS. We, as the researchers, dedicated 11 sessions, from one to two hours per week, to the development of the intervention. During the planning phase, it was expected to conduct 13 sessions; however, due to time constraints, it was not possible to execute two of these sessions. As it is shown in Table 1, the 11 sessions were divided into three stages, where stage 0 was used to identify generative themes for the next stages. In each stage, students were required to perform different tasks grounded in the problem-posing model

proposed by Freire (1970) in which the generative themes proposed by students were integrated.

Table 1

Stages and Sessions of the Didactic Sequence Implemented

Stages	Time	Session
0. Starting the Conversation: University Student Life	1 session	Exploratory Discussion: 1. The University Student Experience
1. The Classroom Experience: Voices, Challenges, and Change	4 sessions	Exploratory Discussion: 1. Teaching Practices and Institutional Dynamics Reflective Writing: 2. From Roots to Branches: Analyzing and Solving Teaching Challenges 3. In Each Other's Shoes: Teacher and Student Perspectives Visual Critical Analysis: 4. Seeing Beyond the Image: Reflecting on the Professor's Role

2. Beyond the Classroom: Debate and Community in the UIS Context	5 sessions	<p>Exploratory Discussion:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Community and Social Awareness at UIS 2. Taking a Stand: Debating Controversial Issues at UIS 3. Listening to Unheard Voices. <p>Reflective Writing:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Confronting Indifference: A Dialogue on Community at UIS <p>Visual Critical Analysis:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. From Conflict to Reflection: Analyzing Social Issues at UIS
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The tasks developed in stages 1 and 2 were adapted from Freire's model into 3 main activities: Exploratory Discussion (Listening), Reflective Writing (Writing), and Visual Critical Analysis (Decodification). The first activity, Exploratory discussion, involved guiding a discussion from a series of open-ended questions revolving around a specific generative theme. Such generative themes first emerged during Stage Zero, and more continued to develop throughout the sessions. The second activity, Reflective writing, enabled students to put into words their perspectives on what was discussed during the

listening activity, allowing them to freely and confidently express themselves, and their ideas were subsequently shared by us, as the researchers, in class and discussed by the class. Finally, the third activity, Visual critical analysis, was used to guide students to identify and interpret the issues discussed in previous activities through visual representations, which were analyzed and decoded using the SHOWED model (see Figure 2). This model focuses on a series of guiding questions that encourage students to describe the problem, define it, relate it to their own experiences, analyze its social context, and develop strategies for action.

Figure 2

The SHOWED Method in More Detail (Wang, 1999).

Table 2. The SHOWED Method in More Detail (Wang, 1999).

1	S - What do you See here?
2	H - What is H appening here?
3	O - How does this relate to O ur lives?
4	W - W hy does this concern, situation, or strength exist?
5	D - What can we D o about it?

Note. From Exploring the use of photovoice in understanding the lived experience of neurological conditions: A scoping review and reflexive thematic analysis. (p. 3), by Smith, J., Nels, A., Emery, L., & Stanley, M., 2023, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22 (1-14).

It is worth mentioning that each session followed a discussion-oriented approach in which students were actively engaged with the topics. Besides, depending on the activity, students were able to work either in pairs or groups throughout the sessions to enrich their individual perspectives. The following sections will discuss the three aforementioned stages: Stage 0 - Starting the Conversation: University Student Life, Stage 1 - The Classroom

Experience: Voices, Challenges, and Change, and Stage 2 - Beyond the Classroom: Debate and Community in the UIS Context.

5.1.1 Stage 0 - Starting the Conversation: University Student Life

This stage took place on March 25th, 2025, and consisted of only one session. During this stage, we, as the researchers, led a guided group discussion with the group in order to learn more about the students' daily experiences and challenges related to university life (see Figure 3). This discussion was developed through a series of open-ended questions related to time management, academic workload, personal responsibilities, access to study resources, and the teaching practices they have encountered so far; as it is shown in the didactic sequence (Annex A). Students were invited to share their possible struggles and propose improvements they would like to see at the university. Besides, we, as the researchers, also contributed to the discussion by sharing personal anecdotes, which helped foster a more open and empathetic environment. The purpose of this stage was to hear students' thoughts and allow them to identify certain issues they do not normally address. After the session, we, as the researchers, gathered the most relevant issues that were mentioned and selected two of them as generative themes to guide the following sessions.

Figure 3

Teacher explaining the stage 0 of the intervention



Note. Picture taken during this pedagogical intervention by the teachers-researchers of this paper.

5.1.2 Stage 1 - The Classroom Experience: Voices, Challenges, and Change

Stage one was developed from March 31st to April 21st, 2025, and encompassed four sessions. This stage was based on the role of teachers and teaching practices in shaping students' identities as future educators, as it was one of the most controversial generative themes proposed by students during stage zero.

The first session was dedicated to the Exploratory discussion activity and was named: *Teaching Practices and Institutional Dynamics*. It was developed through the game *Pass the Ball*, in which students passed the ball from one to another and answered the questions related to teaching quality (e.g., *How aware do you think your teachers are of each student's learning pace in class?*) and students' well-being (e.g., *What are the things that usually keep you up late at night? (University, work, other things?)*) (see Didactic sequence, Annex A).

The second and third sessions focused on Reflective writing. The second session was called: *From Roots to Branches: Analyzing and Solving Teaching Challenges*. During this session, we, as the teacher-researchers, reviewed the previously discussed issues about teaching practices and asked students to brainstorm two additional problems. Students then worked in pairs and were assigned one of the considered issues. They were asked to write on sticky notes a specific situation or personal experience related to their assigned issue, along with a possible alternative to address it. The situations were placed on the “roots” and the solutions on the “branches” of a Problem-solution tree drawn on the board.

The third session was named: *In Each Other's Shoes: Teacher and Student Perspectives* and it was based on the specific issues discussed in the previous session. Students were asked to individually analyze and write the causes of these issues on a piece of paper, taking into account not only their perspectives as students but also putting themselves in the teachers' position. Finally, the fourth session was centered on Visual critical analysis and was titled: *Seeing Beyond the Image: Reflecting on the Professor's Role*. We, as the researchers, provided students with three images related to the characteristics of a good professor and then, through the SHOWED⁵ questions, students decoded the visual representation.

5.1.3 Stage 2 - Beyond the Classroom: Debate and Community in the UIS Context

Stage two was carried out from April 22nd to May 12th, 2025, and consisted of five sessions. This stage focused on unheard voices and social issues within the university community as the main generative themes that emerged from the discussions conducted during stages zero and one.

The first three sessions were dedicated to the Exploratory discussion activity. The first one was named: *Community and Social Awareness at UIS*. It was implemented through a *Hot Potato* game, in which the teachers said *potato*, and the student holding the ball answered a question and then named different classmates to answer the same question. The questions were related to social impact and collective responsibility (e.g., *Who do you think is the most*

⁵ S - What do you See here?

H - What is HAppening here?

O - How does this relate to Our lives?

