

## **Critical Content Analysis as Methodology: Application in English as a Foreign Language Education**

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### **Abstract**

Despite the growing uptake of Critical Content Analysis (CCA) in EFL education research, its methodological enactment remains insufficiently explicated. Many studies invoke CCA as an analytic framework yet offer limited transparency regarding the recursive, non-linear processes through which critical interpretations are developed. Addressing this methodological gap, this article clarifies the theoretical underpinnings and analytic procedures of CCA and proposes accessible yet theoretically flexible guidelines for conducting rigorous analysis in EFL research. The paper delineates the key phases of CCA and illustrates their implementation through examples drawn from EFL education. To render the analytic process visible, we reexamine two published EFL studies and unpack the recursive and iterative moves that shaped their analyses—processes that are rarely documented in CCA-based scholarship. The first exemplar demonstrates how recursive engagement with data and theory prompted the integration of additional theoretical perspectives following initial thematic patterns, leading to a re-interpretation of findings. The second study illustrates the iterative nature of thematic development, detailing how multiple cycles of categorization were negotiated before analytically robust patterns emerged. By foregrounding the methodological logic and recursive analytic practices of CCA in EFL contexts, this article contributes to greater procedural transparency and offers practical guidance for researchers committed to advocating more equitable and socially just English language education.

### **Keywords**

Critical content analysis, methodology, education, English as a foreign language

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## 1 Introduction

Critical Content Analysis (CCA) has recently gained recognition as a qualitative research methodology in educational research, particularly among scholars seeking to examine how texts reinforce or challenge existing power structures. Building on the tradition of content analysis—historically employed to examine what texts are about—CCA extends this approach by interrogating textual content through explicit theoretical lenses (Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002).

Whereas traditional content analysis has been largely quantitative, emphasizing the counting of words or images to identify patterns (DeJulio et al., 2021; Guba & Lincoln, 1994), qualitative approaches have increasingly prioritized interpretive depth (White & Marsh, 2006). Such approaches reflect a theoretical orientation that emphasizes “the development of research criteria for text analysis based on an understanding of texts and readings of these texts in the social, cultural, and political contexts in which they are considered” (Beach et al., 2009, p. 130). Among a range of qualitative methodologies—including discourse analysis, rhetorical analysis, social constructivist analysis, and textual analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Roger, 2004),—CCA is distinctive in its emphasis on close, contextualized readings of texts through frameworks that interrogate power relations, dominant ideologies, and systemic inequities. Informed by hermeneutic and reader-response theories (Rosenblatt, 1983; Stephens, 2015), CCA rejects the notion of fixed textual meanings but instead recognizes that meanings are co-constructed through readers’ lived experiences, values, and cultural backgrounds (Bradford, 2017; Dewitz et al., 2019; Galda et al., 2000; Woodruff & Griffin, 2017).

Despite its growing prominence, many studies employing CCA have focused primarily on thematic findings while providing only limited discussion of their analytic procedures. This lack of procedural transparency has made it difficult for researchers to distinguish CCA from other qualitative approaches or to apply it with methodological rigor. This gap is particularly visible in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) research, where qualitative methodologies remain underutilized and CCA has yet to gain meaningful traction as a recognized analytic framework. In response, this paper addresses a methodological gap by clarifying what CCA entails, how it operates in practice, and what distinguishes it from related analytical frameworks.

With this in mind, it proposes a five-phase procedural framework for conducting CCA, identifies common methodological challenges, and illustrates the analytic process through examples drawn from published research. The recursive and non-linear nature of CCA is further demonstrated through two published studies in Korean EFL education, which exemplify the five phases in action and highlight the iterative theoretical engagement required for rigorous critical analysis.

## 2 Foundations of Critical Content Analysis

The methodological development of CCA emerged from scholars and educators who were committed to examining how texts reflect, reproduce, and contest ideologies and social inequalities (Beach et al., 2009; Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Short, 2025). Despite the theoretical grounding, the field lacked a systematic methodology capable of operationalizing these commitments in rigorous examination of texts – a gap made visible when literacy researchers working at the intersection of children’s literature and critical education found that the methodological procedures underpinning their analyses remained insufficiently articulated. CCA was developed in response to this gap, shaped through vigorous dialogue among literary critics and educators such as Clare Bradford, Rudine Sims Bishop, Vivian Yenika-Agbaw, and Maria Botelho (Bishop, 1990, 2012; Botelho et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2017, 2019; Short, 2025; Yenika-Agbaw, 2014).

Rooted in these critical theoretical traditions and influenced by postcolonialism, critical race theory, and critical multicultural analysis (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Short, 2025), CCA is developed as a

methodology in which theoretical engagement is constitutive of the research process itself, rather than applied as post-hoc framework to interpret findings<sup>1</sup>. This theoretical embeddedness manifests concretely in the questions researchers are prompted to ask: whose perspectives are represented and whose voices are prioritized; what assumptions about age, gender, class, and culture are embedded in the content; who is misrepresented or underrepresented; and ultimately who is silenced or heard. Guided by these questions, researchers deconstruct dominant ideologies that perpetuate social inequalities, creating space to challenge binary thinking, interrogate privilege, and critique power structures that favor certain groups over others (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Sims, 1982; Tso, 2024; Uysal, 2024).

