

# INSPIRING CHANGE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION: INTEGRATING 21ST CENTURY SKILLS AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

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**Abstract.** This paper examines the integration of 21st-century pedagogical competencies and Critical Pedagogy in English language teacher training through the INSPIRE (INnovative Strategies in Pedagogy for Inclusive Reflective English-teaching) Program at a Spanish university. Targeting undergraduate students in Primary Education to become English teachers, INSPIRE merged in-depth English language knowledge with innovative teaching methodologies. The program highlighted adaptability, technological literacy, and intercultural sensitivity in English teaching, aligning with 21st-century requirements in education. Embracing Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy principles, the INSPIRE Program promoted an emancipatory and participatory teaching approach. Implementation phases include initial observation, gradual teaching involvement, and specific project development. INSPIRE's transformative impact is assessed through enhanced linguistic and pedagogical competencies, critical consciousness, and cultural empathy. The paper concludes by emphasizing the significance of innovative, reflective educational approaches in teacher training, preparing future educators as change agents in a diverse, global educational environment.

*Keywords:* 21<sup>st</sup> century skills in education; critical pedagogy; English language teacher education; innovative teaching methodology; intercultural competence

## 1. Introduction

At the onset of the 21st century, we are situated within a period characterized by rapid change and profound shifts, highlighted by the emergence of unprecedented scientific and technological progress (Stehlik 2018). These advancements have not only transformed our daily lives but have also brought forth significant challenges and opportunities within the realm of education. Within this context, the Spanish education system, akin to other nations, stands at a critical juncture where its structure, components, and initiatives must effectively and proactively adapt to these dynamic changes (Hughes 1998).

The traditional aim of education, focused on human growth and readiness for societal life, now assumes a new significance in this evolving landscape. There is a pressing need to enhance the caliber of our human capital to meet the requirements of a society increasingly intertwined with digital technologies and global connections, transitioning towards a lifestyle aligned with the modern world's evolving expectations (Tan et al. 2017; Sharma & Lazar 2019).

Within this framework, the global educational framework, alongside distinct national contexts such as Spain, encounters intricate challenges in cultivating human resources capable of addressing the complexities of a globalized and technologically advanced environment (Paine 2013). Educators play a pivotal role in this transformation, being instrumental in shaping forthcoming generations who are not only proficient in technology but also possess critical thinking, creativity, and adaptability skills (Piiro 2011). The imperative to cultivate robust and pertinent pedagogical expertise among teachers is now more crucial than ever, echoing the insights of Benade (2017) and Gani et al. (2018).

In this contemporary era, the necessity to cultivate advanced pedagogical competencies and a critical outlook on teaching is unmistakable. Spanish educators, parallel to their global counterparts, must possess not only profound subject knowledge but also the ability to effectively manage the teaching and learning dynamics in a technologically advanced and culturally diverse setting (Trilling & Fadel 2009; Ladbrook & Parr 2015). This entails utilizing knowledge practically and guiding learners towards maturity and independence (Cummins et al. 2017).

Moreover, an examination of the 21st-century landscape reveals that the objective of education today transcends mere knowledge dissemination; it now encompasses fostering critical thinking and a profound comprehension of societal and contemporary issues. Critical Pedagogy, advocated by scholars like Paulo Freire over decades, underscores the importance of an education that surpasses academicism, instilling a critical consciousness in students, and preparing them for active engagement in a constantly evolving society (Corbett & Guilherme 2021). This critical perspective is essential for educators to assist students in navigating the complexities of today's world, particularly in Spain where cultural diversity and European integration pose distinctive challenges and opportunities.

Hence, the combination of advanced pedagogical skills with the embrace of Critical Pedagogy as a guiding principle must be imperative in modern education practices. This dual approach not only will equip students with vital skills and knowledge but also will prepare them to be reflective, accountable, and engaged citizens in the 21st century (Sana 2023).

