

Negotiating Meaning in Higher Education Classrooms: Dialogic Communication and the Construction of Critical Literacy

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how dialogic communication operates in reading classrooms and how it facilitates the negotiation of meaning and the development of students' critical literacy. The research employs a qualitative-dominant design integrating classroom observation and questionnaire data collected from undergraduate students in a reading course. Interactional data were analyzed using coding categories of dialogic moves, meaning negotiation strategies, and critical literacy indicators, while questionnaire responses were examined descriptively to identify participation patterns and perceptions of classroom communication. The findings reveal that dialogic interaction creates a communicative environment that enables collaborative meaning construction and supports students' evaluative engagement with texts. These results highlight the role of classroom communication as a pedagogical mechanism that bridges textual understanding and critical interpretation. The study is limited to a single instructional context, suggesting the need for broader and longitudinal investigations to examine the sustainability of dialogic practices across disciplines. Practically, the findings offer insights for educators to design interaction-rich learning environments that foster reflective and participatory learning. The study contributes to the field by empirically demonstrating the interconnected relationship between dialogic communication, meaning negotiation, and critical literacy within an applied communication framework, providing a nuanced understanding of classroom discourse as a site of knowledge construction.

Keywords: dialogic communication; classroom interaction; negotiation of meaning; critical literacy; reading.

INTRODUCTION

Communication constitutes a central dimension of teaching and learning in contemporary higher education, where knowledge is widely understood as socially constructed through interaction rather than transmitted unidirectionally (Mahdi, 2023; Winters, 2025). In language classrooms, communication functions not merely as a channel for content delivery but as a dynamic process through which learners interpret texts, negotiate meanings, and position themselves critically in relation to ideas (Ali et al., 2022; Caselli et al., 2022). Recent applied communication research emphasizes examining classroom discourse as a site of epistemic construction, highlighting how

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interactional practices shape the development of understanding (Moser & Zimmermann, 2025a; Riordan, 2025).

Although this study engages with contemporary scholarship, it remains grounded in major theoretical traditions. Bakhtin (1982) concept of dialogism continues to inform current analyses of classroom interaction, particularly the view that meaning emerges through the interplay of multiple voices. Recent dialogic pedagogy research builds explicitly on Bakhtinian principles, demonstrating how dialogic teaching enhances reasoning, participation, and interpretive depth in higher education contexts (Alexander, 2020; Moser & Zimmermann, 2025a). These studies reaffirm Bakhtin's enduring relevance by empirically validating his claim that understanding is inherently relational and co-constructed.

Similarly, Vygotsky (1978) sociocultural theory remains foundational to contemporary investigations of classroom communication. Current research on collaborative learning and mediation in second and foreign language contexts draws directly from Vygotskian constructs such as mediation, internalization, and the Zone of Proximal Development (Poehner & Leontjev, 2023; Scotland, 2022). Empirical studies in EFL higher education settings demonstrate that dialogic interaction facilitates cognitive development and interpretive growth through scaffolded negotiation of meaning (Ali et al., 2022; Poehner & Leontjev, 2023). These findings reinforce Vygotsky's argument that higher-order thinking develops through socially mediated language practices.

Alongside dialogic and sociocultural perspectives, critical literacy has gained renewed attention in the past five years. Contemporary scholarship conceptualizes critical literacy as the capacity to interrogate ideological positioning, examine power relations, and connect textual interpretation to broader sociopolitical contexts (Ibrahim, 2022; Luke, 2025). While recent frameworks expand methodological approaches, they remain deeply indebted to Freire (1970) conception of reading as a transformative and emancipatory act. Current higher education studies continue to defend Freirean pedagogy by demonstrating that dialogic, problem-posing discussions promote students' critical consciousness and reflexive engagement with texts (Giroux, 2020; Williams, 2022). Thus, Freire's theoretical contribution persists as a normative and analytical foundation for understanding literacy as both cognitive and political practice.