W- Why does this concern, situation, or strength exist?

D - What can we Do about it?

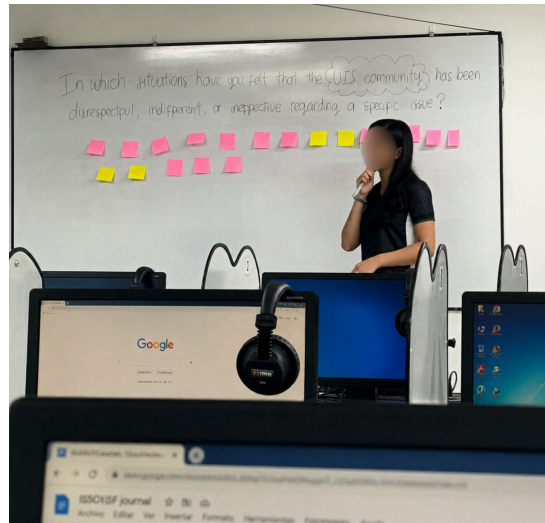
affected when UIS goes on strike? Why?) and equity and critical reflection (e.g., *What things do you think are not usually seen or talked about in university life, but should be discussed more?*). This session was highly valuable, as the issues addressed throughout the rest of the stage emerged directly from the discussion held with the group in this session.

The second session was called: *Taking a Stand: Debating Controversial Issues at UIS*. We, as the researchers, moderated a debate in which they divided the class into two groups and assigned a position to each one. Students were given a considerable amount of time to research information in order to defend their position properly. One of the issues debated was based on people smoking in high-traffic areas of the university where classes are held throughout the day and where large numbers of community members circulate. Group A was against smoking in crowded areas, while Group B was in favor.

In the third session, titled *Listening to Unheard Voices*, students were asked to work in pairs and interview a cleaning staff member, a classroom assistant, or a street vendor. They asked assigned questions about how university strikes affect their lives and work (e.g., *Have you experienced any support or difficulties from students or university staff during strikes?*). Afterwards, each pair shared their interview findings with the class. The fourth session was focused on Reflective writing and called: *Confronting Indifference: A Dialogue on Community at UIS*. During this session, teachers asked students to write on a sticky note a situation or moment when the UIS community was indifferent, disrespectful, or inefficient regarding a specific issue. Then, students posted the sticky notes on the board which guided the classroom discussion (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Teacher discussing the reflective writing activity



Note. Picture taken during this pedagogical intervention by the teachers-researchers of this paper.

The fifth session was based on visual critical analysis and named: *From Conflict to Reflection: Analyzing Social Issues at UIS*. The researchers shared with students three images related to UIS community issues (e.g., vandalism, homemade explosive devices, and student–security guard conflicts) and then, through the SHOWED questions, students decoded such visual representations.

6. Data Analysis

In order to answer the research question: How does the implementation of problem-posing through speaking interactions promote third-semester students' critical thinking skills in the Bachelor's Degree in Foreign Languages with Emphasis on English at the Universidad Industrial de Santander? This study followed the qualitative analysis technique suggested by Burns (2010) in which data were collected through observation journal entries, focus group interviews' transcriptions, and reflections gathered during the

implementation of the intervention. For the observation journal entries, two of the researchers taught the class while one observed and registered students' behaviors and comments during each session. Additionally, photographs of selected activities and short written tasks were collected to document instances that promoted speaking interaction. At the end of the intervention, students participated in focus group interviews, which were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

The data gathered through the observation journal entries (see Annex E) and the focus group transcriptions (see Annex C and Annex D) underwent an inductive analysis process. This process consisted of reading and reflecting on the data several times (Burns, 2010), and identifying emerging patterns through color coding (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Excerpt from the Observation Journal

Date: April 22nd			
Objective	Activity	Observation	Reflection
Students will be able to give their opinion about what it means to be part of the UIS community.	Students play hot potato to answer the questions. Then, after the student with the ball answers the question, they choose other 4 ss to answer the same	<p>The teacher began the class by greeting the students. Then, they explained the methodology for the session and informed the students that they would be playing a game of Hot Potato. After the explanation, the teacher wrote the discussion question on the board:</p> <p>1. What does being part of the UIS community mean to you?</p> <p>-It means sharing things we have in common, like the same goals and characteristics. We are responsible for the same goals.</p> <p>-UIS is not only about the university itself, it's also about what happens outside the classroom. For people who don't live here, it represents an opportunity to become part of UIS.</p>	<p>This type of discussion is really interesting because it allows students to open their minds through these kinds of questions. It also helps them bring to the surface things they already know but don't usually think about or express; things that are understood, but often left unsaid. Starting this new topic is very</p>

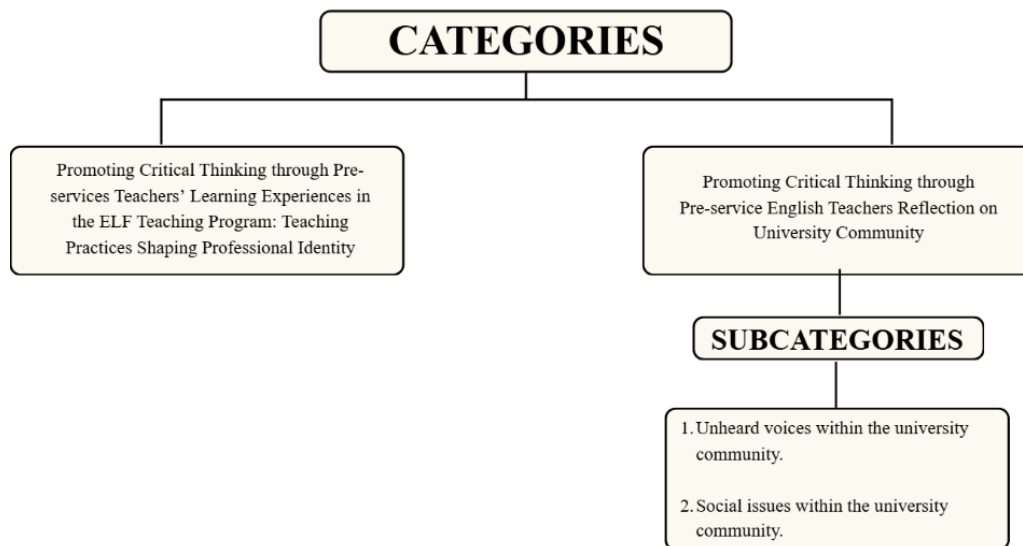
Note. Image extracted from the observation journal to illustrate the analysis conducted through color coding.

The color coding facilitated the identification of generative themes that arose from the dialogues held in class. This in-depth process allowed the development of two main

categories and the subcategories that were organized in order to account for the generative themes that emerged from students' daily concerns and experiences (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Categories and subcategories derived from the analysis of the generative themes.



