

From Theory to Practice: EFL Teachers' Conceptions and Implementation of Critical Reading

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Abstract. Research on critical reading has seldom been conducted on EFL teachers and their teaching practices. This research, therefore, investigated how EFL teachers conceptualized critical reading and how these conceptions were implemented in their instructional practices. Twenty-nine teachers who taught English at secondary schools in Jakarta, Bogor, Tangerang, Bekasi, and Sukabumi with teaching experience ranging from three to 11 years participated in this research through interviews or open-response questionnaires. The findings revealed six main concepts of critical reading conveyed by EFL teachers. The concepts identified were analysis, evaluation, inference/conclusion, interpretation, criticism, and questioning. Concerning the application of these concepts in the classroom, the majority of instructional practices observed matched the teachers' conceptualization. Only a few classroom activities did not refer to those concepts. The findings indicate that EFL teachers clearly understand critical reading and can implement critical reading instruction in their teaching practices. It would benefit teachers to expand the variety of essential activities of reading they employ. Additionally, further studies on critical reading could be conducted in different areas and educational levels to ascertain how other EFL practitioners implement essential activities of reading in their classrooms so that EFL teachers can get more insights and references.

Keywords: *conception of critical reading, teaching practices of critical reading, elements of critical reading, EFL school teachers, qualitative research*

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INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking (CT) has become an indispensable topic when discussing education in this increasingly globalized world. Many authors have expressed the importance of CT in education (e.g. [Arifin, 2020](#); [Bean & Melzer, 2021](#); [Changwong, Sukkamart & Sisan, 2018](#); [Elder & Paul, 2020](#); [Ennis, 2018](#); [Huber & Kuncel, 2016](#); [Ilyas, 2023](#); [McPeck, 2016](#); [Paul & Elder, 2019](#); [Saleh, 2019](#)). For example, [Elder and Paul \(2020\)](#) state that success in college depends on thinking skills, while [McPeck \(2016\)](#) states that students need to improve their ability to think about problems. On the other hand, [Ennis \(2018\)](#) emphasizes the importance of CT in higher education by infusing it into subject-matter courses. Whether CT should be infused in EFL or taught as a separate subject in school is still debatable; however, many authors agree that it should be taught to students.

In the EFL context, CT can be applied in teaching not only the four skills - reading, writing, speaking, and listening – but also the language components – grammar and vocabulary. However, studies on the latter aspect are rare, especially in the Indonesian educational setting. In terms of critical thinking in reading, the literature refers to the term critical reading (CR), which generally focuses on how a reader analyzes, evaluates, and interprets the content of texts (e.g., [Larking, 2017](#); [Salmerón, Delgado & Mason, 2020](#); [Varaporn & Sitthitikul, 2019](#)).

CT and CR have been popular in the field of English as a foreign language (EFL). Recent studies have investigated university students' CR ability, as well as the use of certain approaches to promote it ([Akatsuka, 2020](#); [Castaño-Roldán & Correa, 2021](#); [Din, 2020](#)). While [Akatsuka \(2020\)](#) examined the effects of an approach on Japanese undergraduates' CT, [Castaño-Roldán and Correa \(2021\)](#) explored the gains and challenges experienced by Colombian EFL students who participated in a CR and [Din \(2020\)](#) evaluated university students' CR skill. The findings of [Akatsuka's \(2020\)](#) study indicated that students demonstrated enhanced CR abilities, as evidenced by their writing that was more critical. The results of [Castaño-Roldán and Correa's \(2021\)](#) study also demonstrated that students benefited from CR. Finally, [Din's \(2020\)](#) findings indicated that students held highly positive attitudes toward CR.

[Al-Jarf \(2022\)](#), [Arini and Sulistyarini \(2021\)](#), [Azizi and Kralik \(2020\)](#), [Fatemeh, Mahmoud, and Roman \(2020\)](#), [Khamkhong \(2018\)](#), [Liu \(2019\)](#), [Sari and Prasetyo \(2021\)](#), [Susilo, Mufanti, and Fitriani \(2021\)](#), and [Yulian \(2021\)](#) investigated the relationship between learner factors, such as gender and English proficiency level, and CR ability. The results of the studies indicated a positive correlation between CR and English proficiency. Students who demonstrated higher levels of CR skills exhibited enhanced proficiency in English, particularly in the comprehension of texts. Notably, CR skills were not associated with gender, suggesting that both boys and girls had an equal opportunity to develop these skills.