This paper aims to demonstrate how advanced pedagogical competencies and Critical Pedagogy can be seamlessly integrated into the current educational milieu to address the challenges and prospects of contemporary times. It will explore the practical implementation of these strategies in classrooms and their impact on

preparing students for the present and future society. A case study analysis will be presented based on an experience with undergraduate students at a Spanish university who are future English as a Foreign Language teachers in Primary Education. Through this analysis, we aspire to offer a comprehensive perspective that can serve as a roadmap for educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders interested in enhancing the educational process continuously.

## **2. Conceptual Framework as a Literature Review**

### ***2.1. Redefining Pedagogical Competence in the 21st Century***

In the 21st century, the role of the educator has evolved significantly, responding to a globalised and technologically advanced environment. In the last official documents on Education in Spain, as in other parts of the world, it has been recognised that the pedagogical competence of teachers is essential to meet the educational challenges of this new era (Radhouane & Maleq 2020). Pedagogical competence, defined as a teacher's ability to manage learning effectively, encompasses a broad and deep knowledge of the subject matter, along with the ability to use and apply this knowledge in practical ways (Akkari & Maleq 2020).

This capability extends beyond mere academic knowledge; it requires teachers to be facilitators of learning, designers of enriching educational experiences and competent evaluators of learning outcomes (Costa & Kallick 2010). In this sense, 21st century education requires a combination of traditional skills and digital competences, where teachers must be prepared to integrate technology into their teaching methods. Technological literacy is not simply an additional skill, but an integral part of pedagogical competence in the current era (Gómez-Parra & Daiss 2022).

Moreover, the postmodern dynamics of our lives and 21st century education, described as universal education, posit that all activities in life are increasingly related to global skills (Dana & Allen 2008; Syabarrudin et al. 2023). Therefore, educators must be prepared not only to impart knowledge, but also to guide students in developing qualified skills and competences that are essential for living and succeeding in an ever-changing world. This implies a constant re-evaluation and adaptation of pedagogical strategies to ensure that educators are equipped with the necessary competences to prepare students for the challenges of the future. This need for constant adaptation and development in pedagogical competences is a crucial element in the quest for quality education that responds to the needs and expectations of today's society (Kay & Greenhill 2011; Marouli 2021).

Pedagogical competence in the 21st century encompasses educators' ability to not only facilitate knowledge acquisition but also to foster the development of critical citizens who are engaged and aware of their environment (Tichnor-Wagner et al. 2019; Hanna 2023). This expanded perspective underscores the importance of nurturing students' critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and collaboration

skills essential for navigating an increasingly interconnected and technology-driven world (Eales-Reynolds et al. 2013).

Critical Pedagogy complements this approach by urging educators to challenge and question established educational structures and practices. This viewpoint encourages teachers to transform their teaching into a more interactive and participatory process, where students engage in analyzing, discussing, and applying information in authentic contexts (Gümüő 2022). This shift towards increased student involvement in the learning process facilitates a more comprehensive and meaningful educational experience (Gut 2011).

In addition, recognizing cultural and social diversity within the classroom is another vital aspect of modern pedagogical competence. Educators must be capable of acknowledging and valuing individual and cultural differences, fostering an atmosphere characterized by respect and inclusivity (Santoro 2013). This aligns with the concept of education as a means to humanize individuals, as advocated in Critical Pedagogy, emphasizing the necessity for an educational approach that equips students to thrive in a diverse and globalized society (Sardabi et al. 2018).

Lastly, continuous training and professional development of educators are essential components for enhancing pedagogical competence. Teachers must engage in ongoing learning endeavors, updating their skills and knowledge to stay abreast of technological advancements and evolving educational requirements (Tichnor-Wagner et al. 2019). This commitment to professional growth not only benefits individual educators but also positively influences the quality of instruction they provide, thereby enhancing the success of their students.

