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# The use of storytelling to develop the primary school students' critical reading skill: the primary education pre-service teachers' opinions

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to determine the primary education pre-service teachers' opinions about the use of storytelling to develop the primary school students' critical reading skills. The study was designed with qualitative research approach and criterion sampling method was used to select 53 participants. The collected data was analysed through descriptive analysis. As a result of the study, it was obtained that the pre-service teachers had positive opinions about the use of storytelling to develop the critical reading skill and their opinions about the contribution of the method were compatible with the skills explained in literature within the context of critical reading. Consequently, the pre-service teachers suggested carrying out the studies on the applications of the method during their education, also they emphasized that these studies should be conducted with the primary education teachers.

*Keywords: Critical reading, storytelling, primary education pre-service teachers.*

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## 1. Introduction

The critical literacy applications are the approach that has been recently used, particularly at mother tongue teaching courses to prepare the children for the life in an information society (Hoody, 2008). It is emphasized that to be critically literate, making sense of messages from different sources such as multimedia, complex visual components, music as well as spoken and written words. Thus, to gain students the critical literacy skill is one of the ways to develop the decision making and evaluation skills related to accept or reject which information and opinions attained from these different sources and to enable them to participate the life actively (Luke, 2004; cited in CLG, 2009). In literature, it is highlighted that stories are effective means to gain the critical reading skill (Gaber-Katz, 1999). The stories produced and shared within a social context reflect the social relations. In fact, stories are the bridges between the individual experience and social patterns. In this context, the analysis of the stories can be a potential tool to improve more critical awareness towards social relation in the society (Faircloth, 2009). In this sense, it is considered that analysing stories at Turkish course would enable students to put forth their own opinions and to have critical eyes on the texts. It is considered that to determine the opinions of the pre-service primary school education teachers who know about the storytelling to gain the critical reading at Turkish course is important to help them transfer their theoretical information to application process and to define the problems and thus to suggest solutions for these problems.

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### 1.1. Purpose

The main purpose of the present study is to determine the primary school education pre-service teachers' opinions about the use of storytelling to develop the critical reading skill at Turkish courses in the primary schools. In line with this aim, the following research question was addressed: (1). What are the pre-service teachers' general opinions about the use of storytelling to develop the critical reading skill at Turkish course? (2). What are the pre-service teachers' opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of using the storytelling to develop the critical reading skill at Turkish course? (3). What are the pre-service teachers' suggestions about how to use the storytelling effectively to develop the critical reading skill at Turkish course?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Research model

The present study was designed as a qualitative research, adopting descriptive qualitative research approach.

### 2.2. Participants

In this study, criterion sampling, out of purposeful sampling methods, was used to select the participants. Thus, the main criterion adopted in this study was that the participants should have Turkish course and know about the critical reading and storytelling at least basically. In this context, 53 pre-service teachers, who took Turkish course and became volunteer, participated in the study in 2009-2010 spring terms.

### 2.3. Data collection and analysis

The data of the study was collected through the questionnaire involving open-ended questions developed by the researchers. The experts' opinions were asked about the content and intelligibility of the developed questionnaire, and after few changes, the questionnaires were given to 53 pre-service teachers. In the data analysis of the study, descriptive analysis was used. In this process, first a coding key was developed and the researchers independently coded the data. Then, they discussed their coding and decided on the agreed and disagreed items for the reliability of the study. At the last stage, the data which were examined according to the coding key were analysed descriptively as frequencies in line with the research questions (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2005) were carried out.

## 3. Findings

The obtained data was gathered under three main themes as “the pre-service teachers' general opinions about the use of storytelling to develop the critical reading skill at Turkish course”, “the pre-service teachers' opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of using the storytelling to develop the critical reading skill at Turkish course” and “the pre-service teachers' suggestions about how to use the storytelling effectively to develop the critical reading skill at Turkish course”.