[Mahdavi-rad and Mokhtari \(2019\)](#) studied the effect of CR on various factors. [Martina, Rizal, and Handayani \(2021\)](#) and [Yasemin \(2020\)](#) also explored the impact of CR, and their findings indicated that CR has the potential to enhance reading and writing abilities. Additionally, [Antonova and Tyrkheeva \(2021\)](#), [Rinekso, Rodliyah, and Pertiwi \(2021\)](#), [Shamida, Sidhu, and Nawi \(2021\)](#), [Shokouhi and Zaini \(2022\)](#), and

Zaini (2022) investigated CR in post-graduate education. The findings of the studies on CR at the post-graduate level and the suggestions based on these findings were largely consistent. It was clear that post-graduate students' CR skills required significant enhancement, given that they were at an advanced level of education and were expected to read textbooks and research papers. This indicates that students at all levels, including those in professional contexts, must maintain a critical stance.

The study of CR skills should not only focus on fostering students' abilities but also on exploring the role of teachers in facilitating their development. This exploration should encompass teachers' thoughts, feelings, and practices related to CR. Teachers' conceptions of CR can influence how they implement it in their teaching activities. As there is little information on those aspects, this study, therefore, aims to investigate how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers conceptualize and implement CR in their instructional practices. So, this study is expected to contribute to what extent Indonesian EFL teachers deal with CR in their English teaching processes.

Conception of CR

To date, several authors have conceptualized what CR is. According to DiYanni (2017), CR is not only about agreeing or disagreeing with the author of a text, but rather it deals with a thorough and comprehensive analysis and evaluation of the text. In doing so, the feeling of "initial resistance to a text" (p. 4) must be abandoned and replaced with the spirit of challenging it. In analyzing and evaluating things - not just texts - DiYanni (2017) suggests some stages. First, a person should make an observation and connect all the details of his observation. Making connections is also suggested by Scanlon (2017). Based on the result of his connecting details, inferences and conclusions can be generated.

Hogan (2017) divides reading into three stages: basic reading, close reading, and critical reading. He states that CR not only focuses on the author's ideas but also considers the contexts surrounding a text. For example, he gives ideas about relating the text to the condition when the text was written or thinking about how the content of the text differs from the existing concept. He also advises relating a text to political and social contexts, especially when reading historical texts. Hogan's ideas are similar to DiYanni's concept of analysis and evaluation, but they have a broader scope, touching on things beyond the content of the text.

Similarly, evaluation is also the key point of CR as indicated by Wallace and Wray (2011), especially for students in an academic context. They say that CR is the competence of evaluating texts and relating them to other information. Text evaluation has to start with examining the author's argument: whether his argument is supported by convincing data so that his claims can be believed. Text readers should have a real understanding of the content; otherwise, they will not be able to evaluate and make correct interpretations. Referring to Hogan (2017), they must first step into close reading before moving on to CR.

Some other authors (Li & Wan, 2022; Wilson, 2016) also mention a more or less similar conception of CR: understanding texts through analysis, evaluation, assessment, and interpretation. Finding the concept of CR proposed by many

authors basically starts from four words: analysis, evaluation, interpretation, question, and inference. Other concepts such as prediction, summary, comment, criticism, opinion, etc. are followed concept after the first four are done. For example, to summarize a text, a student should analyze the text; similarly, to give an intelligent opinion about a text, a student should analyze and evaluate the text. While other concepts are important as CR elements and can be used to develop students' CR skills, the most basic categories are these four concepts. That's why CR can be conceptualized as analyzing and evaluating texts to produce intelligent interpretations and conclusions.

EFL Teachers' Implementation of CR

Three studies on the implementation of CR have so far shown the diverse implementation of CR in the EFL setting with different objectives (Bataineh & Al-Shbatat, 2019; Saleh, 2019; Sari & Prasetyo, 2021). Bataineh and Al-Shbatat (2019) conducted a study on EFL learners' CR skills in a secondary school in Jordan by focusing on the effects of questioning strategies: questioning, self-questioning, and their combination. Using a quasi-experimental design, students were randomly assigned to a control group and three experimental groups. Prior to implementation, teachers were trained in the questioning strategies and pre- and post-tests were conducted to collect data from students. The experimental groups were taught using questioning, self-questioning, and a combination of the two strategies.