## ***2.2. The Significance of Critical Pedagogy in Contemporary Education***

Critical Pedagogy presents a transformative educational approach that transcends mere knowledge dissemination, aiming to empower students as critical thinkers and proactive catalysts for societal change. Rooted in the pioneering work of Paulo Freire, this perspective contends that education should not be a passive reception of information but an interactive and introspective journey fostering critical awareness (Freire 1971; Giroux 2010).

Paulo Freire's conceptualization of Critical Pedagogy underscores the belief that education should be emancipatory and liberating. He advocated against viewing education as a mere "banking system" where students passively receive knowledge, emphasizing instead its role in nurturing critical thinking and social consciousness (Freire 1976; Sardabi et al. 2018). This approach holds profound implications in modern education, where diversity and societal complexities offer distinctive avenues for profound learning experiences (Corbett & Guilherme 2021).

Moreover, Freire accentuated the significance of dialogue in education, advocating for a reciprocal relationship between educators and learners. This dialogical exchange challenges conventional teaching paradigms, empowering students to co-create knowledge rather than passively consume it (Freire 1971). In the contemporary

educational landscape, this may entail employing pedagogical strategies that incorporate group discussions, collaborative projects, and the critical utilization of digital technologies to enhance student engagement and participation in their learning journey (Vila et al. 2021).

Consequently, Critical Pedagogy fosters a more egalitarian dynamic between teachers and students, promoting dialogue and collaboration over traditional hierarchical structures in the classroom (Peters & Mathias 2018). Educators embracing this approach encourage students to question and delve into every facet of the teaching-learning process, cultivating an environment where everyone assumes roles as both teachers and learners in an ongoing quest for knowledge (Freire 1974; Shpeizer 2018).

Within the framework of Critical Pedagogy, educators are viewed not solely as knowledge transmitters but as facilitators of critical thinking. This entails challenging established power structures in education and broader society, acknowledging that knowledge is inherently shaped by cultural, political, and social contexts (Freire 1971). This philosophy is translated into an educational approach that celebrates and respects cultural and linguistic diversity while preparing students to be active, discerning citizens in a contemporary democracy.

In the Spanish context, characterized by intricate challenges like European integration, cultural diversity, and rapid technological advancements, Critical Pedagogy emerges as a vital tool for educators. This methodology empowers teachers to guide students in comprehending and critically analyzing their environment, fostering learning that is intertwined with current social and political landscapes (Vila et al. 2021; Syabarrudin et al. 2023).

Besides, Critical Pedagogy extends beyond classroom boundaries to permeate students' daily lives. This pedagogical approach aims to cultivate essential skills such as critical analysis, empathy, and social activism, preparing students not only for academic assessments but also for responsible civic engagement (Indriani 2018).

In alignment with Freire's teachings, consciousness (or 'conscientization', the term coined by Freire) stands out as a central objective of education. This concept pertains to the process of awakening to the social, political, and economic realities that influence our existence (Freire 1974; Lawton 2022). In today's educational milieu, this translates into integrating subjects that address contemporary issues like sustainability, gender equality, social justice, and ethical considerations in the digital age into the curriculum. Such initiatives encourage students to contemplate these matters and ponder their societal roles.

Against the backdrop of the Fourth Industrial Revolution where transformative technologies such as artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things are reshaping society (Gallagher et al. 2021), Critical Pedagogy assumes heightened relevance. Educators are tasked with equipping students to navigate a world where technology and society are intricately interwoven, underscoring the necessity for a critical and

reflective comprehension of these advancements and their implications (Kiita & Amani 2021).

In conclusion, Freire's Critical Pedagogy presents a robust framework for reimagining education in the 21st century. It offers an approach that not only addresses contemporary educational requirements but is also imperative for cultivating students who are thoughtful and engaged participants in an ever-evolving, interconnected global society (Marouli 2021).