Despite these advances, recent literature reveals ongoing fragmentation. Studies of classroom discourse frequently focus on interactional patterns, teacher questioning strategies, and participation structures (Abidah & Hamzah, 2024; Tong et al., 2024), often without explicitly connecting these processes to the development of critical literacy. Conversely, contemporary research on critical literacy tends to foreground curricular design or ideological analysis while giving limited attention to the micro-level communicative mechanisms through which critical perspectives are negotiated moment-by-moment in classroom talk (Williams, 2022; Zhang, 2023). In EFL higher education contexts, empirical studies integrating dialogic discourse analysis with critical literacy development remain relatively limited (Ali et al., 2022; Gönen & Kizilay, 2022).

Accordingly, a significant research gap persists in understanding how dialogic communication practices function as mediational mechanisms linking interactional processes with the construction of critical literacy. Recent scholarship confirms the importance of dialogue, sociocultural mediation, and critical engagement; however, detailed discourse-level analyses explaining how communicative moves facilitate the emergence of critical perspectives are still insufficient. Addressing this gap will contribute to applied communication research by clarifying how dialogic interaction operationalizes Bakhtinian, Vygotskian, and Freirean principles in contemporary higher education reading classrooms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Building upon the foundational perspectives of Bakhtin's dialogism, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, and Freire's critical pedagogy, this section develops an integrated theoretical framework for examining classroom communication as an applied communicative phenomenon in higher

education reading classrooms. Rather than treating these theories as isolated traditions, this review synthesizes them to explain how dialogic interaction functions as a mediational mechanism through which critical literacy is constructed in practice.

Dialogism as an Applied Framework for Classroom Communication

Bakhtin's (1982) theory of dialogism conceptualizes meaning as inherently relational, emerging from the interaction of multiple voices situated within social and historical contexts. Recent scholarship has moved beyond theoretical exposition to empirically operationalize dialogism in classroom settings. For example, Thomas et al. (2025) and Vasalampi et al. (2021) demonstrate how structured dialogic teaching practices such as cumulative talk, exploratory questioning, and dialogic feedback enhance epistemic engagement and collaborative reasoning. These studies show that dialogism is not merely philosophical but can be translated into observable communicative indicators: uptake of student contributions, authentic questioning, and dialogic reciprocity.

However, empirical research also reveals tensions in implementation. Moser & Zimmermann (2025) found that dialogic intentions do not automatically produce dialogic outcomes; classroom power dynamics and institutional constraints often limit genuine co-construction of meaning. Similarly, Bouton et al. (2024) highlight that teacher awareness of interactional choices is critical in sustaining dialogic space. These findings suggest that dialogism must be examined at the micro-interactional level to understand how specific communicative moves either expand or constrain students' interpretive agency.

From an applied communication perspective, dialogism becomes analytically significant when operationalized as discourse strategies turn-taking patterns, uptake sequences, scaffolding moves, and evaluative positioning that can be systematically examined. Thus, dialogic theory supports this study by offering a lens for identifying how communicative practices enable or restrict collaborative meaning-making in real classroom contexts.

Sociocultural Mediation and Negotiation of Meaning

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory provides a complementary explanatory framework by positioning language as a mediational tool for cognitive development. Contemporary research in second and foreign language education continues to refine this framework, particularly through the concepts of mediation, scaffolding, and the Zone of Proximal Development (Ertugruloglu et al., 2023; Mahan, 2022). These studies emphasize that learning emerges through socially situated interaction rather than through individual cognitive processing alone.

Recent empirical work in EFL higher education demonstrates that negotiation of meaning during peer and teacher-student dialogue facilitates interpretive depth and conceptual development (Ali et al., 2022; Indriyani et al., 2021). However, while these studies confirm the importance of interaction, many focus primarily on linguistic development (e.g., accuracy, fluency) rather than on epistemic or critical outcomes. This creates a theoretical gap between sociocultural accounts of mediation and the development of critical literacy.

Critically synthesizing this literature suggests that negotiation of meaning should be reconceptualized not only as a mechanism for language acquisition but also as a process of epistemic positioning. When students question textual assumptions, challenge interpretations, or justify claims, they engage in mediated cognitive activity that extends beyond comprehension toward critical reasoning. In applied communication terms, this implies that micro-level discourse analysis can reveal how scaffolding sequences support higher-order interpretive moves. Therefore, sociocultural theory strengthens the present study by explaining how dialogic communication mediates cognitive and critical development through observable interactional processes.