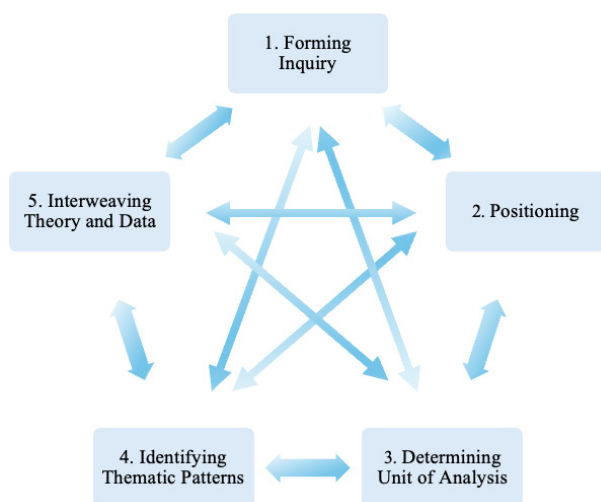
Despite this theoretical richness, the methodological procedures through which CCA is enacted in practice have not always been made explicit. While this approach has since become a dominant trend across educational research in children's literature and been taken up across various domains in educational research, it remains relatively unfamiliar in EFL contexts – and has received little to no attention in Korean EFL scholarship in particular.

### 3 Process of Critical Content Analysis

The process of Critical Content Analysis (CCA) comprises five interconnected phases: (1) Forming Inquiry, (2) Positioning, (3) Determining the Unit of Analysis, (4) Identifying Thematic Patterns, and (5) Interweaving Theory and Data. Figure 1, adapted from Johnson et al.'s (2017) description of the CCA process, illustrates how these phases are interconnected in a recursive, non-linear manner. This flexibility constitutes a defining strength of the methodology.

Figure 1

#### *Process of Critical Content Analysis*



A notable feature of the CCA process depicted in Figure 1 is the bidirectional arrows connecting all five phases, which signal the possibility of revisiting earlier phases at any point during the analysis. This design allows researchers to refine or elaborate prior interpretations as new insights emerge (Johnson et al., 2017, 2019). Such iteration reflects the dynamic nature of CCA, in which researchers continuously juxtapose new data with existing codes, refine conceptual categories, and organize findings into coherent thematic structures. Throughout this process, researchers repeatedly return to both the data and relevant theoretical frameworks—either to substantiate initial interpretations or to extend them—thereby ensuring analytic rigor and depth. The following sections describe each of these five phases in detail.

### 3.1 Forming inquiry

The first phase of this methodology, Forming Inquiry, consists of three interrelated practices: (1) identifying tension, (2) selecting texts, and (3) immersing oneself as a reader. This phase begins with the identification of a tension, defined as “a compelling interest in exploring texts around a focus that matters to the researcher” (Short, 2019, p. 10). Such tensions function as the catalyst for formulating the guiding questions that drive the research process. In educational research, tensions frequently emerge through engagement with teaching practice, interactions with students, examinations of instructional materials such as textbooks and literature, and critical attention to contemporary events and media representations that shape students’ lived experiences. Brooks (2017), for instance, reflects on her experience as a middle school teacher using Mildred Taylor’s novels with White suburban seventh graders already familiar with dominant accounts of African American history and culture. The tension she identified – how to introduce a less familiar historical narrative in ways that meaningfully engaged her students – became the foundation for her research questions.

Text selection constitutes the second component of this phase. Researchers may select a single text that exemplifies the identified tension and subject it to close analysis, or they may assemble a broader corpus of texts relevant to the tension and make analytic selections from within that set. This flexibility allows for either intensive analysis of a small number of carefully chosen texts or the examination of patterns across a larger dataset. While Brooks (2017) conducted an in-depth analysis of a single literary text, Sung and Son (2020) analyzed 32 nonfiction picturebooks about Korea published between 1978 and 2018. As teacher educators in the United States who spent their formative years in South Korea, Sung and Son (2020) observed that biased or incomplete representations of Korea were frequently circulated in U.S. educational contexts. Recognizing the need for high-quality resources that presented more accurate and balanced portrayals, they selected nonfiction picturebooks as the focus of their analysis.

Following text selection, researchers engage in immersion as readers. At this stage, texts are approached initially from the position of a reader rather than an analyst. The purpose of this initial reading is not to conduct formal analysis but to engage holistically with the text. As Johnson et al. (2019) explains, researchers should “read each text at least twice, once completely through to engage with the story and then [write] a reflection to capture [their] initial response” (p. 12). This practice aligns with Rosenblatt’s (1938) aesthetic stance, which emphasizes immersion in the lived experience of the text. Only subsequently do researchers adopt an efferent stance, in which attention shifts toward observation, information gathering, and analytic interpretation (Johnson et al., 2019; Rosenblatt, 1983).

### 3.2 Positioning

Positioning, the second phase of Critical Content Analysis (CCA), encompasses three interrelated considerations: (1) framing the study through sustained engagement with relevant critical theories, (2) articulating researchers’ positionality, and (3) situating the data within the broader social contexts in which they are embedded.