The results of the study showed that questioning strategies, especially higher-order questions, significantly improved EFL students' CR skills. The study showed statistical differences in the participants' pre-test and post-test CR scores between different groups, and the experimental group was better than the control group. The results suggest that engaging students in CR skills through questioning can improve their reading comprehension skills. All these show that questioning, which is also a part of CT, is one of the appropriate teaching activities and strategies to promote students' CR skills.

Saleh (2019) interviewed 24 university EFL teachers in Libya and asked them how they implemented CT. However, the research also included CR, and based on the findings related to CR, the study found that teachers essentially encouraged EFL students to read critically, express opinions, and make judgments using different instructional strategies. The study emphasized the importance of CR in promoting CT skills in EFL classrooms. Teachers encourage students to ask questions about any information they read and to engage in activities that challenge their cognitive abilities, such as in-depth analysis of information and reflection on their own and their peers' work.

Sari and Prasetyo (2021) utilized project-based learning (PjBL) to promote critical reading among EFL university students and improve their CT skills. The study designed CT courses to achieve this objective. The results indicated that PjBL had a positive impact on students' motivation, engagement, and ability to think critically. The implementation of the PjBL model improved students' CT skills.

Sari and Prasetyo (2021) implemented seven stages of PjBL, beginning with questioning, determining, planning, arranging, implementing, presenting, and

evaluating. During the questioning and planning stages, students were asked to critically read and think critically about a topic that could be developed into a project. In the implementing stage, activities promoting CR were included, such as anticipating potential questions and reading the subject matter critically. During the evaluation stage, [Sari and Prasetyo \(2021\)](#) noted that activities promoting critical reflection, such as reflecting and concluding, were present. These activities are considered elements of critical reflection. As a result, nearly all stages of PjBL include activities that encourage students to engage in critical reflection.

The three studies above demonstrate different approaches to implementing CR in the EFL context. While each implementation employs certain strategies, all show strong evidence of improving EFL students' CR skills. However, the studies do not explore the various teaching practices and strategies used by EFL teachers to promote CR based on their beliefs and understanding of what CR entails. Hence, it is necessary to have more exploration concerning the conceptions of EFL teachers on CR and how they put the conceptions into instructional practices.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study utilized qualitative inquiry to investigate participants' conceptions and practices, collecting data in verbal and spoken forms through interviews and open-response questionnaires. Qualitative inquiry is suitable for exploring opinions, perceptions, and thoughts ([Crewell & Poth, 2023](#); [Merriam & Tisdell, 2016](#); [Nassaji, 2020](#)). Interviews were conducted both face-to-face and over the phone. Due to time and distance restrictions, a telephone interview was conducted instead of a face-to-face interview. Participants were given an open-response questionnaire, which they answered directly. In some cases, the questionnaire was sent via email or WhatsApp application. The questionnaire included two questions or instructions. The first asked participants to conceptualize CR, while the second asked them to list as many strategies or activities as possible that they believed could promote EFL students' CR skills – derived from their conception - in their teaching-learning processes.

Setting and Participants

The study involved 29 EFL teachers from public and private secondary schools in the JABOTABEK area (Jakarta, Bogor, Tangerang, Bekasi) and Sukabumi, a regency in West Java province. The majority of teacher participants (18) were female, while the remaining participants were male. The age span of the participants was from 26 to over 50 years old. The participants had teaching experiences ranging from three to over 15 years. Only a small number of teachers had graduated from the post-graduate level or were pursuing a Master's degree; the majority had completed undergraduate education.

In Jakarta, the majority of participants joined the English Teacher Organization, which regularly held meetings to improve their professional development. As a result, they made time to answer the questionnaire or

participate in an interview. Conversely, participants from other areas were recruited through recommendations.