Critical Literacy and Dialogic Engagement

Freire's (1970) conception of reading as a transformative and emancipatory act remains central to

contemporary critical literacy scholarship. Recent research continues to affirm that literacy involves interrogating power relations, ideological positioning, and sociocultural assumptions embedded in texts (Bozbiyik et al., 2026). Misson (2022) further argues that critical literacy must be enacted through participatory dialogue that allows learners to connect textual analysis with lived realities.

Nevertheless, a critical examination of recent studies reveals that many investigations of critical literacy focus on curricular design, thematic content, or ideological analysis of texts, with less attention to the communicative mechanisms that enable critical engagement. This creates a methodological divide: while Freirean pedagogy emphasizes dialogue as praxis, empirical studies sometimes treat critical literacy as an outcome detached from interactional processes.

Integrating Freirean theory with dialogic and sociocultural perspectives helps bridge this divide. If critical literacy is understood as dialogically negotiated rather than individually possessed, then classroom communication becomes the primary site of its construction. In applied contexts, this means examining how teachers prompt critical questioning, how students appropriate or resist discursive positions, and how interactional sequences support the articulation of alternative perspectives.

Thus, Freire's theory contributes not only normative justification but also analytical direction: it foregrounds the importance of examining whose voices are legitimized, how authority is negotiated, and how critical consciousness emerges through communicative practice.

Toward an Integrated Theoretical Framework

Synthesizing these traditions yields a coherent framework for analyzing classroom communication as an applied phenomenon:

- Bakhtinian Dialogism explains the relational and multi-voiced nature of meaning construction.
- Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory explains how interaction mediates cognitive and interpretive development.
- Freirean Critical Pedagogy explains the transformative and ideological dimensions of literacy practices.

When integrated, these perspectives position classroom discourse as:

- A dialogic space where multiple voices interact (Bakhtin, 1982);
- A mediational process through which understanding develops (Vygotsky, 1978);
- A critical arena where power, ideology, and perspective are negotiated (Freire, 1970).

For applied communication research, this framework directs attention to specific communicative phenomena:

- Teacher questioning strategies that open or close dialogic space;
- Uptake and revoicing practices that scaffold interpretive reasoning;
- Student positioning moves that signal critical engagement;
- Negotiation sequences where ideological assumptions are challenged or reframed.

Rather than viewing communication as a neutral channel, this synthesis conceptualizes it as the mechanism linking dialogic interaction with the emergence of critical literacy. Importantly, this framework supports micro-level discourse analysis while remaining grounded in broader sociocultural and critical traditions.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative interpretivist paradigm, grounded in the assumption that knowledge is socially constructed through interaction. Consistent with Bakhtinian dialogism, Vygotskian sociocultural theory, and Freirean critical pedagogy, classroom communication was conceptualized as a mediational process through which meaning and critical perspectives emerge. A qualitative case study design with a discourse-analytic orientation was employed to examine how dialogic communication practices facilitated negotiation of meaning and the construction of critical literacy in a higher education EFL reading classroom.

The study was conducted in one undergraduate EFL reading class consisting of 40 students and one instructor at a public university. Data were collected over one academic semester through classroom observations and video recordings of ten 90-minute sessions. Field notes were taken to document instructional activities, participation patterns, and contextual factors. Instructional materials, including reading texts and discussion prompts, were also collected to contextualize interactional data. All recorded classroom interactions were transcribed verbatim, capturing turn-taking, pauses, overlaps, and salient non-verbal actions relevant to meaning negotiation.