First, framing the study through a critical theoretical stance is foundational to CCA. The *critical* dimension of this methodology refers to deep engagement with theoretical frameworks that guide researchers to interrogate ideology, normativity, and the construction of *truth* in texts (Huber, Gonzalez, & Solórzano, 2020). Depending on the research purpose and the nature of the dataset, researchers may draw on a single critical theory or integrate multiple theoretical perspectives that collectively inform the analytic lens.

Given the breadth and conceptual density of critical theories, researchers are encouraged to identify three to five theoretical tenets most salient to their research focus (Johnson et al., 2019). These tenets function not as fixed coding categories but as interpretive lenses that guide ongoing engagement with the data. This selective theoretical focus also enables researchers to refine their research purposes and

questions. For example, drawing from the expansive framework of Critical Race Theory, Utt and Short (2018) foregrounded two specific tenets—racial consciousness within dominant race-neutral discourse and dysconsciousness of modern racism—to examine police training manuals in the southwestern United States.

Second, CCA requires researchers to explicitly articulate their positionality within the research process. This entails critical reflection on how researchers' identities, lived experiences, and ideological commitments shape analytic decisions and interpretations. Thomas and Dyches (2019), for instance, identified themselves as White female educators committed to anti-racist education in their analysis of twenty children's books and accompanying lesson plans from the Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention program. They acknowledged that their positionality influenced what they noticed in the texts and what may have remained less visible.

Finally, CCA necessitates situating data within their broader sociohistorical and cultural contexts, a process that is central to "uncovering hidden ideologies" (Short, 2019, p. 14) embedded within representations. Huber et al.'s (2020) analysis of *The Two White Rabbits* by Jairo Buitrago illustrates this contextual approach. The picturebook follows a young girl and her father on an unspecified journey; although the terms migrant or immigrant are never explicitly used, visual cues—including crossing a river near a Frontera sign, riding a rusted freight train, depictions of arrests, and the presence of a border fence—suggest that the characters are Central American or Mexican migrants. By situating these visual and narrative elements within broader sociohistorical contexts of migration, Huber et al. (2020) revealed how the text represents the precarious journey of impoverished Latinx migrants to the United States.

### 3.3 Determining unit of analysis

The third phase of the Critical Content Analysis (CCA) process involves determining the unit of analysis. Prior to making this decision, researchers conduct an initial close reading of written texts and/or visual images that foregrounds issues of power orienting them toward more a focused analysis. When attending to power from a broader analytic perspective, three key dimensions should be considered (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Johnson et al., 2017, 2019): focalization – whose story is being told, who sees what, and from whose perspectives the narrative is presented; the social process of characters – who holds power within the story and who possesses agency; and closure – how the story concludes, how issues are resolved, and what assumptions are embedded in the resolution.

With these dimensions in mind, researchers determine the unit of analysis, defined as "smaller chunks of meaning" (Short, 2017, p. 16) within the dataset. In some studies, the entire text—such as a whole book—constitutes the unit of analysis. In others, researchers select specific segments of written texts or particular visual images for closer examination. Identifying the unit of analysis may involve identifying written and/or visual elements that represent a critical incident or narrative turning point relevant to the research focus. For example, Hoffman (2019) purposefully selected three key illustrations from the picturebook *Antelope Woman* for close analysis. To examine the symbolic and literary elements, as well as the sociocultural values conveyed in the text, Hoffman (2019) analyzed the interplay among characters' identities and attributes, their actions, and the physical environments in which they were situated.

### 3.4 Identifying thematic patterns

The fourth phase, Identifying Thematic Patterns, entails a rigorous examination of the dataset through the dynamic interplay between theoretical frameworks and texts to uncover emergent themes and patterns. Initial analysis involves extensive note-taking and progressive identification of salient issues, themes, or analytic categories. This process may draw on either conventional content analysis or directed

content analysis. Conventional content analysis follows an inductive strategy in which categories emerge directly from the data without predetermined codes. As an inductive approach, analysis begins with open coding, whereby raw data are segmented into discrete units and assigned initial codes. Through constant comparison, these codes are refined and clustered into patterns. Directed content analysis, by contrast, adopts a deductive strategy that begins with existing theories or conceptual frameworks to guide the initial coding process. In this approach, predetermined codes or categories derived from prior research or theory structure the analysis, while still allowing for the identification of new codes as warranted by the data (Assarroudi et al., 2018; Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Researchers continuously compare new data with existing codes or themes to refine categories, organize data into analytically meaningful groupings, and document emerging thematic patterns. Identifying major themes or categories often necessitates further theoretical engagement, either by deepening analysis within the existing theoretical framework or by incorporating additional theoretical perspectives. As themes emerge, researchers repeatedly revisit both the data and relevant theory to ensure analytic rigor. This recursive process supports a nuanced interpretation, with themes and categories substantiated through representative textual and visual evidence (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Lee (2020), for instance, analyzed all visual images in the picturebook *Where on Earth Is My Bagel?*, documenting how Korea and the U.S. were visually represented in terms of cultural features, physical environments, and the juxtaposition of the two countries' backdrops. Through multiple iterative readings, theoretical memos were generated to capture emerging themes, tensions, and questions in relation to Orientalism.