The following sections describe and analyze how students developed their critical thinking through speaking interactions grounded in problem-posing. The classroom dialogues presented below include students' reflections and insights that emerged during each session, as recorded in the observation journal (see Annex E), along with the activities and guiding questions proposed in the didactic sequence (see Annex A), and the discussions held in the focus group interviews (see Annex C and Annex D).

It is worth mentioning that the broader generative themes emerged from the guided discussion about students' daily experiences in university life held in Stage 0 *Starting the Conversation: University Student Life* (see Methodological Design of the Pedagogical Interventions). Some of the open-ended questions that guided this discussion were: *What would you like the university to change to improve the students' experience?*, and *What*

difficulties do your classmates like the university to change? During this stage, students demonstrated a clear interest in topics related to their teachers, teaching practices, and challenging situations within the university community. These topics were explored through a sequence of sessions organized into three types of activities: exploratory discussion, reflective writing, and visual critical analysis; which provided different spaces for students to express and reinterpret their experiences. Together, the two categories provide the framework through which the findings of the intervention were analyzed and interpreted.

6.1 Promoting Critical Thinking through Pre-service Teachers' Learning Experiences in the ELF Teaching Program: Teaching Practices Shaping Professional Identity

This category emerged from the dialogues conducted in class, in which students discussed their learning experiences and reflected on the role of teachers and teaching practices in shaping students' identities as future educators, as the generative theme. This theme was developed across four sessions: 1) Teaching Practices and Institutional Dynamics (Exploratory Discussion); 2) From Roots to Branches: Analyzing and Solving Teaching Challenges (Reflective Writing); 3) In Each Other's Shoes: Teacher and Student Perspectives (Reflective Writing); and 4) Seeing Beyond the Image: Reflecting on the Professor's Role (Visual Critical Analysis). Through speaking interactions, usually held in English, students explored relevant topics related to their professional development and critically examined how such experiences shape their identity as future teachers, while strengthening their critical thinking.

During the session *Teaching Practices and Institutional Dynamics* (Exploratory Discussion), students discussed and examined some valuable teaching practices and

personality traits that define a teaching role model based on their perceptions and what they have observed in their university professors. These topics were addressed through a Pass the Ball activity in which students answered questions such as *What does being a good professor mean to you?* and *Do you consider your professors to be good teaching role models?* During the dialogue held in class, students collectively agreed that most of their university professors were good role models, highlighting in them qualities such as patience with students' learning pace and styles, professional and respectful relationships with students, and passion and deep knowledge in their teaching field. Additionally, they mentioned how they valued when teachers explained topics with different strategies that fit the students' necessities and interests, since these practices foster a comfortable and engaged learning environment.

This discussion also prompted students to share their insights on what they considered inappropriate teaching practices by some of their professors. Among these practices, students agreed that not planning lessons, relying exclusively on textbooks for the class, and being disrespectful when addressing students were among the most unacceptable, since such behaviors undermine the effective development of the class and cause students to feel disengaged. This perception is supported by a student's comment during the session: "When we see a professor acting like that, the class feels like a waste of time and I immediately don't want to participate" (Observation Journal, March 31st, 2025, Annex E). The outcomes of these questions revealed students' ability to engage in evaluative thinking by analyzing and categorizing teaching practices based on their own experiences

In this session, students were also asked to discuss the question *How do your teachers react when these situations happen in class: students do not understand a topic, look tired or unmotivated, or are distracted and talking too much?* During the group dialogue, students

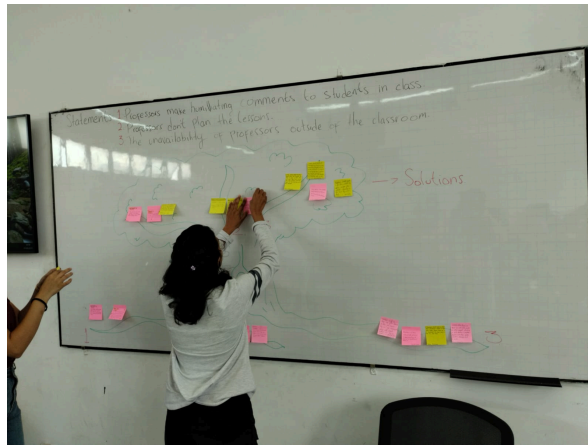
highlighted that, although their professors were usually empathetic and open to endeavor for different strategies to teach topics, in some cases some professors: “don’t care and continue their classes since it’s not their responsibility to make them [students] pay attention in order to understand the topic” (Observation Journal, March 31st, 2025, Annex E). This indicates that students are aware that some professors are more concerned with completing the curriculum plan in its entirety than with ensuring students’ proper understanding of the content. Moreover, regarding disruptive talking in class, they mentioned that: “Some teachers get angry and ask for respect because it’s their class, or call them at the end of the class to talk to them about it” (Observation Journal, March 31st, 2025, Annex E). By discussing these situations with their classmates, students were able to compare different ways professors manage authority and respect within the classroom. Overall, by discussing these teaching practices, students examined how teachers’ responses in the classroom influence and shape the learning environment.

The above reflections let us, the teacher-researchers, provide students with the space to critically analyze teaching practices considering their own roles as future teachers. To further explore this, during the session *From Roots to Branches: Analyzing and Solving Teaching Challenges* (Reflective Writing), students went beyond reflecting on and providing examples of situations they had experienced in their daily interactions with teachers. They were also encouraged to think as future teachers and propose possible alternatives through a Problem-solution tree activity (see Figure 8). Students were given the opportunity to share specific situations in which they felt dissatisfied with some of their professors’ teaching performance. Students proposed and highlighted situations such as correcting students’ pronunciation mistakes in a rude manner in front of the entire class, improvising most class

activities, and only providing their email as a means of contact, which they consider often ineffective, among others.

Figure 8

Problem–solution tree



Note. Students placing a sticky note on the problem-solution tree drawn on the board. Picture taken during this pedagogical intervention by the teachers-researchers of this paper.

Based on the above-mentioned situations, students were encouraged to propose possible actions to address them in the future as teachers. Some of the strategies included implementing a suggestion box for anonymous feedback on teachers' performance or establishing consultation hours to facilitate student-teacher communication. Throughout the session, students were able to engage in reflective thinking by sharing and addressing alternatives to these situations with the class bearing in mind their future roles as educators. This is reflected on one of the focus group interviews while answering Q2 *“Do you feel that your realities, interests, and concerns were taken into account? How did that make you feel?”* F1 mentioned that *“The activities revolved around my voice and my identity as a student [...] It helped us reflect on situations we usually internalize but don't consciously analyze.”* (researchers' translation) (Focus group interview F1, November 14th, 2025, Annex C).