### ***2.3. Integrating Advanced Pedagogical Competence and Critical Pedagogy in English Language Teaching (ELT)***

In the realm of English language teaching (ELT), the integration of advanced pedagogical competence with Critical Pedagogy may stand as a pivotal educational paradigm. This combination empowers educators to transcend mere linguistic knowledge transmission, fostering learning that encompasses critical comprehension and appreciation for cultural diversity within a global context, essential facets of second language teacher education. Following some of the principles in the teachings of Paulo Freire, Critical Pedagogy may be used to encourage learners to challenge established structures and practices, advocating for an education that is both empowering and liberating. Within this framework, English won't be merely taught as a language but as a conduit for exploring and comprehending diverse social and cultural landscapes, preparing students for active engagement in the global community (Gaulin 2019; Jain 2022).

Teaching ELT in the 21st century necessitates methodologies that prioritize functional engagement, dialogue, and collaboration. Educators must embrace a comprehensive approach that integrates not only language skills but also the cultivation of intercultural competence and critical thinking. This means employing instructional strategies like project-based learning and collaborative endeavors, enriching the English language acquisition process while nurturing students' capacity to analyze, question, and apply their knowledge in pertinent practical and social contexts (Asghar & Shezad 2021).

Reflection and continual self-assessment hold equal significance within this pedagogical framework. Educators must remain adaptable, continuously adjusting their teaching methods and approaches to meet the evolving needs of learners and educational settings. Incorporating novel strategies and technologies into ELT instruction not only enhances the educational journey but also equips students to confront challenges and seize opportunities in an interconnected and diverse world (Kennedy et al. 2023).

English language instruction thus serves as a platform for honing global communication skills, fostering critical thinking, and promoting cultural awareness. Equipping educators to deliver English within this paradigm not only enhances students' language proficiency but also empowers them to be well-informed, reflective, and engaged members of the global society (Barros & De Oliveira 2022).

### **3. Fieldwork Program INSPIRE: An Innovative and Integrative Experience in English Teacher Education**

Within the setting of a Faculty of Education in Spain, a field experience program named INSPIRE (*INnovative Strategies in Pedagogy for Inclusive Reflective English-teaching*) was meticulously designed for undergraduate Primary Education students aspiring to become English teachers. This initiative serves as a prime example of the successful fusion of advanced pedagogical and 21<sup>st</sup> century competences and the fundamental tenets of Critical Pedagogy. Drawing inspiration from various international case studies, including works by Hayes (2014), Liu et al. (2017), Spiro & Crisfield (2018), Arce-Trigatti et al. (2019), and Sockman & Blevins (2022), the INSPIRE program was aimed to enrich the educational journey of future educators.

#### **3.1. Description of the Experience**

##### ***Context and School Selection***

Two schools situated in socially marginalized areas were strategically chosen as the Program's implementation sites, selected for their diverse cultural milieu and the pressing need for innovative pedagogical methodologies. These educational institutions featured a heterogeneous student body representing various socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds. This deliberate selection aimed to furnish prospective English teachers with a stimulating and nurturing environment conducive to improving and refining their pedagogical insight.

##### ***Preparation and Training***

Twenty-two students from the Faculty of Education, studying the major of English language teaching, underwent comprehensive pre-training sessions focused on innovative teaching approaches, adept management of cultural diversity within classrooms, and the effective utilization of technology in educational settings. These preparatory sessions encompassed workshops delving into Critical Pedagogy principles and tailored strategies for teaching English within contexts characterized by social exclusion.

#### **3.2. Design of the INSPIRE Program**

##### ***Connecting with 21st Century Pedagogical Competencies***

The INSPIRE Program tailored for English majors in the Degree in Primary Education was designed to align with and enhance the fundamental pedagogical competencies essential for educators in the 21st century, particularly in the realm of second language instruction. These competencies were delineated during the design phase as follows:

1. *Content Mastery and Innovative Methodologies:* Beyond a deep knowledge of English, the Program underscored the importance of acquiring innovative teaching methodologies. Prospective English educators delved into diverse approaches such as project-based learning, differentiated instruction, and the utilization of language immersion strategies to tailor lessons to meet the diverse needs of students (Hayes 2014; Gaulin 2019).