### 3.5 Interweaving theory and data

The final phase of this methodology centers on the sustained integration of data and theory. Researchers are often critiqued for relegating theory to the framing and discussion stages rather than weaving it throughout the analytic process (Johnson et al., 2017, 2019). In response to this concern, Jackson and Mazzei's (2012) notion of *plugging in* conceptualizes theory as an active analytic lens through which data are continually read, interpreted, and re-read across their social, relational, and ideological dimensions.

At this stage, researchers attend closely to power relations embedded in written and visual representations, drawing on critical theoretical frameworks to refine analytic categories. Earlier patterns and themes are extended through engagement with professional literature and theoretical perspectives informing both interpretation and meaning-making. A central analytic practice involves the writing of theoretical memos for each major theme or category. These memos function as analytic sites where textual and visual evidence is examined alongside theory, enabling researchers to interrogate how representations operate within broader systems of power.

This phase prioritizes the identification of dominant and marginalized perspectives and the examination of how texts reproduce or challenge systemic oppression (Freire, 1970; Johnson et al., 2017, 2019). Researchers engage with recurring critical questions concerning representation, omission, and assumption, including whose voices are amplified or silenced and how particular narratives are normalized. Through this recursive interweaving of data and theory, findings are developed as theoretically informed interpretations rather than descriptive thematic summaries. Satori's (2018) analysis of U.S. Peace Corps recruitment brochures, for instance, integrates Critical Whiteness Studies (Frankenberg, 1993) with Ontological Expansiveness (Tuck & Yang, 2021) to demonstrate how seemingly neutral visual imagery reproduces imperialist and racialized power relations.

As a methodological approach, CCA is inherently recursive and adaptable, with analytic procedures shaped by research purposes, textual forms, and theoretical commitments. While this flexibility constitutes a core strength, it also presents challenges. Strong theoretical positioning may heighten

interpretive influence; analytic rigor may depend heavily on researchers' theoretical expertise; and the time-intensive nature of recursive analysis may limit feasibility in large-scale studies (Johnson et al., 2019; Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002).

## 4 CCA in Practice: A Detailed Procedural Account from EFL Research

This section demonstrates the application of Critical Content Analysis (CCA) in EFL research by providing detailed procedural accounts that foreground the methodology's recursive and non-linear nature. Rather than offering comprehensive summaries of individual studies, we emphasize the analytical processes themselves, illustrating how researchers navigate methodological dilemmas, negotiate theoretical frameworks and tenets, and make iterative decisions throughout the analysis. While the preceding section delineates CCA's five phases as discrete steps for procedural clarity, this section illustrates how these phases function in practice—frequently overlapping, converging, and re-emerging across the research process.

To this end, we draw on two studies conducted by the authors: (1) *Exoticism of the Other: (Mis)representations of Culture in English Textbooks in Korea* (Lee, 2023), which uncovered ideologies and biases embedded in cultural representations in Korean English textbooks; and (2) *Cultivating Global Citizenship through Critical Literacy: A Case Study of Never Fall Down<sup>2</sup>* (Lee, 2021), which examined how pre-service EFL teachers developed intercultural understanding through engagement with global literature. Closely investigated in this section are how CCA's phrases are operated and how each phrase reveals methodological complexity and recursive decision-making inherent in CCA-based EFL research.

### 4.1 Critical content analysis of Korean English textbooks

This section demonstrates the application of Critical Content Analysis (CCA) in the examination of cultural representations within English textbooks, specifically through *Exoticism of the Other: (Mis)representations of Culture in English Textbooks in Korea*. Moving beyond a merely descriptive approach that categorizes cultural content and counts its frequency, this study employs CCA to critically interrogate how English textbooks construct and represent minority cultures, while simultaneously reinforcing dominant cultural ideologies and power structures.

#### 4.1.1 Identifying tension and forming inquiry

As a Korean female researcher with expertise in EFL curriculum and pedagogy, the researcher's tension arose from observing the pervasive presence of Western cultural norms in Korean English textbooks, alongside the limited critical examination of how minoritized cultures are represented. This tension had personal roots before it became a scholarly one. Encountering her father's English textbooks from the 1960 – in which Western cultural practices were so dominant that even everyday objects like forks were taught as cultural content despite having little relevance to Korean daily life – first attuned her to how textbooks construct cultural hierarchies. That sensitivity deepened into a sustained research concern as she observed similar patterns persisting in contemporary Korean EFL materials. At the same time, having been raised in a household deeply immersed in the English language and American culture, and having lived in the U.S. for over a decade, she recognized a distinct risk: the culture long familiar to her had already become naturalized, rendering their embedded cultural dynamics less visible and therefore hard to critique. This dual immersion positioned her simultaneously as an insider and an outsider within both Korean and American cultural contexts. Her time in a doctoral program in bilingual education, oriented toward critical examination of language, power, and multiple perspectives, further shaped her analytical stance, through which she encountered scholarship on Indigenous language revitalization, including

Meek's (2006) work, and developed collegial relationships with Native Americans that gradually deepened her awareness toward the questions of voice and representational politics.