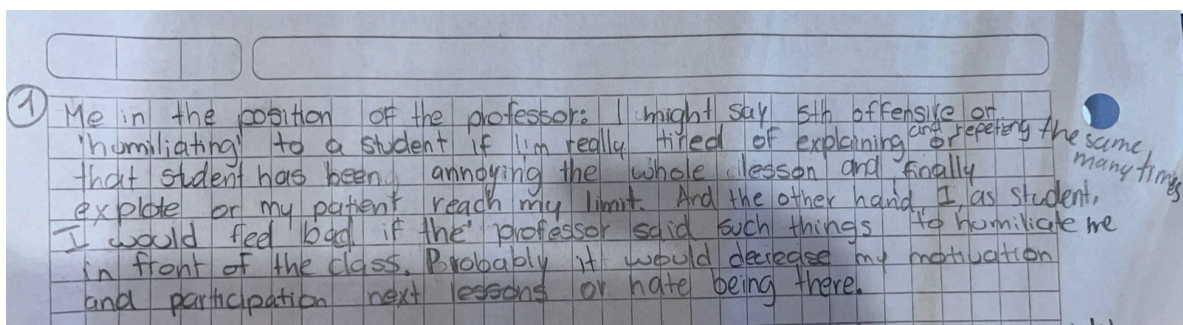
These findings indicate that providing and promoting a space for students to share their learning experiences with the class and reflect on them collectively proves to be meaningful in order to foster their ability to question internalized ideas and propose strategies to take action based on such reflections.

Continuing with the themes discussed in the previous session, students were engaged in a more deeply analysis carried out in the session *In Each Other's Shoes: Teacher and Student Perspectives* (Reflective writing). Students analyzed these specific teaching practices through individual writing, taking into account both the possible reasons why some professors may act in certain ways and how students feel in response to these situations. They were given the option to write either in English or Spanish depending on how they felt more comfortable expressing their opinions.

As it can be illustrated in Figure 9, this student, assuming the role of the teacher, might resort to making humiliating comments in class if they become frustrated with explaining the same topics while students are disrupting the lesson. However, from their perspective as a student, they recognize the negative impact of such behaviour and consider that their participation and motivation toward the class would decrease if this were to happen to them.

Figure 9

Student's writing about humiliating comments in the classroom



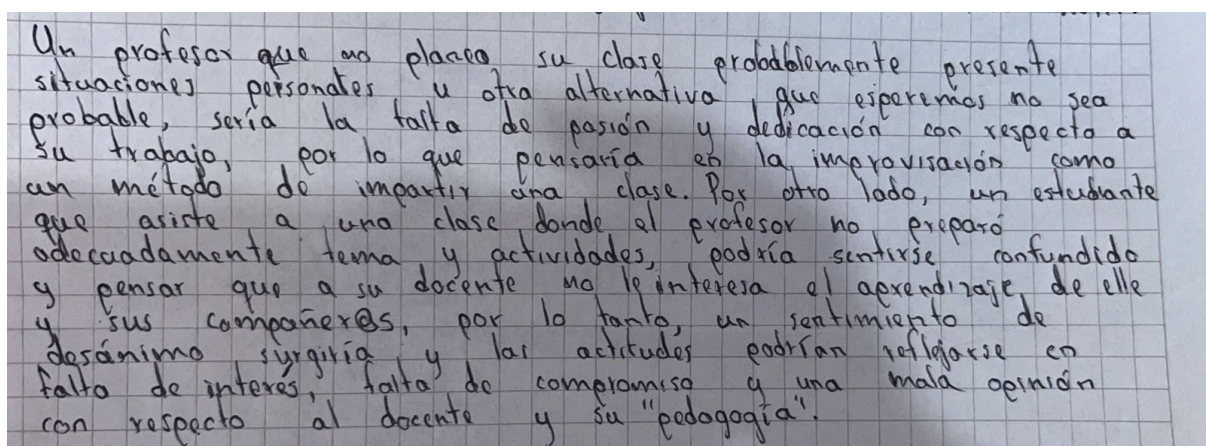
Note. Picture taken during this pedagogical intervention by the teachers-researchers of this paper.

Transcription reproduced exactly as written by the student: “Me in the position of the professor: I might say sth offensive or humiliating to a student if I'm really tired of explaining [and repeting the same thing many times] that student has been annoying the whole lesson and finally explote or my patient reach my limit. And the other hand, I, as student, I would feel bad if the professor said such things to humiliate me in front of the class. “Probably it would decrease my motivation and participation next lessons or hate being there.”

Furthermore, students pointed out in their writings that the lack of lesson planning due to workload, time management, or uncreative methods like over-reliance on textbooks leads to disengagement, lack of commitment, and low academic interest. All of this negatively impacts students’ performance and their perception of both the teacher and their pedagogy. Moreover, as it can be observed in Figure 10, this student also considered that professors may encounter personal challenges that prevent them from planning the lesson effectively. Nevertheless, regardless of the situation, from a student’s perspective, such circumstances may create the impression that the professor does not care about the students’ learning process, which can lead to demotivation.

Figure 10

Student’s writing about their professors’ lack of lesson planning

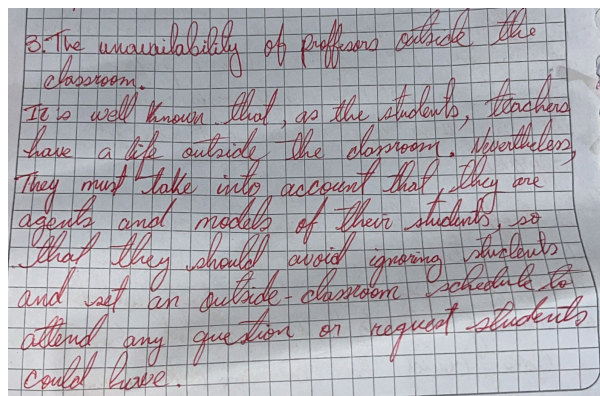


Note. Picture taken during this pedagogical intervention by the teachers-researchers of this paper. Transcription reproduced exactly as written by the student: “Un profesor que no planea su clase probablemente presente situaciones personales u otra alternativa que esperemos no sea probable, sería la falta de pasión y dedicación con respecto a su trabajo, por lo que pensaría en la improvisación como un método de impartir una clase. Por otro lado, un estudiante que asiste a una clase donde el profesor no preparó adecuadamente tema y actividades, podría sentirse confundido y pensar que a su docente no le interesa el aprendizaje de él/ella y sus compañeros, por lo tanto, un sentimiento de desánimo surgiría y las actitudes podrían reflejarse en falta de interés, falta de compromiso y una mala opinión con respecto al docente y su "pedagogía".”

Finally, as it is shown in Figure 11, students acknowledge that professors are usually unavailable outside of the classroom due to their personal responsibilities. Nevertheless, they considered it necessary to establish extra meetings or an effective means of communication for students to clarify their doubts regarding the class, highlighting that teachers serve as role models and therefore should remain attentive to students’ questions and concerns.

Figure 11

Student’s writing about their professors’ unavailability outside the classroom



Note. Picture taken during this pedagogical intervention by the teachers-researchers of this paper. Transcription reproduced exactly as written by the student: “The unavailability of professors outside

the classroom. It is well known that, as the students, teachers have a life outside the classroom. Nevertheless, they must take into account that, they are agents and models of their students, so that they should avoid ignoring students and set an outside-classroom schedule to attend any question or request students could have.”

