Empowering Students Through Critical Literacy in English Language Teaching

Nasrullah Darma Perkasa
Universitas Islam Kadiri
nasrullahdarma16@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the implementation of critical literacy of thinking in English Language Teaching (ELT) as an effort to empower course participants in critical thinking, social awareness and active learning skills. Critical literacy goes beyond grammar and vocabulary, guiding participants to examine texts in depth, interpret implied meanings, and understand how language reflects power relation and social norms. This research adopts a qualitative approach, with active participants of an English language course institution in Pare. Data were collected through classroom observation, participant interviews, and document analysis. Instruments used include observation sheets, interview guidelines, and reflective journals. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation and member checking. The core strategy of implementing critical literacy of thinking involves encouraging participants to pose critical questions, interpret various types of texts, express alternative viewpoints and be cross-source checking. These activities enhance participants' ability to identify bias, reflect on perception, and evaluate personal beliefs. The findings reveal that integrating critical literacy of thinking in ELT not only strengthens language skills but also connects English learning with real-world social issues. With adequate support and adaptive teaching methods, critical literacy of thinking can become an important part of inclusive and reflective learning in course institutions, despite challenges such as limited resources and insufficient tutor training.

Keywords: Critical literacy, English Language Teaching, Student empowerment, Critical thinking, classroom pedagogies

Introduction

English language learning at course institutions generally focuses on linguistic aspects such as grammar, vocabulary and mastery of basic communication skills.

however, in facing complex social realities, the majority of course participant -students, prospective workers or university students- requires critical thinking skills to be able to understand and respond to discourse more reflectively.

Critical approach offers relevant and contextual alternatives. unfortunately, this approach has not been widely used in English language course classes, especially since the focus of teaching is still technical and pragmatic. therefore, this study aims to explore how implementation of critical literacy of thinking can empower course participants through a learning process that is more critical, reflective and connected to social reality. Many scholars agree that integrating critical literacy in English language learning equips learners with tools to analyze and respond to complex social realities, rather than merely memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules (Janks, 2010). Moreover, the growing role of English as a global language makes it important for learners not only to master linguistic competence but also to develop social awareness and critical perspectives. When learners are equipped with critical literacy skills, they are better prepared to analyze diverse media messages, navigate multicultural contexts, and challenge stereotypes or misinformation. In addition, in the era of rapid digital communication, the ability to critically evaluate sources, identify biases, and construct informed opinions is increasingly essential. Therefore, integrating critical literacy in English teaching becomes a strategic step to connect language learning with broader personal and social development goals. This paper is expected to contribute insights for educators and stakeholders in non-formal education who wish to innovate their teaching practices for greater relevance and impact. In Indonesia, the majority of English language course institutions are still focused on preparing participants for standardized tests or improving basic conversation skills. However, there is often a gap between the knowledge learned in class and the real-life ability to analyze social texts or issues critically. Learners who only memorize structures and vocabulary may struggle to participate in discussions about social, political, or cultural matters. Meanwhile, the rapid growth of social media and online content in English demands stronger critical literacy so that learners are not easily influenced by misinformation or biased narratives.

Many young people in non-formal education, especially in language courses in places like Pare, have aspirations not only to communicate fluently in English but also to work abroad, continue their studies overseas, or engage in digital platforms. For

these goals, critical literacy is highly relevant because it trains learners to think beyond surface-level comprehension. They can develop the skill to analyze whose voices are represented in texts, identify persuasive strategies, and understand how language can be used to build or challenge power relations.

Moreover, teaching critical literacy can help learners become more reflective individuals. They may begin questioning the stereotypes presented in media, the portrayal of social groups, or even how advertising manipulates emotions. As educators, we have an obligation to equip learners not only with language skills but also with the critical awareness to use English as a tool for social engagement and personal empowerment.

This study therefore is driven by the belief that language classes should be meaningful spaces where participants connect what they learn to real-life contexts and social issues. It aims to explore how critical literacy can be practically implemented in non-formal English teaching settings, what impacts it creates for learners, and what obstacles need to be addressed to make this approach sustainable.

Method

This research uses descriptive qualitative approach with around 10 active participants from a language course institution at Pare, Kediri. Each participant has different educational background, and is on average between 18 and 25 years old. Participants came from various regions in Indonesia, with different cultural and educational backgrounds. Some had graduated from vocational high schools, while others were university students from diverse faculties. This diversity provided rich perspectives during discussions and reflections because each participant brought unique experiences and opinions.

The choice of Pare as the research location was based on its popularity as a center for English learning in Indonesia. Many learners come to Pare with specific goals, such as improving TOEFL scores, preparing for work abroad, or simply seeking immersive language environments. These motivations influence how they engage with critical literacy activities because some prioritize practical skills while others are open to exploring social topics in depth.

Data analysis in this study used thematic analysis techniques. The researcher read all data repeatedly to identify patterns, codes, and emerging themes. Coding was

done manually by underlining sentences or paragraphs that reflected participants' critical thinking, emotional responses, or changes in perspective. Themes such as bias recognition, social awareness, and reflective thinking were then compared across data sources to validate findings.