Data were analyzed using theory-informed discourse analysis. First, dialogic episodes were identified based on indicators such as authentic questioning, uptake, extended student turns, and multi-voiced exchanges. Second, interactional sequences were coded to identify negotiation-of-meaning moves (e.g., clarification requests, interpretive reformulations, disagreement) and emerging critical literacy indicators (e.g., questioning assumptions, ideological positioning, perspective shifts). Finally, selected episodes were examined sequentially to trace how communicative moves and scaffolding practices contributed to the co-construction of critical interpretations. This analytical procedure ensured alignment between the theoretical framework and observable communicative practices while maintaining transparency for replication in similar EFL higher education contexts.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents research findings based on analysis of questionnaire data and observations of interactions in a Reading classroom in higher education. The findings are organized to demonstrate how dialogic communication operates, how meaning is negotiated, and how this process contributes to students' critical literacy development.

Table 1: Students' Perceptions of Dialogic Communication

Item	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
Discussions provide opportunities to express opinions	30	70
Lecturers respond openly to students' ideas	0	100
Lecturers ask thought-provoking questions	0	100
Classroom communication is open and dialogic	5	95

As shown in Table 1, students perceived the classroom as highly dialogic. All respondents reported that lecturers consistently encouraged deeper thinking and responded openly to students' contributions. Questionnaire data indicate that all respondents (100%) stated that lecturers consistently ask questions that encourage in-depth thinking and respond openly to students' ideas. Furthermore, 70% of students strongly agreed that discussions provided them with opportunities to express their opinions, while the remainder agreed, indicating a high level of inclusive participation. Observation data reinforces these findings with high frequencies of opening questions, uptake, and prompting elaboration, indicating that lecturers actively facilitate ongoing dialogue. The practice of revoicing also emerged as a strategy to clarify and expand students' contributions. These findings confirm that classroom communication operates within a dialogic framework, where interactions do not stop at the exchange of information but evolve into the collective exploration of ideas.

Table 2: Students' Perceptions of Meaning Negotiation

Item	Positive Responses (%)
Discussions clarify text meaning	100
Discussions allow multiple interpretations	95
Discussions help revise initial understanding	100
Students learn from peers' explanations	100

Table 2 indicates that meaning negotiation was perceived as a central component of classroom interaction. All respondents (100%) stated that discussions helped clarify their understanding of the text, while 95% of students reported that discussions opened up opportunities for multiple interpretations. Furthermore, all students stated that they had adjusted or revised their initial understanding after class discussions. Observational data revealed the emergence of clarification requests, confirmation checks, and reformulation as primary mechanisms in the process of negotiating meaning. Moments of negotiated agreement also indicated that understanding was often achieved through discursive consensus. Overall, these findings suggest that text understanding is shaped through a social process of collective clarification, validation, and interpretation adjustment.

Table 3: Students' Perceptions of Critical Literacy Development

Item	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
Discussions encourage questioning assumptions	42	58
Discussions improve argument evaluation	30	70
Discussions connect texts to social contexts	5	95

As illustrated in Table 3, classroom discussions contributed to students' critical literacy development. Fifty-eight percent of respondents stated that discussions led them to question assumptions in the text more frequently, while 70% reported that they became more accustomed to evaluating arguments. Furthermore, 95% of students stated that discussions helped them connect the text to the broader social context. Observational findings also demonstrated the emergence of critical literacy indicators such as questioning assumptions, expressing alternative perspectives, and evaluative stances. This indicates that students not only understand the text literally but also engage in a reflective interpretation process. Thus, dialogic communication functions as a pedagogical mechanism that supports students' epistemic engagement in reading learning.

Discussion

This section discusses the research findings by linking them to the theoretical frameworks of dialogic communication, meaning negotiation, and critical literacy, as well as to recent empirical research in higher education. Overall, the results of this study indicate that dialogic communication serves as a primary pedagogical mechanism that mediates meaning negotiation and the development of students' critical literacy in reading classes.

Dialogic Communication as an Interactional Pedagogical Framework

The finding that practices such as opening questions, uptake, and prompting elaboration dominate classroom interactions reinforces the view that dialogue-based learning not only enhances participation but also the quality of students' cognitive engagement. Recent studies have shown that dialogic communication enables epistemic engagement, where students act as active contributors to knowledge construction (Hongyan et al., 2026; Rojas-Drummond et al., 2025). Furthermore, these findings align with research confirming that open-ended questioning and following up on student responses serve as interactional scaffolding that supports in-depth exploration of ideas (Dominguez & Svihla, 2023; Wang et al., 2024). In higher education, this

practice is also associated with a greater sense of ownership of the learning process, as students feel their voices are recognized in discussions (Geurts et al., 2024).