Outcomes of this reflective writing indicated that this session led students to reflect and adopt a more empathetic perspective toward teachers’ realities. Rather than focusing only on the pedagogical shortcomings, students were also able to consider external factors that may influence teachers’ practices and limit their opportunities to meet students’ expectations. It is worth mentioning that this reflective writing process also portrays the development of students’ critical thinking, as they moved beyond judgments and engaged with an understanding of others’ perspectives. This was also evident in the focal group interview while answering Q8: *Do you feel that this experience transformed your perspectives and actions as a member of a community?* F2 stated: “[...] taking into account the situations that each person experiences within the university is important to better understand each other, [...] and also to start thinking about what can be done to find solutions.” (researchers’ translation) (Focus group interview F2, November 20th, 2025, Annex D).

Finally, in the session *Seeing Beyond the Image: Reflecting on the Professor’s Role* (Visual Critical Analysis), students analyzed and identified characteristics of a teacher based on the body language and gestures depicted in the images of a teacher in contexts such as planning a lesson, giving a class, and talking to a member of the cleaning staff (see Figure 12). They also reflected on how those actions shape their perceptions of the class while drawing comparisons with their current professors. During the dialogue held in class, students concluded that a good professor demonstrates passion for teaching by willingly devoting time

to planning dynamic classes with a positive attitude in order to foster students' participation and engagement. This is evidenced in one student's comment in relation to the image: "He seemed to enjoy teaching. The students in the image probably feel engaged because of the teacher's attitude in the class" (Observation Journal, April 21st, 2025, Annex E). Besides, students noticed that the professor's body language portrayed a kind and respectful personality inside and outside the classroom.

Figure 12

Image depicting a teacher in three different contexts



Note. Images generated by ChatGPT (OpenAI) using artificial intelligence.

Moreover, some students felt that the images reflected not only most of their university professors' classes but also their own realities. One student, who was already working as a teacher, mentioned: "The images relate to my practice in how I plan my classes [...] it is fun when you enjoy what you do" (Observation Journal, April 21st, 2025, Annex E) which emphasizes the value of being passionate about teaching. The findings of this session led us to notice that students constantly draw on some of their teachers' practices as examples of how they could address students' interests through dynamic and engaging classes when they become teachers themselves.

In conclusion, throughout the previous sessions students' speaking interaction in the class evidenced that providing students with a space to identify characteristics of a good professor and recognize the importance of appropriate teaching practices is crucial to shape their own development as future educators. This is particularly evident among students enrolled in teacher education programs, in which they are trained to critically reflect on these practices in order to continuously improve their teaching path. Through this process, students were able to propose and adopt more critical and reflective perspectives, becoming agents in both their learning and teaching development. These classroom dialogues also provided students with the opportunity to share their own experiences and express themselves in either L1 or L2, depending on their level of comfort, fostering a problem-posing environment that enables students to critically examine these situations and their perspectives on their role as future teachers

6.2 Promoting Critical Thinking through Students' Reflection on University Community Experiences

This category is grounded in the classroom discussions carried out throughout the sessions, usually in English, where students reflected on their experiences within the UIS community while engaging in a critical examination of relevant issues seen on their daily basis through a problem-posing approach. Some of the generative themes addressed are unheard voices and social issues within the university community. These themes were explored across five sessions: 1) Community and Social Awareness at UIS (Exploratory Discussion); 2) Taking a Stand: Debating Controversial Issues at UIS (Exploratory Discussion); 3) Listening to Unheard Voices (Exploratory Discussion); 4) Confronting

Indifference: A Dialogue on Community at UIS (Reflective Writing); and 5) From Conflict to Reflection: Analyzing Social Issues at UIS (Visual Critical Analysis).

6.2.1 Unheard Voices within the University Community

During the session *Community and Social Awareness at UIS* (Exploratory Discussion), students were able to collectively discuss and reflect on the UIS community, its members, its dynamics, and the social, economic, and personal implications associated with it. These concerns were addressed through a Hot Potato game in which students encountered questions such as *What does being part of the UIS community mean to you?* and *Who do you consider to be part of the community?* While listening to their classmates in an open dialogue, students emphasized that not only professors and students are part of the UIS community by saying: “the people who help clean the space, [...] the administration, [...] the street sellers [...] the people who work here. [...] whoever is inside the university is part of the UIS because they want to improve it.” (Observation Journal, April 22nd, 2025, Annex E). Students’ comments indicated a strong sense of empathy, appreciating the roles and contributions not only of their professors but also of all the members of the community.

The above was also evident in the session *Listening to Unheard Voices* (Exploratory Discussion) where teacher-researchers provided a space in the class to engage students in a dialogue with some members of the university community. This was conducted in Spanish, as it was the participants’ native language. Outcomes of these dialogues evidenced that students became aware of different problems faced by the street vendor, cleaning staff and security guard as consequences of strikes. For instance, students reported that street vendors experience a significant decrease in their daily income, as their earnings depend on student

presence on campus. This class discussion was held in English. In addition, cleaning staff indicated that their work is disrupted during strikes, as they are either reassigned to other locations or required to clean the aftermath of protest activities, which often involves dealing with excessive disorder. Classroom dialogue indicated that students developed sensitivity towards others' realities, as one student mentioned during this session: "I felt bad because I admit that when strikes happen and people start causing chaos, the only thing I think about is going home" (Observation Journal, April 29th, 2025, Annex E). This comment demonstrates an increased awareness that, just as students wish to go home, other members of the university who work there may share the same concern.

In addition, as illustrated in the focus group interviews, students expressed a positive perception of this activity. In response to Q1: "*Can you identify the activities you enjoyed the most during the sessions? Why?*", one student of F1 stated: "I remember the activity in which we interviewed university workers, because it helped us become aware not only of our own perspective, but also of that of the rest of the UIS community" (researchers' translation) (Focus group interview F1, November 14th, 2025, Annex C). Similarly, students from F2, answered to Q9: "*How would you describe the experience of getting to know the perspective of people from the UIS community?*" by highlighting the value of engaging with often unheard voices, stating that

"It was wonderful, because they are people who are often not taken into account, and understanding how they are affected allows us to see the university from another point of view [...] Getting to know the perspectives of some members of the UIS community helped me better understand the reactions that some people have toward strikes and other university issues, such as regulations. By becoming aware of how

many people are affected and how many are not, it is easier to understand that level of indifference. ” (researchers’ translation) (Focus group interview F2, November 20th, 2025, Annex D).”

The above allowed us to observe a shift in students’ critical thinking, as they began to reconsider the impact of their everyday actions. By engaging with perspectives different from their own, students were encouraged to reflect more deeply on their role within the university community and the ways in which their decisions may affect others.