This layered positionality — insider to Korean educational contexts yet deeply shaped by American culture — crystallized into a central research question: How do English textbooks position culturally dominant and non-dominant groups, and whose narratives are privileged or silenced? Focusing on issues of representation and power, the theoretical framework of Othering was selected to examine how the dominant group constructs itself as the normative Self while rendering non-dominant groups as inferior or exotic Others, which may reinforce cultural hierarchies and power imbalances (Jackson, 2014; Said, 1978; Tschida et al., 2014). Said's (1978) concept of Orientalism solidified the notion of Othering that is viewed not as a mere individual bias but as a systemic discursive practice (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Oni-Eseleh, 2021; Tyson, 2015). This division of the world into 'us' and 'them' reflects an imperial exercise of power and colonial control, operating through knowledge production that simplifies and fixes non-dominant cultures (Nayar, 2015; Pickering, 2001). In educational materials, this dichotomy of self and other can be particularly consequential, as textbooks function as authoritative sites where such representations are naturalized and transmitted to learners as unquestioned cultural truths.

#### 4.1.2 Text selection

Given that middle school education (grades 7-9) is compulsory in Korea, this study focused on middle school English textbooks due to their widespread influence. Four publishers were selected based on their adoption rates in a metropolitan city, resulting in a sample of twelve textbooks spanning the three-year curriculum. The unit of analysis included all textbook components—dialogues, illustrations, and main reading, recognizing that culture is intricately embedded within texts. The analysis specifically targeted representations of non-dominant cultures, defined as non-Western and non-Korean cultural groups. Both Western (Anglo-American) and Korean cultures were excluded from the unit of analysis – the former due to its ideological positioning as the 'owner' of the English language (Park, Jeon, & Lee, 2022; Yoo, 2014), and the latter as the majority culture in the national context under study.

#### 4.1.3 Thematic patterns and theoretical expansion

The process of categorizing and identifying themes proved far more complex than the simplified thematic presentations typically found in published studies. Thematic development required constant movement between data and theory – yet this movement was not always straightforward. While Othering provided an initial organizing framework, there were moments where the framework felt incomplete in that it could sufficiently name cultural differences, but could not fully explain the particular way in which the differences were being constructed.

The first phase of coding organized representations according to ethnic and national identities, capturing both tangible cultural items (e.g., cuisine, attire) and intangible practices (e.g., music, dance, language use) across visual and written texts. Within this stage, patterns began to emerge that, through repeated engagement with the data and the theoretical tenets of Othering, gradually became analytically legible. One such pattern centered on the visual representation of Indigenous peoples specifically: they were repeatedly depicted in traditional clothing—headdresses, ceremonial attire, moccasins—while non-Indigenous individuals appeared in contemporary clothing such as pants, shirts, and hats. These visual contrasts positioned Indigenous groups as fundamentally different from a presumed cultural norm, effectively relegating them to static, historical figures.

While Othering explained the visual dichotomies, it did not address the issue of narrative control. Indigenous peoples were consistently mediated through outsider perspectives, a pattern especially visible in scenes where a non-Indigenous individual photographed Indigenous peoples or where a White narrator

authoritatively described Native American epistemologies and cultural practices. The photographing scene in particular presented an interpretive challenge. The act of photographing across cultural difference is the one the researcher recognized from her own experience as a traveler — seemingly innocent, even celebratory. Yet the persistent question — not just *whose* story was being told, but *who* was authorized to tell it — gradually made visible what Othering alone could not fully articulate: the directionality of gazing, and the power embedded in *who* gets to observe, represent, and define *whom*. This recognition did not emerge as a sudden discovery but was instead grounded in a gradual theoretical clarification, informed by prior engagement with scholarship on Indigenous language revitalization and representational politics.

To address these limitations, the analysis drew on postcolonial and critical race scholarship, incorporating the concepts of White gaze and colonial gaze (hooks, 1992; Sions & Wolfgang, 2021; Sullivan, 2006). This expanded theoretical lens made visible how the textbook positioned readers to view Indigenous peoples as objects of curiosity and cultural consumption rather than as contemporary subjects with agency. Narrative authority remained concentrated in White, outsider perspectives, shaping not only what was represented but how readers were guided to interpret these representations.

#### 4.1.4 Integration of theory and data

Once *gaze* emerged as a necessary theoretical concept, the analysis entered an iterative phase of reading data through this lens while simultaneously refining the understanding of how gaze operates within the Othering framework. This phase involved writing theoretical memos that explicitly connected visual and textual representations to specific dimensions of gaze theory—particularly White gaze and colonial gaze as mechanisms of objectification and commodification.

The analytical process required constant movement between concrete textual instances and theoretical constructs. When examining visual representations, the researcher documented not only what was depicted but also the relational dynamics embedded in the representation: who was observing whom, whose perspective organized the visual frame, and how power manifested through this observational relationship. Written texts were analyzed for narrative voice and focalization, asking whose knowledge was being transmitted and whose voices were absent or mediated.