2. *Integrating Technology into Teaching*: Acknowledging the increasing significance of technology in education, the INSPIRE Program integrated training in digital tools for teaching English. This encompassed interactive online platforms, mobile applications, and multimedia resources, preparing students to navigate technologically advanced classrooms and adapt to hybrid learning environments (Singh-Pillay 2021).

3. *Development of Intercultural Competences*: A pivotal facet of the program was the cultivation of intercultural competence. Education students engaged with learners from varied cultural backgrounds, fostering an understanding and appreciation of linguistic and cultural diversity. This approach facilitated the creation of an inclusive and respectful learning environment crucial for effective English language instruction as a global language (Harris et al. 2020).

4. *Fostering Learner Autonomy and Critical Thinking*: The Program encouraged aspiring teachers to design activities that nurtured autonomy and critical thinking among their students. They were trained to develop lessons that not only imparted English language skills but also encouraged questioning, creative problem-solving, and self-directed learning (Hayes 2014).

5. *Teacher Adaptability and Flexibility*: In a rapidly evolving global landscape, adaptability and flexibility are indispensable competencies for educators. The Program was aimed to equip future teachers to swiftly adapt to diverse teaching contexts, student requirements, and curriculum changes – essential skills for effective teaching in the 21st century (Kay & Greenhill 2011; Kumpulainen 2014).

6. *Constructive Feedback and Assessment*: Emphasis was placed on constructive feedback and assessment techniques. Students learned to implement assessments that not only tested linguistic progress but also provided valuable feedback for holistic learner development (Piiro 2011; Indriani 2018).

7. *Collaboration and Teamwork*: Lastly, the INSPIRE Program underscored the significance of teamwork and collaboration – not only between education students and their instructors but also among learners in the classroom. Collaboration was promoted as a vital tool for second language acquisition, reflecting the increasingly collaborative nature of contemporary education (Sheppard 2020).

These 21st-century pedagogical competencies served as the foundation of the fieldwork INSPIRE Program with the object of endowing future English teachers with the requisite skills, knowledge, and sensibilities appropriate for today's dynamic global educational landscape.

### ***Incorporation of Critical Pedagogy Principles***

The integration of Critical Pedagogy doctrines into the INSPIRE Program for prospective English teachers was evident through various key elements aimed at cultivating a more reflective, critical, and socially just approach to education:

1. *Focus on Critical and Social Awareness*: The Program prompted aspiring teachers to critically analyze power dynamics and inequalities that impact English



teaching and learning. This involved exploring the privileging of certain dialects and accents over others and its implications for students. It encouraged valuing all forms of expression in English, fostering respect and openness towards linguistic and cultural diversity (Barros & De Oliveira 2022).

2. *Development of an Emancipatory Pedagogy*: Drawing inspiration from Paulo Freire's ideas, the Program aimed to instill in future teachers a pedagogical approach that not only imparted knowledge but also empowered students. They were trained to design lessons that prompted students to question, explore, and relate English language learning to their own experiences and societal contexts, thereby enhancing their understanding and personal connection to the language (Jain 2022).

3. *Promoting Dialogue and Active Participation*: Aligned with Critical Pedagogy principles, the INSPIRE Program stressed the significance of dialogue and active engagement in the classroom. Prospective teachers learned to facilitate open and critical discussions, encouraging students to voice their opinions and experiences. This was achieved through activities like debates, collaborative projects, and class discussions on pertinent topics, encouraging students to utilize English as a tool for expressing and developing their ideas (Corbett & Guilherme 2021).