The analysis of these sessions’ answers allowed us, as teacher-researchers, to observe how students developed a stronger sense of social awareness by engaging with perspectives that are usually overlooked in institutional discussions. Interacting directly with these members of the community enabled students to move beyond assumptions and recognize the real-life consequences of strikes on different members of the university community. For instance, a student stated that: “when strikes happen, the community’s attention focuses on the strike itself, but not on the people who are directly affected by the problems that strikes bring.” (Observation Journal, April 29th, 2025, Annex E). In this regard, critical thinking was fostered as students reflected on these new perspectives and became aware of the strikes’ effects on other members of the community.

6.2.2 Social Issues within the University Community

Classroom dialogue further facilitated the identification of additional concerns, while teacher-researchers created spaces for students to critically engage with issues impacting the well-being of the community. Throughout the session *Taking a Stand: Debating Controversial Issues at UIS* (Exploratory Discussion), students reflected on and analyzed

two controversial issues within the UIS community that had been addressed with the questions: “*What situations inside or outside the university have made you feel uncomfortable or unfairly treated?*” and “*What things do you think are not usually seen or talked about in university life, but should be discussed more?*”. In order to foster meaningful dialogue, a debate was implemented to observe how students articulated their ideas through critical thinking, while actively engaging in discussion and listening.

One example of the issues discussed was smoking in crowded areas, particularly in the Faculty of Humanities Buildings, where students take classes and members of the university frequently circulate. Students defending this practice argued that smoking is legal and there are no visible signs that prohibit smoking on the campus. In contrast, opposing students stated that the university provides other areas for smoking and explained that the absence of signage does not justify the behavior. As one student mentioned: “Just because something isn't explicitly forbidden doesn't mean it is ethically acceptable, especially when it negatively affects others' health” (Observation Journal, April 28th, 2025, Annex E).

Students' arguments during the debate allowed us, as teacher-researchers, to observe how students actively engaged in discussions, analyzing social issues from different perspectives. We also noticed that some students initially experienced difficulty, particularly those who were required to defend positions that differed from their personal beliefs. However, this allowed them to become more critical regarding perspectives different from their own, as they were asked to develop unbiased arguments in order to defend such differing perspectives. Moreover, students expressed a positive perception of this activity. This is illustrated in the focus group interview response to Q1: “*Can you identify the activities you enjoyed the most during the sessions? Why?*” F1 stated: “The debate, as it

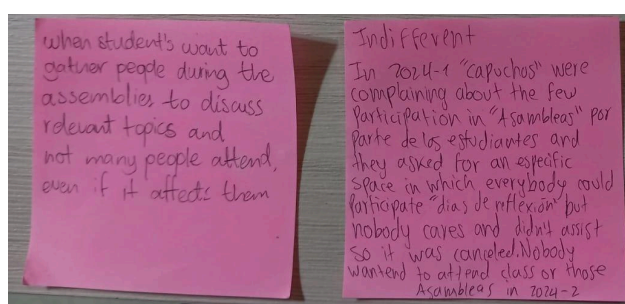
promoted the use of English, and we were asked to defend very controversial ideas and to take a position either in favor of or against them. We took into account everyone's points of view on the same issue"(researchers' translation) (Focus group interview F1, November 14th, 2025, Annex C). The above suggested that this debate encouraged students to develop critical thinking and take advantage of the opportunity to construct arguments from different sources while actively listening to those of their peers.

Furthermore, during the session *Confronting Indifference: A Dialogue on Community at UIS* (Reflective Writing), students were encouraged to consider and write down on a sticky note a specific issue they perceived the UIS community to have been indifferent to, or addressed disrespectfully or inefficiently. The discussion brought to light several issues raised by students, including the lack of student participation in assemblies, as well as the disregard for protests and informational material distributed at the campus entrance. They also highlighted institutional inaction regarding teaching reviews on some professors at the university and ineffective support for students facing economic difficulties, among others.

During the open dialogue, referring to Figure 13, students collectively agreed that low participation in assemblies is mainly due to the limited opportunities to express different perspectives. Students explained that viewpoints are disregarded when they differ from the dominant opinion. The previously mentioned idea is reflected in one student answer: "They don't discuss anything. They don't reach any conclusions. [...] I went to support, and it was a circus. It was just everyone fighting" (researchers' translation) (Observation Journal, May 5th, 2025, Annex E).

Figure 13

Students writing about their experiences during the assemblies

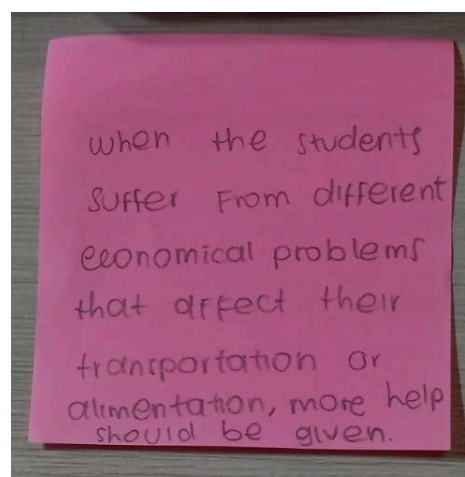


Note. Picture taken during this pedagogical intervention by the teachers-researchers of this paper. Transcription reproduced exactly as written by the student: [Note on the left] “When student's want to gather people during the assemblies, to discuss relevant topics and not many people attend, even if it affects them”. [Note on the right] “In 2024-1 "capuchos" were complaining about the few participation in "Asambleas" por parte de los estudiantes and they asked for an especific space in which everybody could participate "dias de reflexión" but nobody cares and didn't assist so it was canceled. Nobody wanted to attend class or those Asambleas in 2024-2”

Similarly, in relation to Figure 14, students agreed on the idea that students face different economic situations that affect their academic process. Students recognized that some forms of economic support provided by the university, such as subsidized meals and *matrícula cero* (*subsidized tuition*), are beneficial for many students. However, they also acknowledge that there are still additional expenses, unrelated to their studies, that they are required to cover on their daily basis. This is shown in one comment shared by a student claiming that: “One student had to drop out because he was either eating or studying. He felt frustrated because he was forced to leave. Later, when his situation became more [economically] stable, he couldn't return due to university regulations. These are situations that are simply out of students' control” (Observation Journal, May 5th, 2025, Annex E).

Figure 14

Student writing about students' economic situation



Note. Picture taken during this pedagogical intervention by the teachers-researchers of this paper. Transcription reproduced exactly as written by the student: “when the students suffer from different economical problems that affect their transportation or alimentation, more help should be given.”

Finally, in this session, we found it particularly interesting that some students chose to speak in Spanish during the discussion. This may suggest that they felt more emotionally connected when expressing their opinions in their native language, especially when addressing personally relevant topics, such as issues related to economic situations. Additionally, what stood out the most was how students reacted to each other’s ideas by demonstrating genuine engagement, empathy, and a willingness to listen and reflect critically. This is illustrated in a focus group interview in response to Q8: *Do you feel that this experience transformed your perspectives and actions as a member of a community?* F1 stated: “Listening to my classmates did impact my critical thinking, because some had stronger arguments than others, presented counterarguments, and confirmed certain theories or ideas I already had” (researchers’ translation) (Focus group interview F1, November 14th, 2025, Annex C). Overall, it is worth mentioning that this dialogue fostered not only awareness of shared concerns but also a deeper sense of collective understanding and participation.