This integration of gaze as a theoretical tenet with data analysis exemplifies CCA's commitment to thinking with theory throughout the analytical process rather than applying theory as post-hoc framework. Theoretical concepts did not serve as predetermined codes but as interpretive lenses that evolved in dialogue with the data, revealing how textbook representations can possibly position readers to consume Indigenous cultures through dominant cultural frameworks. The researcher's theoretical memos became sites where data and theory mutually informed one another, generating insights neither could be produced independently.

## 4.2 Critical content analysis in EFL teacher education

The need for global citizenship education has recently gained attention in Korea as a means of fostering intercultural competence and global citizenship (Ministry of Education, 2022). However, English education in Korea continues to prioritize skill-based language proficiency, leaving this area underexplored (An, 2017; Sudarwati et al., 2023). Drawing on *Cultivating Global Citizenship through Critical Literacy: A Case Study of Never Fall Down* (Lee, 2021), this section explicates how CCA was employed to capture the development of intercultural understanding among pre-service EFL teachers. Whereas the first example demonstrated CCA applied to published textual data, this extends its application to student-generated data within a pedagogical setting, illustrating CCA's methodological adaptability across diverse forms of data.

#### 4.2.1 Positioning and designing the study

As a Korean female teacher-educator, the researcher approaches this study from a position shaped by both professional and lived experiences, with her practice of critical pedagogy and critical literacy. Grounded in Freire and Macedo's (1987) notion of reading the world and the world, critical literacy is understood here as a transformative process of engaging with diverse stories and lived experiences to develop critical awareness of how ones' own experiences are socio-historically constructed (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 2009). She designs her English language course with the belief that language classrooms are inherently political spaces — that linguistic growth and the development of critical consciousness are not separate pursuits but deeply intertwined. This is not merely theoretical but experiential: having lived in the United States for over a decade as an Asian, she has inhabited — not simply observed — a minority position. Yet lived experience alone does not automatically give rise to critical insight. It was through the combination of that embodied reality and sustained theoretical engagement with critical pedagogy, critical literacy, and scholarship on power and representation. This allowed her to develop the capacity to unveil structures of inequality, which often remain invisible to those who have only ever inhabited positions of privilege.

This experiential and theoretical formation created one of the central tensions of the research. The students in this study — mainstream Korean young adults who had grown up as members of Korea's dominant ethnic/cultural group — had not been required by their social positioning to notice such structures. The researcher's task was therefore not simply pedagogical but deeply reflexive: how do you create conditions for students to develop a critical lens without simply transmitting your own?

In order to explore this question in depth, revisiting the theoretical underpinning of developing critical consciousness was essential. Critical consciousness, as Freire (1970) insists, cannot be deposited into students — yet without pedagogical scaffolding, students with no prior exposure to critical perspectives may struggle to see inequality. Such recognition is only a starting point; critical consciousness moves beyond surface recognition of inequality toward an active, transformative engagement with the conditions that sustain it (Freire, 1970). Critical literacy, in this respect, serves as the pedagogical vehicle through which this consciousness is cultivated in language learning contexts — enabling learners to read not just the word but the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004; Wilson, 2014), and in doing so, to develop intercultural understanding as they encounter and engage critically with perspectives beyond their own (Byram, 2008; Freire, 1970). This tension that critical consciousness must emerge from within yet requires deliberate pedagogical conditions to take root shaped every curricular and analytical decision, positioning the researcher as neither a neutral observer nor a directive authority, but as a facilitator of critical engagement who sought to respect students' own meaning-making processes.

This tension was further intensified within the Korean educational context, carrying significant implications for how the study had to be designed and interpreted. As their professor operating within a Korean academic context where Confucian-influenced hierarchies shape classroom dynamics (Lee & Kim, 2017; Maftoon & Shakouri, 2012), the researcher recognized that students may be less likely to openly challenge or contradict their instructor's perspectives — raising a persistent interpretive concern: to what extent did students' responses reflect an embodied critical consciousness beyond cognitive recognition, and to what extent might they be aligning with their professor's expectations in order to attain high grades? This question may not be fully resolved, but it must be honestly articulated. It fundamentally shaped how the researcher approached the data and what she allowed herself to claim as evidence of intercultural understanding and critical literacy development.

#### 4.2.2 Data collection

In total, 37 freshmen majoring in English Education at a South Korean University participated in the study. All class activities and tasks undertaken by these students as part of their reading of *Never Fall*