4. *Reflection and Self-criticism in Teaching*: A fundamental component of the Program was continuous reflection and self-critique. Student teachers were urged to reflect on their teaching practices, pinpoint areas for enhancement, and contemplate how their backgrounds and experiences might influence their pedagogical methods. This process involved examining personal biases and assumptions that could impact their teaching and students' learning experiences (Jain 2022).

5. *Commitment to Educational Equity and Inclusion*: The Program also emphasized equipping prospective teachers with skills necessary for establishing inclusive and equitable learning environments. This encompassed strategies for addressing diverse learning needs and ensuring that all students, irrespective of background or language proficiency, had access to meaningful and fair learning opportunities in the English classroom (Cummins et al. 2017).

In essence, the integration of Critical Pedagogy into the design of the INSPIRE project was aimed not only to prepare future English teachers as knowledge transmitters but also as facilitators of transformative and reflective learning. By doing so, the Program attempted to enhance students' technical and pedagogical competencies and to promote a more empathetic, conscious, and socially responsible approach to teaching English.

### **3.3. Implementation of the Program Hands-on Teaching Experience**

Each student was allocated to a classroom in one of the selected schools, dedicating 4 hours per week for a span of 2 months to engage directly with the students. This immersive experience unfolded through distinct phases:

1. *Initial Observation*: The initial days were devoted to observing classroom dynamics, the instructional methodologies employed by the practicing teachers, and the interactions between students and teachers.

2. *Gradual Introduction to Teaching*: Students commenced their journey by assisting in minor activities, progressively assuming more significant responsibilities. They transitioned into designing and delivering segments of lessons under the guidance of in-school educators.

3. *Implementation of Specific Projects*: Aspiring teachers conceptualized and executed learning projects centered around topics pertinent to the students, such as local culture, environmental concerns, or current events. These projects incorporated elements of teamwork, research, and presentations, thereby nurturing English communication skills.

4. *Integration of Technology in the Classroom*: Digital tools, including educational applications and online resources, were seamlessly integrated to amplify student engagement and interaction in English language learning.

5. *Extracurricular Activities*: Supplementary activities like English conversation clubs and drama workshops were orchestrated to offer students informal yet captivating language learning opportunities.

#### ***Resources and Materials Used***

The Program leveraged interactive teaching materials, multimedia resources, and online collaboration tools to enrich the learning experience. Students from the Faculty of Education were encouraged to use these resources creatively, crafting lessons that matched with the interests and requirements of their learners.

#### ***Collaboration with Schools and Community***

A strong emphasis was placed on fostering collaboration among Education students, school educators, and the broader community. Regular follow-up meetings and knowledge-sharing sessions were conducted to fine-tune approaches and strategies based on feedback received, aligning with models exemplified by Middleton & Prince (2011).

#### ***3.4. Feedback and Professional Development***

A crucial aspect of the INSPIRE Program for prospective English teachers was the structured and reflective emphasis on feedback and professional growth. This framework aimed to ensure that student teachers not only acquired practical teaching skills but also cultivated a deeper comprehension of their pedagogical practice (McLaren 1989; Kay & Greenhill 2011).

Throughout their fieldwork experience, student teachers received ongoing feedback from their mentors. This feedback extended beyond technical aspects of English language instruction, such as pronunciation or grammar, to encompass pedagogical strategies, classroom management, and tailored approaches for addressing individual students' needs. Mentors offered practical guidance and recommendations for enhancing and adjusting teaching methodologies to effectively apply the theories learned in academic settings.

Trainee educators were prompted to engage in regular reflection and self-assessment sessions. This process involved critically evaluating their teaching methods, recognizing strengths and areas for enhancement, and contemplating how their personal backgrounds and experiences might influence their teaching approaches. Support for this self-evaluation was provided through teaching journals, group discussions, and feedback sessions with peers and mentors, using previous experiences as models, such as Hung et al. (2014).