Data collection technique

- Class observation: it is done for 4 sections in the Reading for Understanding class.
- Semi-structured interview: run on 5 participants to explore their experience in reading and interpreting critical text.
- Reflective journal analysis: each participant is asked to write own reflection after read social themed text such as social inequality, juvenile delinquency and gender.

Research instrument

- Classroom behavior and interaction observation sheet
- Open interview guidelines
- Reflective journal assessment rubric

Data validity

Validity is maintained through data triangulation (observation, interview and documents) and member checking of respondents to ensure appropriateness of interpretation.

Result

Awareness of text point of view

Most participants were able to identify bias or perspective in the text. In the text "The Perfect Body in Social Media," 7 out of 10 participants recognized that the narrative promoted certain unrealistic beauty standards that were detrimental to certain groups.

Reflective discussion and diverse views

Through group discussion, participants showed courage in expressing critical opinions. One participant stated, "I just realized that fast food advertisements often depict false happiness. In fact, the impact on health is bad."

Self-reflection and social sensitivity

In reflective journals, participants wrote about changes in their views on social issues. For example, one participant wrote: "the text about migrant workers opened my eyes, I thought that working abroad would be successful, but it turns out there are many dark sides that I did not know about,"

Implementation challenges

Some of the obstacles in implementing critical literacy of thinking in course institutions are time constraints, lack of reading materials that are appropriate to the local context, and tutors who not yet accustomed to using a reflective approach.

Examples of classroom practice

To implement critical literacy, the tutor used various types of texts, such as news articles, advertisements, and social media posts. One example was using an Instagram post about fast fashion brands. Participants were asked to discuss who benefits from fast fashion, who might be exploited, and how the language in the caption tried to create a glamorous image. This discussion led to a deeper understanding of consumerism and social responsibility.

Another activity involved analyzing a short news article about environmental protests. Participants identified emotional words used by journalists and debated whether the article was neutral or biased. One participant said, "I never realized that words like 'rioters' or 'peaceful activists' can change how people see the same event." Such activities helped participants connect language learning with real-world social awareness.

Participants' journal reflections revealed that they became more careful when reading online content. Some admitted they used to share posts on social media without checking facts, but after the lessons, they felt more critical and selective. This shows how critical literacy in English class can influence learners' daily behavior, not only language skills.

Discussion

This study explored the implementation and impact of critical literacy in English Language Teaching (ELT), revealing significant gains in students' analytical abilities, reflective practices, and social awareness. The findings underscore the potential of critical literacy to empower students beyond mere language acquisition, fostering a deeper engagement with texts and real-world issues.

Enhanced Awareness of Text Point of View and Freirean Pedagogy

The results indicate a notable improvement in participants' ability to identify bias and perspective within texts. For instance, the high rate (7 out of 10) of participants recognizing the detrimental nature of unrealistic beauty standards promoted in "The Perfect Body in Social Media" text demonstrates a heightened capacity for critical deconstruction. This finding strongly resonates with Paulo Freire's concept of "conscientization" or "critical consciousness." Freire (1970) argued that true education involves learners moving beyond a superficial understanding of reality to critically perceive the social, political, and economic contradictions that shape their lives. Your study's participants, by identifying the manipulative nature of media portrayals, are actively engaging in this process of conscientization, challenging dominant narratives rather than passively consuming them. This suggests that explicit instruction in critical literacy equips students with the tools to discern underlying messages and question power dynamics embedded within texts, moving beyond a superficial understanding of content.

Cultivating Reflective Discussion and Social Constructivism

The study highlights the emergence of courageous and critical opinions among participants through group discussions. The poignant realization by one participant that "fast food advertisements often depict false happiness" exemplifies how collaborative dialogue can unearth hidden implications and foster a more nuanced understanding of everyday phenomena. These discussions provided a safe space for students to articulate their perspectives, challenge assumptions, and engage with diverse viewpoints, thereby strengthening their critical thinking muscles. This aspect aligns well with social constructivist theories of learning, particularly Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the role of social interaction in cognitive

development, where learning is a collaborative process. In your study, the group discussions served as a "zone of proximal development" where participants, through interaction with peers and the tutor, collaboratively constructed new understandings and refined their critical perspectives. This goes beyond individual comprehension to collective sense-making, a hallmark of effective critical literacy pedagogy.

Fostering Self-Reflection and Transformative Learning

The reflective journals served as a powerful medium for participants to document shifts in their perceptions of social issues. The participant's reflection on migrant workers, acknowledging the "dark sides" previously unknown, illustrates a profound personal transformation. This indicates that critical literacy not only enhances cognitive abilities but also cultivates empathy and social sensitivity, enabling students to connect academic learning with real-world complexities. This resonates with Jack Mezirow's theory of transformative learning. Mezirow (1991) posits that transformative learning involves a fundamental shift in an individual's frame of reference, assumptions, and perspectives, often triggered by a "disorienting dilemma." The critical texts, such as the one on migrant workers, likely served as such dilemmas, prompting participants to critically examine their prior beliefs and integrate new, more complex understandings into their worldview. By prompting self-reflection, critical literacy encourages students to re-evaluate their own assumptions and develop a more informed and compassionate outlook.