Additionally, during the session *From Conflict to Reflection: Analyzing Social Issues at UIS* (Visual Critical Analysis), students examined some visual representations presented by the teacher-researchers. Through these images, students explored the causes of and possible alternatives to the issues that emerged during the exploratory discussion session of this stage, which addressed the question *What situations inside or outside the university have made you feel uncomfortable or unfairly treated?* These visual representations illustrated situations such

as student-security guard problems, homemade bombs, and meaningless graffiti around the university (see Figure 15). They were subsequently interpreted using the SHOWED questions.

Figure 15

Image illustrating three situations that occur within the university



Note. Images generated by ChatGPT (OpenAI) using artificial intelligence.

During the session, students emphasized that the images were familiar to them, as they had experienced similar, if not identical, situations within the university. They also agreed that such actions negatively affect the university's image. When analyzing the student-security guard problem, students pointed out that guards are simply fulfilling their duties and following established protocols. However, they argued that the university should provide alternatives for student IDs to enter the campus. These ideas are evidenced in a student's comment: "[...] there are no alternatives for those without access to a smartphone or internet, taking into account that the university doesn't make physical IDs anymore; however, the students shouldn't act in that way because the guards are just doing their jobs" (Observation Journal, May 12th, 2025, Annex E).

Regarding the graffiti image, students acknowledged that, although such actions may be intended to convey messages or express discontent, they also contribute to visual pollution. In the case of the homemade bomb image, students expressed concern about the

fear and danger these actions generate. This is reflected in one of the students' comments: "During class, I have heard similar explosions, and one classmate once said he had seen bombs explode near students, which made me feel unsafe" (Observation Journal, May 12th, 2025, Annex E). Finally, across the three images, students mentioned that, although they do not always agree with the methods used, such behaviors are often perceived as responses to feeling unheard by the university or the government. In terms of alternatives, they proposed more constructive ways of expressing demands, such as using megaphones to communicate messages, rather than resorting to actions that generate fear or damage the campus environment.

This session led us, as the teachers-researchers, to consider how students began to reflect more critically regarding issues that are often ignored in university life. This critical thinking development was fostered by the use of the SHOWED questions, which guided students from observation to deeper interpretation and problem-solving. Furthermore, in this dialogue, students seemed to feel valued and heard, as observed in the answers to the focus group interviews. For instance, in response to Q6: "*Do you think your critical thinking skills developed throughout the sessions?*", F1 claimed: "Yes, because critical thinking is built over time, and putting it into practice with these sessions helped us develop it since we questioned problematic situations and gave solutions to them" (researchers' translation) (Focus group interview F1, November 14th, 2025, Annex C). We find this consideration deeply important since students do not usually have the space to discuss these kinds of concerns. It is essential to create opportunities in the classroom where they can express and reflect on their experiences with no pressure of judgment.

In conclusion, findings indicated that students went beyond merely identifying the negative aspects of certain actions of some UIS community members, engaging in deeper analysis by questioning the reasons behind these behaviors, considering their possible positive outcomes, and proposing alternative ways to address them. This process enabled them to move from a surface-level understanding of the university community dynamics to a more empathetic perspective, in which they recognize the impact of their own actions and the importance of considering others' realities. Moreover, it encouraged students to explore multiple viewpoints and approach complex situations with awareness. Overall, these sessions fostered the development of critical thinking and social awareness, which may influence how students contribute to their academic community in a more reflective manner.

7. Discussion

The research question that guided this investigation was the following: How does the implementation of problem-posing through speaking activities promote third-semester students' critical thinking skills in the Bachelor's Degree in Foreign Languages with Emphasis on English at the Universidad Industrial de Santander? In order to address this question, this section examines the impact on students' critical thinking development from a problem-posing approach, while connecting these findings to previous literature. Additionally, it discusses the implication of study for future English teachers, raising awareness of the importance of creating spaces in the classroom to foster critical thinking through problem-posing. Finally, it addresses the limitations of this study.

7.1 Problem-posing through speaking interactions

In relation to the research question stated above, this study was aimed to follow the problem-posing approach proposed by Freire (1970), since it fosters critical thinking by engaging students with generative themes suggested by them. In this regard, the generative themes that emerged through speaking interactions were related to professors as role models and UIS community dynamics. Through this approach, students were empowered to actively participate and take action within their social contexts.

Throughout the intervention, our purpose as teacher-researchers was focused on providing a space in the classroom and guiding the speaking interactions where students could reflect and share in class situations that are relevant to them. Our goal during this research project was to implement a problem-posing approach in the pedagogical intervention, in which students were given the opportunity to bring to class situations based on their experiences with their professors and the UIS community. This objective was approached by drawing on Felipe and Orrego (2017) and Hashemnezhad (2020), who argue that teachers should act as facilitators in the classroom to guide students' learning processes.

Findings indicated that when students shared and examined relevant situations to their own experiences through classroom dialogue, they became more aware of how they directly or indirectly affect themselves and others members of the community. This aligns with the ideas proposed by Gómez (2020), Suarlin et al. (2021), Shareef and Sadiq (2023), and Nelson and Chen (2022), which suggest that when problem-posing is implemented in the classroom, students' curiosity can be sparked to learn more deeply and seek critical alternatives to such relevant issues.

During the intervention, specifically during the discussion of teachers as role models, we could notice that students were given the opportunity to reframe their own realities. Given that they are enrolled in a bachelor's degree, and some were already working as teachers, they were able to critically reflect on their current and future teaching practices, identifying those they would like to adopt as well as those they would seek to transform. These outcomes are consistent with what Freire (1973), Jewett (2021) and García-Soler (2023) argue regarding problem-posing activities, which enable learners to question and reconstruct their perception of reality, fostering a sense of agency to enact change.

The use of speaking activities in this project proved effective in enabling students to articulate their points of view and develop confidence without fear of being judged while discussing different generative themes. Additionally, since most of the activities were structured around discussion, students were provided with continuous opportunities to engage in meaningful spoken interaction. These findings align with the studies conducted by Gómez (2020), Nelson and Chen (2022), and Felipe and Orrego (2017), which demonstrated that the incorporation of speaking activities contributes to the enhancements of learners' confidence and oral proficiency.

Beyond discussing the topic, students were also engaged in writing activities that allowed them to further develop and express their ideas. Before undertaking these tasks, they participated in pre-writing phases, such as guided discussions based on topic-related questions. Findings indicated that discussions allowed students to reflect more deeply on the issues addressed and, consequently, articulate their ideas in the writing task. Similar results were reported by Nelson and Chen (2022, 2023), who suggest that pre-writing discussions

not only increase students' involvement in writing tasks but also contribute to the development of metacognitive awareness.