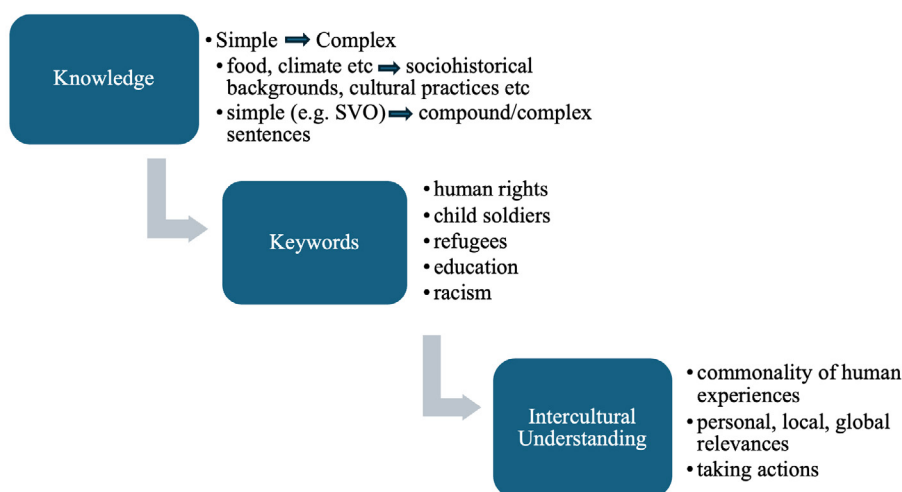
Down were designated as the unit of analysis. The data encompassed three stages<sup>3</sup>—pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading—allowing the researcher to trace the developmental trajectory of intercultural understanding across the reading experience. Pre-reading data captured students' prior knowledge and cultural assumptions; during-reading data traced their evolving interpretations and critical questions through in-class activities; post-reading data revealed how students connected textual themes to contemporary issues through project-based inquiry and reflective surveys.

#### 4.2.3 Iterative refinement of thematic patterns

As CCA conceptualizes analysis as a non-linear movement between data, theory, and interpretation, the researcher engaged in three successive rounds of categorization to trace how pre-service teachers' literary responses reflected the development of intercultural understanding. As illustrated in Figure 2, each analytical phase recalibrated the theoretical lens and cumulatively informed the themes presented in the finding section.

Figure 2

#### *Process of Identifying Thematic Patterns*



The first phase revealed patterns of knowledge acquisition, primarily centered on factual information and descriptive account of cultural practices. Student responses were initially categorized according to what they appeared to know about Cambodia before and after reading the literary texts. In addition to examining content, the analysis attended to linguistic form, noting shifts in English sentence structures from simplified to more elaborated expressions. While this phase captured the circulation of factual knowledge—such as references to geography, food, climate, and cultural practices—it remained largely descriptive in nature. From a CCA perspective, this approach prioritized surface-level aspects in representations and did not sufficiently interrogate how knowledge was framed, whose perspectives were centered, or how students positioned themselves in relation to cultural Others.

Keyword analysis, as a second phase, was employed as a heuristic strategy to identify discursive thematic patterns. Although this approach shed light into recurring topics and concerns in students' responses, it did not yet capture the developmental trajectories of intercultural understanding, indicating the need for a more explicitly defined theoretical tenets to guide the analysis. Expanding from the keyword analysis, the subsequent attempt recontextualized it within the theoretical tenets of intercultural understanding, tracing how students situated particular issues across personal, local, and global scales

of meaning. This return to the theory clarified the critical dimensions necessary for analysis within the CCA framework: the recognition of shared humanity across cultural differences, the articulation of personal positioning in relation to distant or marginalized experiences, and the interrogation of how local narratives are embedded within global structures of inequality. Critical literacy, as the pedagogical vehicle for developing critical consciousness, frames intercultural understanding not as cultural knowledge acquisition but as a transformative process through which learners move from recognition of difference toward critical interrogation of the power structures that produce it (Bryam, 2008; Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987). Revisiting the theory thus concretized the analytical tenets that had remained implicit in earlier iterations, providing a more precisely defined lens through which to examine what to look for and what mattered in the data. Guided by this refined analytical lens, the analysis attended to whether students acknowledged shared human vulnerability, how they connected the protagonist's experiences to their own sociocultural contexts, and whether their responses moved from affective empathy toward critical awareness of systemic inequities.

This analytical distinction proved particularly challenging in practice. While many students demonstrated affective empathy and intellectual recognition of structural inequality, responses that moved toward the dimension of action-taking in intercultural understanding, as illustrated in Figure 2, remained limited. When it comes to taking action, some students positioned systemic change as the responsibility of institutions or governments rather than as something requiring personal engagement. Careful interpretive analysis was needed to determine whether students were reluctant to take action at their personal level as part of intercultural development, or whether they were simply unwilling to move beyond performative compliance in an evaluated academic context. This analysis could not be carried out on the basis of data alone but had to be navigated through sustained theoretical engagement with what critical consciousness actually demands. Across this iterative process, the researcher repeatedly returned to the data through increasingly refined theoretical lenses, consistent with CCA's commitment to reflexivity and interpretive depth.

#### *4.2.4 Engaging theory in data interpretation*

Throughout this process, the researcher maintained a dual analytic focus: identifying patterns in student responses while simultaneously interpreting those patterns through the lens of critical literacy. This process involved the systematic writing of theoretical memos that explicitly linked emergent patterns to specific theoretical constructs. For example, when students began to question societal narratives surrounding refugees, the researcher documented analytic memos drawing on Freire's (1970) concept of conscientization to interpret this shift as evidence of developing critical consciousness rather than a simple change in personal opinion.