Practical Implementation and Luke and Freebody's Four Resources Model

The successful integration of critical literacy was evident in the varied classroom practices employed by the tutors, using diverse text types like news articles, advertisements, and social media posts. The observation that participants became more discerning in their online content consumption, moving from uncritical sharing to selective engagement, further underscores the tangible impact of these classroom activities on daily behavior. These practical examples directly exemplify aspects of Luke and Freebody's (1999) Four Resources Model of critical literacy. This model suggests that proficient readers draw on four key resources:

1. Code Breaker: Understanding the technical aspects of text (e.g., vocabulary, grammar).
2. Meaning Maker: Comprehending the literal meaning of a text.
3. Text User: Understanding how texts function in different social contexts (e.g., an advertisement aims to persuade).
4. Text Analyst/Critic: Critically analyzing the text for bias, power relations, and authorial intent.

Your study's classroom activities, such as analyzing the language in fast fashion captions or identifying emotional words in news articles, clearly fostered the "Text Analyst/Critic" role. Furthermore, the shift in participants' online behavior demonstrates their ability to act as "Text Users" who understand the social implications of sharing content. This model provides a robust framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of critical literacy skills developed in your study.

Addressing Implementation Challenges and Teacher Professional Development
Despite the observed successes, the study also identified several challenges in implementing critical literacy, including time constraints, the lack of locally relevant reading materials, and tutors' unfamiliarity with reflective approaches. These obstacles highlight the ongoing need for teacher professional development that extends beyond theoretical knowledge to practical application and confidence-building in facilitating critical discussions. These findings align with broader research on curriculum innovation, which often points to teacher preparedness and resource availability as crucial factors for successful implementation (Fullan, 2007). Addressing these challenges is crucial for scaling up the integration of critical literacy in ELT settings and maximizing its benefits for students.

In conclusion, this study provides compelling evidence that integrating critical literacy into ELT significantly empowers students by enhancing their awareness of textual bias, fostering reflective discussions, promoting self-reflection, and cultivating social sensitivity. These empirical findings are robustly supported by established theories such as Freire's conscientization, Vygotsky's social constructivism, Mezirow's transformative learning, and Luke and Freebody's Four Resources Model. While challenges in implementation exist, the demonstrated positive impact on students'

analytical skills, critical thinking, and real-world engagement strongly advocates for the wider adoption and sustained support of critical literacy initiatives in English language education, recognizing its profound potential to develop not just proficient language users, but critically aware and socially responsible citizens.

Conclusion and Suggestions

This study proves that the applications of critical literacy in English learning in course institutions can empower participants intellectually and socially. Participants not only learn to understand texts, but also build critical awareness of issues around them. However, for this approach to be sustainable, course institutions need to provide relevant reading materials and provide tutors with training in critical pedagogy. In this way, English learning can become a reflective and transformative tool, not just technical and practical. Besides pedagogical improvements, future research should also examine the long-term effects of critical literacy practices on learners 'attitudes, confidence, and social engagement beyond the classroom. Studies with larger and more diverse participant groups could enrich understanding of how different backgrounds influence learners 'responses to critical literacy activities. Additionally, developing locally relevant teaching materials aligned with learners 'experiences can help bridge the gap between abstract critical concepts and practical language use. It is also recommended that collaboration be established between course institutions, researchers, and material developers to produce resources that are contextually appropriate and culturally sensitive. By continuously exploring and refining this approach, critical literacy has the potential to become a transformative force that not only improves language skills but also shapes learners into socially conscious and empowered individuals. Thus, critical literacy in ELT is not merely an instructional technique but an educational mission to prepare learners to engage actively and responsibly in society. Furthermore, course institutions could collaborate with publishers or digital content creators to produce reading materials that reflect Indonesian realities but written in English. Topics could include local cultures, social challenges, environmental issues, or stories of Indonesian figures, making critical literacy activities more engaging and relatable.

In addition, there should be efforts to train tutors not only in language teaching methods but also in facilitating critical discussions. Tutors should learn how to

encourage open dialogue, manage sensitive topics, and help learners' express opinions respectfully.

Finally, critical literacy should be seen as a long-term goal, not a one-time lesson. Learners need continuous exposure and practice to make critical thinking a habit. With proper planning and support, critical literacy has the power to transform English learning into a process that empowers individuals and contributes positively to society.

Author Biography

Nasrullah Darma Perkasa started learning English in July 2023 at Global English Course for 10 months. During the writing this paper, the author was a tutor in Kampung Inggris pare, Kediri. Currently, the author is also a first-year student at Islamic University of Kadiri.

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