The program placed significant emphasis on cultivating professional competencies beyond language instruction. This encompassed skills in classroom management, effective communication with stakeholders like parents and colleagues, and the design of inclusive and adaptable curricula. The significance of being a versatile and well-prepared educator capable of responding to contemporary educational challenges and changes was underscored (Benade 2017).

Technology played a pivotal role in the feedback and learning processes. An online platform was utilized for resource sharing, discussions on teaching methodologies, and submission of work for evaluation. This not only facilitated collaboration and idea exchange between Education students and instructors but also provided hands-on experience in leveraging technological tools for teaching purposes (Jacobs 2010; Ladbrook & Parr 2015).

In addition to the hands-on experience and feedback received during the fieldwork, the Program incorporated a series of seminars and workshops towards the culmination of the experience. These sessions delved into topics such as cutting-edge research in English pedagogy, advancements in second language teaching, and strategies for tackling contemporary educational difficulties. By focusing on these areas, the seminars offered students a broader perspective on education and opportunities for ongoing professional growth (Spiro 2018).

Ultimately, the feedback and professional development initiatives within the Program not only targeted to enhance the technical English teaching skills of aspiring educators but also aimed to cultivate a profound comprehension of the intricacies involved in teaching within a multicultural and technologically progressive setting. Through a comprehensive approach, the INSPIRE Program endeavored to ensure that Education students completed their training as teachers who were reflective, critical, and well-prepared for the demands of the 21st century (Costa & Kallick 2010).

### ***3.5. Transformative Impact***

The field experience INSPIRE Program yielded a transformative impact on both the Education students and the school communities involved, showcasing the program's efficacy in preparing educators for the complexities of teaching in a contemporary, diverse setting.

Education students emerged from the program with notably heightened confidence in their capacities as English language instructors. The combination of hands-on experience, critical introspection, and ongoing feedback not only enhanced their

language proficiency and pedagogical competencies, but also nurtured the cultivation of a personalized and adaptable teaching approach essential for addressing the diverse needs of learners in modern classrooms.

Furthermore, the program fostered increased critical consciousness and cultural empathy among prospective teachers. Through direct engagement with students from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds and participation in events like the “Cultural Immersion Festival”, Education students gained a deeper appreciation for the significance of inclusivity and diversity respect in education.

These future educators introduced fresh ideas and methodologies into their classrooms, promoting a more interactive, collaborative, and student-centered learning atmosphere. This innovative approach not only benefited English language learners but also inspired teachers within participating schools. Testimonies from in-service teachers highlighted how the Program strengthened university-partner school relationships, endorsing knowledge and experience exchange, which coincides with Harris et al. (2020) or Askins & Breiner (2022). Through collaborative efforts and ongoing dialogue, robust connections were established, facilitating the dissemination of insights within the broader educational community.

As seen, the program prepared future teachers not only to address current challenges in English language instruction but also to serve as catalysts for change and innovation in their professional growth within education, aligning with Sheppard's advocacy (2020). Graduates left the experience with a proactive mindset, a commitment to continuous learning, and a readiness for ongoing professional development - essential attributes for educators navigating the evolving global educational landscape.

In summary, the transformative impact of the INSPIRE Program was evident in the enhancement of pedagogical and linguistic proficiencies, the cultivation of critical awareness and cultural sensitivity, and the capacity for innovative teaching practices. These prospective English teachers concluded their journey better prepared to contribute positively to 21st-century education by fostering inclusive, effective, and engaging learning environments (Fukaya & Uesaka 2020).

#### **4. Conclusions**

Upon reflection on the challenges and opportunities inherent in 21st-century education, it is evident that the effective integration of advanced pedagogical competencies and the adoption of a Critical Pedagogy philosophy, as advocated by Paulo Freire and his adherents, are not merely desirable but imperative for the cultivation of transformative and pertinent education. This fusion not only equips students to confront future academic and professional difficulties but also empowers them to engage actively and responsibly in a democratic and diverse society.