### 3.1. General opinions about the use of storytelling to develop the critical reading skill

When the pre-service teachers' opinions about the use of storytelling to develop the critical reading skill were examined, it was realized that out of 53 participants in the study, 52 pre-service teachers reported that this method could be effective. Moreover, related to the development of the critical reading, 10 of the pre-service teachers stated that this method would gain the listening through questioning skill, and other 10 of them considered that this method would develop the primary school students' prediction skill while 8 pre-service teachers thought that it would provide opportunity for questioning/discussions, also 7 pre-service teachers claimed that it would gain the skill of reading by questioning. Additionally, 4 pre-service teachers reported that the method would contribute to the development of questioning skill, 3 pre-service teachers put forth that this method would provide opportunity to ask questions about the high-level thinking while 2 pre-service teachers considered that it would develop the skill of asking critical questions and other 2 pre-service teachers thought that this method would teach to be respectful towards different thoughts.

Regarding the use of story-telling method in developing the critical reading, 22<sup>nd</sup> pre-service teacher reported that “*An individual who uses the storytelling relays the author's viewpoint on an event from his own window. In this way, he can discover on which situation the author concentrates in the story and what the author transfers and how.*”

*From an independent window, he can see the positive and negative aspects of the events. At the same time, by asking questions, he can draw attention to the different situations in the story. Through such questions, it would be possible to handle the story in depth and to interpret and catch the author, in brief; it would enable the student to approach the author through both positive and negative aspects; critical aspect. On the contrary, 30th pre-service teacher explained his negative opinion about the storytelling as “I do not think that the storytelling would be effective on the critical thinking method. Because the children get lost within the text. Children mostly dwell on the setup rather than listening to the read or told story.”*

### *3.2. Opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of using storytelling to develop the critical reading skill*

Regarding the advantages and disadvantages of using of storytelling to develop the critical reading skill, 10 pre-service teachers claimed that this method would develop the primary school students’ skills to have different viewpoints on the events while 7 of the pre-service teachers in the study argued that this method would develop their skills of expressing themselves and defending own opinions as improving their self-confidence. Additionally, related to the advantages, 6 pre-service teachers considered that this method would gain different thinking ways, 5 pre-service teachers claimed that this would develop their thinking and research skills as well as questioning, while 4 pre-service teachers agreed that this method would provide the connection with the real life. At the same time, 2 of the pre-service teachers put forward that this method would help to gain the critical reading fast and easily, besides other 2 pre-service teachers emphasized that it would help the students to set empathy. Furthermore, 2 pre-service teachers stated that the story-telling method would help students be objective while 3 pre-service teachers claimed that this method would contribute to evaluate the daily life problem from critical aspect and look for solutions.

In detail, regarding the advantages of using storytelling to develop the critical reading skill, 22nd pre-service teacher explained his opinion about the contributions of the storytelling on developing the skills of prediction and setting cause-effect relations in the critical reading as *“Firstly, an individual gain the competency of looking at the events both on their own and from different directions through many Windows. Thus, this develops thinking horizon, thereby the style of how to approach the events and their decision making skill”*. Similarly 49th pre-service teacher clarified that *“considering the events in the stories, the students could enable to look at the events in the real life critically, that is from different perspectives, besides to evaluate the events objectively”*. 43rd pre-service teacher added that *“The students would be encouraged to question what they listen or read on the basis of ‘why’ question. This constitutes the important part of the critical reading.”*

On the other hand, related to the disadvantages of using the storytelling to develop the critical reading, 4 of the pre-service teachers in the study argued that using the same techniques all the time would be boring, while for 3 of them, using the method constantly would be insufficient, and according to other 3 pre-service teachers, the outcomes/aims would not be achieved when this method is used alone. Furthermore, 2 pre-service teachers claimed that this method could not be used for every learning area, the other 2 pre-service teachers explained that this method would not address to every students. In addition, 1 pre-service teacher stated that this method would make the critical reading as habit, while another pre-service teacher emphasized that every story would not be appropriate to the critical reading. On the other, another pre-service teacher explained that the stories may not perceive the messages in the stories accurately, and other pre-service teacher stated that the efficiency can be low if current sources are not used.