Finally, the outcomes in this study also revealed that the activities involving Visual Critical Analysis allowed students to connect the visual representation with their own realities. For instance, when the teachers-researches presented the images of the teacher, they related them to their own experiences. Likewise, images reflecting situations of the UIS community, prompted them to draw parallels with situations encountered in the university setting, thereby reinforcing the relevance of the activities. In line with this, the use of images and scenarios relevant to students' lives foster engagement, as learners are able to recognize their own realities in the educational content, as pointed out by Nelson and Chen (2022) and Felipe and Orrego (2017).

7.2 Teachers implications

The findings of this study suggest significant implications for teaching practices in EFL contexts, particularly in relation to the integration of the problem-posing approach through speaking activities. Grounded in the principles proposed by Paulo Freire (1970), this study highlights the importance of fostering spaces for dialogue in which students are given the possibility to critically engage with their realities rather than passively receive knowledge. In this sense, language classrooms can give the opportunity to reflect, providing an environment where communication is not limited to linguistic accuracy but extends to the analysis of meaningful social issues.

An additional relevant implication relates to the emphasis on speaking as a central skill within the implementation of the problem-posing approach. The findings of this study

suggest that engaging students in real-time oral interaction allowed more spontaneous and authentic responses, giving a better understanding of their perspectives. We consider it worth mentioning that, in a context where the use of digital tools and artificial intelligence has become increasingly common in students' academic production, as suggested by Vieriu and Petrea (2025), prioritizing live speaking interactions offers opportunities to listen to their genuine viewpoints and reflections. This emphasizes the importance of incorporating communicative practices that promote immediacy, personal engagement, and authenticity in the language use.

Moreover, the results emphasize the need to allow students to become active agents in their own learning process. Through activities such as debates, interviews, and reflective discussions, students demonstrated the ability to question assumptions, consider multiple perspectives, and propose alternative responses to complex situations. The findings of this project suggest that teachers should move beyond traditional teacher-centered approaches and, instead, promote participatory environments that ensure students an active role in their own process where they feel confident expressing their opinions and reflecting on complex issues as a group.

In addition, exposing students to diverse and often unheard perspectives proved to be a key element in fostering social awareness and empathy. By engaging with different members of the UIS community, students were able to reflect on the broader impact of their actions and decisions. Therefore, we consider it is important for teachers to design learning experiences that connect classroom practices with real-world contexts, allowing students to critically examine their role within their communities.

Furthermore, this study underscores the importance of guiding students to move beyond the mere identification of problems and, as teachers, encourage them to reflect more deeply by questioning the roots of such situations, considering their implications, and exploring possible alternatives. This approach not only strengthens critical thinking but also supports the development of more reflective and socially engaged students.

Finally, given that participants in this study are enrolled in a bachelor's degree, these findings are relevant for their professional development. By engaging in activities with a problem-posing approach, they were given the space not only to analyze their educational context but also to consider what type of educators they aspire to become. In this way, the participation on this project may influence their future teaching practices, motivating them to adopt more critical and socially aware approaches in their teaching practices.

7.3 Limitations of the study

Despite the positive outcomes of the intervention, several aspects could be improved in future possible implementations. First, extending the duration of the intervention and increasing the frequency of the sessions could better support the continuous development of students' critical thinking skills. Due to time constraints, it was not possible to explore issues related to the local neighborhood, which could have further strengthened the connection between the activities and students' everyday realities. Moreover, incorporating a wider variety of dynamic and creative strategies could further enhance student engagement. Similarly, stronger alignment with the writing component is needed. Only the first writing session fully emphasized structured written production. In the remaining sessions, students mainly provided brief written responses, while deeper analysis and argumentation took place

orally. We recommend that future implementations should ensure that writing activities consistently promote the development of well-structured and argumentative responses, in accordance with the intended focus.

8. Conclusions

This research study aimed to determine how the implementation of problem-posing through speaking interactions promotes third-semester students' critical thinking skills in the Bachelor's Degree in Foreign Languages with Emphasis on English at the Universidad Industrial de Santander. The intervention provided insights into students' perspectives on generative themes proposed by them, particularly those related to teachers and the UIS community. These perspectives were gathered through sessions organized into three types of activities: exploratory discussion, reflective writing and visual critical analysis. The discussions held throughout the intervention along with the answers of the focal group interviews enabled us to observe how students engaged in critical thinking about their future roles as a teacher and as members of the university community. Through this intervention, students were given the opportunity to identify and reflect on relevant issues, analyze their possible causes and propose alternatives. The following section will address the three specific objectives proposed at the beginning of this study.

The first objective of this study aimed to encourage speaking interactions through problem posing activities that foster critical thinking in English classes of third semester students. To achieve this, students were involved in meaningful discussions about generative themes that allowed them to express their ideas, share experiences and propose alternatives. Students participated in different tasks, such as debates, interviews, and problem-solution

trees, among others, that were later discussed and reflected upon after their implementation. These interactions created opportunities for students to use English as a tool for reflection and dialogue. Previously, it seemed that students perceived English as a language used mainly for presentations and exams; however, during our intervention, it became clear that English can also be used to talk about community issues. This research demonstrates that English classrooms can serve as spaces where students can speak not only about academic topics, but also about issues that are closely connected to their own realities.

The present study also sought to analyze students' critical thinking development along the intervention. Findings indicated a clear progression in critical thinking, as students moved from merely identifying issues and engaging in initial discussions to approaching these situations in a more analytical and reflective manner. Throughout the sessions, teachers-researchers created opportunities for dialogue in which students expressed different points of view, constructed arguments, proposed alternatives to the generative themes discussed, and listened to others without judgment, recognizing that everyone may hold a different perspective. By the end of the intervention, students demonstrated increased agency and recognized that engaging in dialogue with their peers enabled them to consider multiple perspectives, and strengthened their ability to develop reflective thinking.

The final objective of this research study was to examine the impact on students' critical awareness and perspectives regarding issues related to their classes, their university community, and their local neighborhood through problem-posing speaking activities. During the discussions, it was observed that these generative themes impacted students' lives by prompting reflection, not only on the type of teachers they aspire to become, but also recognizing their role within a broader social context. In this sense, the intervention enabled

students to move beyond simply discussing these topics and engage in deeper reflections on their causes, consequences and possible alternatives.

Overall, this study demonstrates that implementing problem-posing activities through speaking interactions with third-semester students in an English class contributed to the development of their critical thinking skills. It also highlights the importance of incorporating topics that are relevant to students' lives, rather than focusing on academic content. Notably, speaking functioned as a medium through which students engaged with and reflected on generative themes. When students engage with familiar issues, they tend to participate more and express their ideas more freely. For that reason, it is essential to provide opportunities for students to discuss these topics and integrate them with curricular content in the classroom.

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Annexes

Annex A - [Didactic Sequence Proposal](#)

Annex B - [Interview Questions](#)

Annex C - [Focus Group 1 Interview – November 14th, 2025](#)

Annex D - [Focus Group 2 Interview – November 20th, 2025](#)

Annex E - [Observation Journal](#)

Annex F - [Informed Consent Form for the Intervention](#)