The study included 11 male and 18 female teachers with teaching experience ranging from three to more than 10 years. Participants were selected on a voluntary basis and were informed that their personal information would remain anonymous. They were given the option to either fill out a questionnaire or participate in an interview, with the majority choosing to complete the open-response questionnaire. As previously stated, one method utilized was conducting interviews. Interviews were conducted when the other method was not feasible. However, interviews were also conducted with participants whose responses required further clarification to ensure accurate interpretation by the researcher.

Data Analysis

As mentioned, the interview and questionnaire both asked participants how they conceptualized and implemented their understanding of CR in their teaching practices. The questionnaire allowed participants to freely list activities that they believed demonstrated their understanding, while the telephone interview involved the researcher asking questions and taking notes on the responses. Sometimes repetition was used to ensure that the researcher accurately understood the message conveyed by the participants.

The obtained data, in the form of recordings, notes, and written material, were transcribed. During transcription, the data were meticulously and critically reviewed multiple times to identify emerging themes. These themes were then interpreted and compared to the principles of CR and grouped into categories based on their similarities.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

EFL Teachers' Conceptions of CR

From 29 participants, this study obtained 29 conceptions of CR and 87 instructional practices based on the participants' conceptions that they believed to be able to encourage students' CR skills. The conceptions presented below have been revised for clarity, and they were meticulously analyzed and grouped based on similarity in concept and idea. Based on careful analysis, the conceptions fell into the following CR categories ([table 1](#)):

Table 1. EFL teachers' essential conceptions of CR

No	CR categories	Number of Teachers
1	Analyzing	8
2	Evaluating	6
3	Inferencing/Concluding	5
4	Interpreting	5
5	Criticizing	3
6	Questioning	2

1. Analyzing

EFL teachers' conceptions of CR were dominated by the concept of analysis. As evidenced by [Table 1](#), eight teachers associated CR with analysis, which became the focal point of their conceptions despite their use of different wording. For instance, one teacher posited that CR entailed the analysis of words in a reading text to comprehend its meaning (participant number 10), emphasizing the language used in the text. Another teacher (participant number 27) defined CR as the ability to analyze the text, while a third (participant number 5) described it as the analysis of the content of the text to ascertain its essence. These views are exemplified in the following excerpts:

CR is the capacity to analyze written texts. It is essential to understand the messages they convey, whether positive or negative. This skill should be imparted to schoolchildren (Teacher #27).

CR is a method of analyzing the content of texts, which allows for the comprehension of the information they convey. Without this comprehension, the act of reading a text is useless, as the reader will not be able to retain any information and the learning process will be hindered (Teacher #5).

A number of authors (e.g., [Al Roomy, 2022](#); [DiYanni, 2017](#); , [Liu, 2019](#); [Scanlon, 2017](#)) have indicated that analysis is an important element in CR. The ability to analyze a piece of writing is crucial for developing critical thinking skills. Analysis entails dissecting the text into its elements to grasp its intention, organization, significance, and even tone, as sometimes asked in reading comprehension and standardized tests like TOEFL. This skill should be taught to EFL students since it enables them to explore the text in greater depth, rather than merely grasping the surface meaning. It ultimately fosters active interaction with the text, thereby promoting independent learning.

2. Evaluating

A meticulous examination of EFL teachers' responses regarding their conceptions of CR revealed that six out of 29 participants regarded CR with evaluation. Evaluation, as evidenced by responses from participants 3, 11, 18, and 28, primarily pertained to the content of texts. For instance, Participant 3 stated that reading critically entails a critical evaluation of the content of a text, which begins with an examination of the text's main idea and the reasons presented by the author to support it.

In contrast to the four aforementioned participants, participant number 14 conceptualized evaluation in CR as the process of assessing the logical ideas of a text, particularly the supports the writer utilized to persuade the reader of the veracity of their argument, as can be seen in the excerpt below:

I think that CR is the process of assessing the logical ideas of a text. A text that is of a high quality will typically have a premise and supporting evidence. It is the role of the critical reader to identify and omit any illogical evidence. It is possible

to teach this activity to EFL students, although it is necessary to adjust the level of proficiency and general knowledge of the students (Teacher #14).