Related to the disadvantages of using the story telling, 2nd pre-service teacher stated that *“I considered that it would not be effective when I use all the time”* while 12th claimed that *“there can be some inadequacies and deficiencies in arranging the activities for every learning area. The stories can be unattractive for the children or the outcome cannot be achieved exactly.”* On the other hand, 29th pre-service teacher stated that *“If the teacher does not know the method adequately, this can cause her to have difficulty or ignore it”*. Moreover, 31st pre-service teacher explained that *“when the method is used appropriately I do not think there would be any drawbacks. However, if the teacher always carries out the same activities all the time the students can get bored”*.

### *3.3. Suggestions about how to use the storytelling effectively to develop the critical reading skill*

When the primary school education pre-service teachers’ suggestions about how to use the storytelling effectively to develop the critical reading skill were examined, it was realized that while using the method, 21 pre-service teachers suggested to organize class/group discussions, for 13 pre-service teachers, to use the stories that can

raise curiosity, according to 12 pre-service teachers, to ask critical questions about the story, for 11 of them, to question the listened stories, for 6 pre-service teachers, to use reading-aloud method in the process, for other 6 pre-service teachers to make the students active in the process, also for 6 pre-service teachers to support the lesson with different visual materials, songs, films and drama method. Moreover, other pre-service teachers suggested doing some activities like writing or completing a story, 5 pre-service offered to question different/multiple viewpoints. On the other hand, 5 of them suggested relating the questioning with the real-life, other 4 pre-service teachers suggested encouraging the students' skill of asking a question. Moreover, for 4 pre-service teachers, to plan the method according to different learning areas, and for other pre-service teachers, to create a democratic class environment, according to 2 pre-service teachers, to enable students reflect and to design activities to do this were considered as necessary suggestions. In addition to them, 3 pre-service teachers suggested that teachers should know the method and likewise other 3 pre-service teachers offered that teachers should be guide about this issue and direct students. Moreover, it was suggested to provide guessing activities (2), to use with note taking activity (1), to question about the aim of the author (1), to question what and how the author gives (1), to question the relation between the story and the visual (1), to make students examine 'why' and 'how' (1), to check the progress within the process (1), to support and enrich the method with other activities (1) and to give all students right to talk (1).

When these suggestion were examined in detail, it was detected that 1st pre-service teacher explained how he would plan the lesson as” *Within the context of storytelling to develop the critical reading skill, I would plan a lesson based on development of speaking skills...The reason why I would use speaking is that I would plan to gain a critical viewpoint through more discussions and self-expression. I would tell a story to children. By separating the class into groups, I would ask one group to ask questions about the positive aspects of the study while for other group negative aspects. Then, I would ask them to tell their questions. I would ask from other group to tell an alternative explanation or opposite verification or ask them to tell own ideas. Additionally, I would plan to gain students to realize there can be opinions different from ours, and the things that we know as accurate can be wrong for others. Apart from this, I would try to choose the stories that can raise attention and curiosity. Therefore, I would ask students to research or create new stories. I would also look for the stories and arrange the lesson accordingly.*”

#### 4. Results and Discussion

In line with the research questions of study; when the pre-service teachers' general opinions about the issue were examined, it was seen that the participants found the storytelling as positive to gain the critical reading skill. Additionally, it was observed that the participants pointed out the efficiency of the method particularly in terms of questioning, prediction, discussion, high-level thing skills and asking critical questions. These skills that the pre-service teachers mentioned are compatible with the skills defined within the context of the critical reading in literature. On this issue, Horning (2004) stated that the critical literacy contains analysing, synthesizing and evaluating skills while Ontario Ministry of Education explained that the critical reading has the potential of critical thinking (Hughes, 2007). Moreover, Browne and Keeley (2007) claimed that the critical reading is carried out with critical questions and according to Luke (2004), the critical literacy is based on reading by guessing, asking hard and harder questions; questioning the text, the meaning under the text and meaning beyond the text, how the powers of the texts are used on us and others and the text is for and against whom (cited in Critical Literacy Guide, 2009). In this context, it can be said that the pre-service teachers' opinions on the use of storytelling to develop the critical reading showed parallelism with literature.