This interpretive process was further complicated by the power dynamics inherent in the research context. As the course instructor, the researcher could not fully dismiss the possibility that students were discursively aligning their responses with their professor's expectations, particularly within a Korean academic context, where the asymmetrical power relations may discourage students from expressing different views. Navigating this concern required developing interpretive criteria grounded in the specificity of student responses, which were drawn explicitly from their own life histories and personal experiences. For instance, connecting the protagonist's displacement to their own moments of feeling marginalized, misunderstood, or invisible was interpreted as an initial point of entry into critical consciousness and reflexivity. The personalization and vulnerability embedded in such responses suggested engagement that went beyond reproducing the researcher's expectation. By contrast, responses that remained at the level of abstract acknowledgment of inequality, without personal positioning or emotional investment, were treated with greater analytical caution. Distinguishing between responses grounded in personal experience and those remaining at the level of abstract acknowledgement

thus offered an interpretive framework for navigating the methodological tension between critical development and performative compliance.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper addresses a critical gap in the Critical Content Analysis (CCA) literature. Although CCA is increasingly employed to analyze texts, few studies provide transparent accounts of the complex, iterative, and intellectually demanding analytic processes through which CCA is conducted. By articulating CCA's theoretical foundations, offering a procedural framework, and illustrating its recursive nature through exemplar studies in EFL education, this paper presents a realistic account of what rigorous qualitative inquiry entails—including preliminary analyses, theoretical refinement, and repeated attempts at categorization that are central to CCA.

Although this paper delineates a five-phase framework—Forming Inquiry, Positioning, Determining the Unit of Analysis, Identifying Thematic Patterns, and Interweaving Theory and Data—the exemplar studies demonstrate that enacting CCA is inherently non-linear. Researchers move recursively among these phases, frequently revisiting earlier decisions as analytic understandings deepen and theoretical needs evolve.

The two exemplar studies individually illuminate the situated and reflexive demands that CCA places on researchers. In the first case, the researcher's positionality — as a Korean female scholar deeply shaped by American culture yet attuned to Indigenous representational politics through prior theoretical engagement — was not incidental to the analysis but constitutive of it. The theoretical expansion from Othering to gaze did not represent a failure of the initial framework but rather a reflexive recognition that, through sustained data engagement, the directionality of gaze required a more precise analytical lens. This recognition was itself shaped by who the researcher was and how she had developed her theoretical trajectory, underscoring that in CCA, the researcher's position is not a variable to be controlled but an analytical resource to be made transparent. In the second case, the challenges were differently situated but equally reflexive. The researcher's lived experience as a minority in the United States enabled her to see structural inequality that her students — as members of Korea's dominant ethnic/cultural group — had not been required to notice. Yet this experiential asymmetry created its own methodological complexity: how do you create conditions for developing students' critical consciousness without simply transmitting your own critical lens? And how do you interpret student responses when institutional power dynamics may have shaped what students were willing to express?

Together, these cases reveal a pattern of challenge that is not incidental to CCA but inherent to its critical orientation. Both researchers encountered moments where their initial analytical frameworks proved insufficient — not because the frameworks were flawed, but because the data demanded greater theoretical precision. They navigated interpretive uncertainty that required sustained reflexive engagement with theory, data, and their own positionalities. The researchers were also situated themselves within specific sociocultural contexts that shaped what was analytically visible and what required deliberate effort to see. This is precisely what makes CCA methodologically demanding, and what published CCA studies rarely make visible. For EFL researchers in Korean and across Asian educational contexts, where qualitative methodological guidance remains limited and critical frameworks are still relatively unfamiliar, acknowledging these challenges explicitly is not a confession of analytical weakness but a demonstration of what rigorous critical inquiry actually requires.

By foregrounding this methodological complexity, the paper enhances transparency in qualitative research and supports researchers by embracing uncertainty as an integral component of critical analysis. In doing so, it challenges the misconception that themes simply *emerge* through linear procedures but instead emphasizes the arduous nature of interpretive engagement required to construct meaningful, theoretically grounded findings. Furthermore, by demonstrating CCA across two distinct types of data,

this paper illustrates that the methodology's scope extends well beyond its origins in literary analysis. While CCA was initially developed as a tool for examining literary texts, its application in EFL educational contexts suggests its adaptability across diverse forms of data and educational settings.

Taken as a whole, this paper demonstrates that the messy, recursive, and theoretically demanding nature of CCA is not incidental but foundational. By making these processes visible, the paper offers a more transparent and practically useful guide, showing how embracing analytic complexity enables CCA to function as a rigorous methodology for critical inquiry and social transformation in educational research.

## Notes

1. While Critical Multicultural Analysis focuses specifically on children's literature and discourse analysis foregrounds linguistic structure, CCA extends this critical orientation across a broader range of text types through explicit procedural phases designed to make theoretical integration transparent and replicable.
2. *Never Fall Down* (McCormick, 2012), written by Patricia McCormick, is a young adult novel based on the true story of Arn Chorn-Pond, a Cambodian boy who survived the Khmer Rouge genocide.
3. These structural stages served two methodological purposes: first, it enabled systematic examination of how meaning-making evolved throughout the reading process; second, it aligned with Critical Literacy's emphasis on repositioning readers' perspectives through sustained engagement with texts.

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