The interpretation provided by participant number 14 is clear: evaluation belongs to the CR element when practiced in reading activities. This is because assessing and identifying illogical evidence necessitates a deep thinking process. A reader must assess the evidence and connect it to the main premise. Then, they must decide whether the evidence aligns with the premise or not. There are significant advantages to be gained when this skill is taught to EFL students, including improvements in their reading comprehension skills. Consequently, some researchers (e.g., [Din, 2020](#); [Liu, 2019](#); [Rombout, Schuitema, & Volman, 2021](#); [Shamida, Sidhu, & Nawji, 2021](#)) conceive that evaluation is an intrinsic component of CR and CT.

3. Inferring/Concluding

The study identified five distinct conceptions of inference and conclusion, as illustrated in [Table 1](#). Given that the two terms are essentially synonymous, they were considered to be analogous items. Consequently, this research integrated them into a single concept. In general, the five conceptions proposed by the participants (6, 9, 19, 21, 22) conveyed similar ideas, namely that CR is the process of drawing a conclusion from what has been read. For instance, Participant 6 defined CR as the capacity to draw conclusions and underscored the significance of this ability in comprehending written texts, as seen below:

In my opinion, CR is drawing a conclusion based on the information presented in the text. This ability is typically associated with students engaged in the process of reading theoretical texts. The ability to comprehend a concept is more valuable than just memorization (Teacher #6).

The conclusion is a key component of several authors' and researchers' works (e.g., [Alsaleh, 2020](#); [Clarke, 2022](#); [Paul & Elder, 2019](#); [Wale & Bishaw, 2020](#)). In the context of EFL, the ability to draw conclusions or inferences is crucial for students, as it enables them to comprehend the central message of a text and engage in critical thinking. This approach enables students to assess the strength of the author's argument. By formulating conclusions, students become more engaged in the reading process ([Arifin, 2020](#)) and develop into an active role as readers, rather than merely absorbing information from the text ([Ilyas, 2023](#)).

4. Interpreting

Similar to the theme of "conclusion," the theme of interpretation emerged from EFL teachers' conceptions with the same frequency. All five responses addressed text contents as a source of interpretation. According to participant number 7, text interpretation is the essence of CR, while participant number 23 stated that it is:

CR is how we interpret the text, as not all readers are capable of discerning the writer's intention, the text's underlying agenda, or the text's implicit meanings. In general, readers accept the text as it is (Teacher #23).

Participant number 2 also referred to the content of the text when interpreting it. However, she proceeded to mention the importance of teaching this interpreting skill to EFL students. Despite the difficulty of the skill, she asserted that EFL teachers must facilitate students in developing this skill in order for them to become critical readers. According to her, interpreting a text involves reading the text beyond a superficial level, but rather, digging deeper into the text, for example, by considering the context. This prepared last year's students of high school to enter the academic world at university.

A number of authors (e.g., [Khemlani, Byrne, & Johnson-Laird, 2018](#); [Rosenblatt, 2018](#); [Rosenshine, 2017](#); [Paul & Elder, 2019](#)) also acknowledge interpretation as a component of critical reading. Some argue (e.g., [Paul & Elder](#)) that interpretation can encourage active engagement and enhance comprehension skills in students. This is because when interpreting a text, students can move from a passive to an active stance. They begin to see the text in a more nuanced way, which in turn leads to active involvement in the reading process. This ultimately promotes comprehension, although it does require significant practice and effort. However, this should begin at an early age.

5. Criticizing and Questioning

The study revealed that three participants (numbers 4, 8, and 12) explicitly referenced the concept of criticism from the perspective of CR conception. For instance, participant number 12 asserted that CR consistently adopted a critical stance on the content that had been previously read. He could criticize the content that was not appropriate to the factual or present condition, or he could criticize, for instance, the writer's main idea that lacked convincing support. This can be observed in the following excerpt:

CR employs a critical approach to the texts we read. For instance, we may question the rationale behind the writer's inclusion of certain examples and the absence of others. Is this intentional? This critical stance is particularly valuable when examining social texts, such as when the content becomes outdated in the context of the present situation (Teacher #12).

Finally, the theme of questioning emerged as the least common theme among EFL teachers' conceptions. Two participants (numbers 1 and 26) stated that CR was related to questioning. For instance, the participant stated that readers should ask questions about the text, such as the writer's motivation for writing the text or the writer's agenda. Although this concept is similar to criticism, questioning is more connected to a process of inquiry, whereby the reader engages with the text by asking a multitude of questions before forming an opinion and accepting the text as truth. That is why numerous authors (e.g., [Brummett, 2018](#); [Kuhn, 2019](#); [Paul, 2018](#); [Paul & Elder, 2019](#)) regard these two themes as essential components of CR.