When the second question of the study, it was realized that the pre-service teachers stated that the storytelling would develop the primary school students' skill of evaluating the events from different perspectives and gain them different thinking ways, contribute to develop the questioning and research skills, help them set the cause-effect relations considering the stories and gain the skill of establishing connections with the events in the real life. Furthermore, the pre-service teachers emphasized that the use of storytelling would contribute to gain the critical reading fast and easier, develop the students' empathy skills and develop the processes of evaluating the events objectively and deciding on the solutions for the problems in the real life. On the other hand, regarding the disadvantages of the method for the development of the critical reading, the pre-service teachers explained that using the same technique all the time could be boring, inefficient and inappropriate for all students and when it is

used alone it would be difficult to achieve the aim. In literature, it is highlighted that the critical literacy is the examination of multi-dimensional viewpoints (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004; cited in Gregory and Cahill, 2009) and in the recent studies, it is pinpointed that providing opportunities to take into account of different opinions supports the critical literacy (Athanasas, 1998; Fecho, 2001; cited in Pace, 2006). Furthermore, Simpson (1996) stated that teachers can present students opportunities to examine the text from different perspectives by creating the environment for text analysis (cited in Gregory and Cahill, 2009). In this context, it can be claimed that the contributions of the method that the pre-service teachers pointed out overlap with literature.

The findings on the suggestions about using the method effectively to develop the critical reading skill pointed out that the pre-service teachers suggested to use the method with group and class discussions, to select the stories raising attention and curiosity, to ask critical questions about the told/listened stories, to make reasoning on the texts, to make the students active in the process, to support the stories with different materials and activities like dram, to set the relations with the real life, to create a democratic class environment, to plan the activities according to different learning areas, to be a teacher who is competent about the issues and direct the students. In literature, one of the emphases regarding the development of the critical reading is that *the students' experience should be used as a text and integrated with the application of the literacy* (Stribling, 2008). In this sense, in the present study, the finding about the suggestion to set connection with the real life is compatible with literature. Moreover, in literature, it is emphasized that teachers can join in the discussions as a result of using critical questions with primary school or younger students (Meller, Richardson and Hatch, 2009) while Chafet et al (2007) stated that in their studies, younger children could learn set critical connection with reading aloud texts and answer the questions like “How is telling the story?”, “Tell me your opinion that this person wants us to think what? Or “In your opinion what is the character poor?” (cited in Meller, Richardson and Hatch, 2009). In the present study, the findings about the pre-service teachers' suggestions to ask critical questions about the told/listened stories and doing ‘reading aloud’ activities also overlap these arguments. Besides, the suggestions to use the method with group and class discussion show parallelism with Beck, (2005), Comber and Nixon, (1999), Singer and Shagoury, (2005)'s opinions about the significance of class discussion to gain the critical reading (cited in Pirtrandrea, 2008). Furthermore, the suggestion to question the stories to apply the method effectively is compatible with Bourke's (2008) findings on the importance of the questioning explained in the study that the texts of *Three Peevish Goats, Jack and Bean Body, Rapunzel* were used.

In line with the results of the study, it could be suggested that the pre-service teachers, who have basic knowledge about the storytelling but some prediction about the use of this method to develop the critical reading skill, should be informed about this issue through Turkish Teaching courses and training based on applications regarding this issue should be given to them during their pre-service education. Besides, as well as quantitative studies, experimental studies should be designed with the teachers to evaluate the process.

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