The INSPIRE (*INnovative Strategies in Pedagogy for Inclusive Reflective English-teaching*) Program for prospective English teachers discussed herein serves as a prime example of this integration. By emphasizing the development of advanced

pedagogical competencies alongside critical and social awareness in English language instruction, the program showcased how theory and practice can harmonize to nurture adept and conscientious educators. Participants not only improved their linguistic and pedagogical proficiencies but also cultivated an appreciation for cultural diversity and the ability to promote critical thinking and inclusivity in their forthcoming teaching environments (Ashadi 2018).

The incorporation of ongoing feedback, critical reflection, and professional development within the Program underscored the significance of a reflective and adaptable approach to the teaching-learning process. Future educators underwent training that encouraged introspection on their practices and adaptability to evolving student needs and educational landscapes. This training ultimately empowered them to transcend being mere knowledge transmitters to becoming facilitators of transformative and reflective learning experiences (Fang 2013).

This inclusive paradigm in teacher education holds paramount importance in an increasingly interconnected and technology-driven world. By preparing educators to be innovative, critical, and attuned to cultural and social dynamics, we are nurturing a future where education extends beyond classroom confines to become a catalyst for social comprehension and change. Consequently, this Program benefits both Education students and their prospective pupils and also contributes to the cultivation of a more enlightened, critical, and empathetic society.

## **5. Future Steps and Recommendations**

As we navigate the demands of the 21st century, it is imperative for educators and educational institutions to continually adapt and progress to meet the evolving needs of learners and society. Drawing from the insights and experiences of the INSPIRE Program described, the following recommendations and future steps are proposed:

1. *Encourage Continuing Education in Emerging Technologies:* Educational institutions should offer ongoing opportunities for educators to explore and integrate new technologies. This not only enhances classroom instruction but also equips students for an increasingly digitalized world.

2. *Incorporate Critical Reflection into the Teacher Education Curriculum:* Critical reflection should be a fundamental element of teacher training, encompassing introspection on pedagogical methods and an understanding of how social and cultural contexts influence learning.

3. *Promote International Collaboration and Cultural Exchange:* Facilitating exchange programs and partnerships with global educational institutions can enrich educators' and students' experiences, fostering a deeper appreciation of diverse pedagogical approaches and cultural contexts.

4. *Develop Inclusive and Adaptive Teaching Strategies:* Teacher education programs must equip educators to embrace and celebrate diversity in the classroom.

This involves tailoring teaching methods to accommodate varying learning styles, abilities, and cultural backgrounds.

5. *Enhance Educational Research and Innovation*: Institutions should support educational research endeavors, empowering educators to explore novel methodologies and pedagogical approaches that address present and future educational challenges.

6. *Establish a Culture of Constructive Feedback*: Cultivating an environment where constructive feedback is valued among educators and students can significantly enhance the quality of teaching and learning experiences.

7. *Prepare for Change and Flexibility*: Educators should be prepared to adapt and flexibly respond to rapid shifts in the educational landscape, including adjusting pedagogical approaches in light of technological advancements, societal changes, and cultural shifts.

Implementing these recommendations necessitates a collaborative effort involving educators, educational institutions, policymakers, and communities (Adamson & Darling-Hammond 2015). By collectively embracing these steps, we can ensure that education remains relevant, impactful, and transformative - preparing students not only to tackle present challenges but also to emerge as leaders and innovators in the future.

These initiatives not only enrich the knowledge and skills of future teachers but also equip them to confront the multifaceted challenges of our era, empowering the upcoming generation to be proactive agents of positive change within their communities and beyond. The successful execution of our English teacher INSPIRE Program serves as a compelling model for other institutions and educators on effective integration. By adopting these practices and recommendations, educators can prepare students not just for academic or professional success but also for active citizenship in an ever-evolving world. Through sustained dedication to adaptation, reflection, and innovation, we can ensure that education evolves harmoniously to meet the needs of forthcoming generations and global society.

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