EFL Teachers' implementation of CR in their instructional practices

As previously noted, EFL teachers imparted 87 CR instructional techniques based on their CR beliefs. The table below displays example exercises or practices

that EFL teachers gave to their students based on the six categories listed above. The example practices offered have been revised to improve clarity.

Table 2. CR Categories and Their Example Practices

No	CR categories	Example of Instructional Practices
1	Analyzing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Analyze the essay's major part of speech and sentence structure. b. Look at the context and find the synonyms and antonyms for the underlined words. c. Find all of the characters in the story and examine their intentions and motivations for doing anything.
2	Evaluating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Determine the major topic of the text. b. Identify the central idea of the text idea and its supporting sentences. c. Evaluate the key characters in the story and their relationships with the others
3	Inferencing/Concluding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Draw a conclusion from each of the paragraphs. b. Make another version of your own conclusion based on these essays.
4	Interpreting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Write your own interpretation of the author's intention in the passage b. Interpret the meaning of the underlined sentences in the text based on their context.
5	Criticizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Criticize the textual content that is not relevant to the current situation.
6	Questioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Work in groups and create 5 explicit and 5 implicit questions based on the text

A review of the instructional practices employed by EFL teachers yields two notable observations. First, they appear to have a grasp of the concept of CR, and second, they are adept at fostering students' CR skills. The activities associated with analysis, for instance, provide students with the opportunity to engage in critical reading. For instance, the second instruction, "Look at the context and find the synonyms and antonyms for the underlined words," requires EFL students to engage in two forms of critical thinking: the identification of synonyms and antonyms and the analysis of context. To determine the meaning of the underlined word, students must first consider the context surrounding it and then identify its synonyms and antonyms. This task undoubtedly requires critical thinking, and it serves as a prime example of a CR activity.

Another effective CR activity is instructional practice, "Evaluate the key characters in the story and their relationships with the others," which falls under the evaluation category. Through this activity, students are required to read the entire story, comprehend it, identify the main character, and then identify the supporting characters. They must also determine the relationships among the characters. Once

they are finished with the comprehension of the story, they are encouraged to apply critical thinking to connect the relationships among the characters. Practically, this instructional practice involves a critical process of reading and thinking at almost every stage.

The instructional practices specified in [Table 2](#) have demonstrated the array of activities that facilitate EFL students' CR abilities. These practices have provided other English teachers with the opportunity to adopt and adapt them for implementation in their respective classrooms. Nevertheless, there is still scope for further exploration and expansion. For instance, the CR category of prediction has not been addressed by EFL teachers. Additionally, the instructional practices for criticizing and questioning require further development. It is, therefore, necessary for EFL teachers to exercise their creativity, or even their critical thinking, in this regard.

CONCLUSION

This research investigates English teachers' conceptions of CR and how they translate these conceptions into teaching practices. The study has revealed six distinct concepts of CR and demonstrated the teachers' ability to convert these concepts into activities. It can be concluded that EFL teachers in Indonesia have a comprehensive understanding of the essence of CR and are already adept at implementing CR activities in their teaching-learning processes. However, it is evident that there is still room for improvement in the teachers' knowledge of the CR categories. The existing literature on CR has informed some other categories, such as predicting and summarizing, which could be further explored. Having a deeper understanding of these categories could potentially enhance teachers' creativity in developing instructional practices. Additionally, the incorporation of more CR activities based on the aforementioned categories could enrich the curriculum and provide students with a more diverse range of learning experiences. It is important to note that this research only encompasses 29 EFL teachers from five cities in Indonesia, predominantly from secondary schools. Therefore, it would be beneficial to expand the scope of the study to include teachers from different educational settings and at various levels of education. Further research could be expanded to cover other cities in Indonesia, for example, or different levels of education such as elementary or university. It would be beneficial if the research also investigates CR in non-English environments, for instance, conceptions and instructional practices of teachers teaching the Indonesian language.

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