Thus, the findings of this study strengthen the argument that dialogic communication is not simply a teaching technique but an interactional framework that shapes the epistemic dynamics of the classroom.

Negotiation of Meaning as a Socially Mediated Process

The results of this study, which show a high frequency of clarification requests, reformulations, and confirmation checks, support a sociocultural perspective that views understanding as a result of social interaction. Recent research confirms that negotiating meaning in classroom discussions helps students refine interpretations and integrate multiple perspectives (Brunner, 2021; Canals, 2021).

Furthermore, studies on reading instruction in higher education indicate that dialogue-based discussions increase interpretive flexibility, namely, students' ability to view texts from diverse perspectives (Cui & Teo, 2023; Wilkinson et al., 2015). The findings of this study strengthen this literature by demonstrating that negotiation of meaning occurs not only in response to difficulties in understanding but as a routine practice in the construction of shared knowledge. In other words, classroom interactions function as discursive spaces where meaning is not transmitted, but rather negotiated collaboratively.

Dialogic Interaction and the Development of Critical Literacy

The finding that students more frequently questioned textual assumptions, evaluated arguments, and connected texts to their social contexts suggests a strong link between dialogic communication and the development of critical literacy. This aligns with research showing that dialogue-based discussions encourage students to adopt reflective and evaluative interpretive positions (Janks, 2019; Luke, 2012).

Recent research also indicates that a dialogic classroom environment supports the development of a critical stance, namely, students' ability to evaluate texts ideologically and contextually (Cui & Teo, 2021; Tao et al., 2025). In this context, dialogic interaction serves as a bridge between textual understanding and critical awareness of broader social issues.

The findings of this study extend this literature by demonstrating that the development of critical literacy is influenced not only by task design but also by the quality of communication during the learning process.

Integrating Dialogue, Meaning Negotiation, and Critical Literacy

Conceptually, the findings of this study support an integrative model that places dialogic communication as the foundation of the learning process. An open communication environment enables students' epistemic participation; this participation facilitates meaning negotiation, which, in turn, contributes to the development of critical literacy.

This model aligns with contemporary research that emphasizes learning as a discursive process involving interaction, reflection, and the co-construction of meaning (Resnick et al., 2019; Sedova et al., 2022; Alexander, 2023). Thus, this study provides additional empirical evidence that the quality of classroom communication is a key factor in shaping meaningful learning experiences in higher education.

Contribution to Applied Communication

In the field of applied communication, this study's findings confirm that classroom communication practices have direct implications for students' cognitive and critical thinking processes. This study demonstrates that dialogic communication can be understood as a professional practice in an educational context, in which interaction strategies facilitate meaning-making and critical

reflection.

Thus, this study contributes to the literature by offering empirical evidence that dialogic communication is not only a pedagogical approach but also a communication phenomenon that shapes the dynamics of knowledge in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that dialogic communication serves as a primary mechanism in facilitating the negotiation of meaning and the development of critical literacy in students in higher education reading classes. Through open and responsive interactions, students not only gain a deeper understanding of texts but also develop the ability to critically evaluate and reflect on meaning. Thus, the study's goal of explaining the role of classroom communication in the construction of meaning and critical literacy has been achieved.

Theoretically, this study reinforces the perspective that learning is a discursive process mediated by interaction, while also extending the literature on dialogic communication by demonstrating its empirical link to students' epistemic engagement. In practice, these findings underscore the importance of using dialogic communication strategies such as open-ended questions and follow-up on student responses as a pedagogical framework for fostering reflective and participatory learning.

The limitations of this study lie in its limited context within a single classroom and the use of instruments that do not capture long-term developmental dynamics. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve more diverse contexts and employ longitudinal or mixed-method designs to more comprehensively understand the impact of dialogic communication.

Overall, this study confirms that the quality of classroom communication is a key factor in fostering meaningful, critical literacy-oriented reading and learning in higher education.

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