

Integrating Critical Literacy in English Language Teaching: Practices and Perceptions of EFL

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Abstract *The application of critical literacy in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning is gaining attention as awareness of the importance of education that builds social awareness and reflective thinking increases. However, the understanding and implementation of critical literacy concepts among EFL teachers still vary, especially in non native contexts. This study examines EFL teachers' perceptions of critical literacy and the teaching practices they employ to integrate this approach into their classrooms. This study used a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through semi structured interviews and classroom observations of ten EFL teachers at the secondary level in Indonesia. Data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's approach to identify key patterns in teachers' perceptions and practices. The results show that most teachers understand critical literacy as the ability to analyze texts in depth and critically question the ideologies behind them. However, limited theoretical knowledge, lack of professional training, and a crowded curriculum are the main obstacles to consistently implementing critical literacy practices. Nonetheless, some teachers showed initiative by adapting teaching materials and encouraging critical discussions in class. The findings provide important implications for curriculum development, teacher training, and language education policy in EFL contexts.*

Keywords: critical literacy, English language teaching, EFL teachers, teacher perceptions, teaching practices, critical education

1. Introduction

In recent decades, literacy has evolved from the mere ability to read and write to more complex understandings, such as critical literacy. Critical literacy emphasizes the importance of readers in questioning, critiquing, and analyzing texts and their socio cultural context (Freire, 1970; Janks, 2010; Luke, 2012). In teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), critical literacy plays a crucial role in shaping students who are fluent in the language and possess social awareness (Ko, 2013; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Vasquez, 2017).

Implementing critical literacy in the EFL classroom is crucial, given the increasing global challenges, including disinformation, opinion polarization, and social inequality. EFL teachers are not only required to teach language, but also to be facilitators in shaping students' critical thinking (Ajayi, 2008; Lau, 2013; Wallace, 2003). Unfortunately, not many trainings have explicitly integrated critical literacy principles into the EFL curriculum (Yulianti & Sulisty, 2021; Alford, 2020; Riasati &

Mollaei, 2012).

A preliminary study in Indonesia by Yulianti & Sulisty (2021) showed that only 25% of EFL teachers felt confident enough to implement critical literacy in their classrooms. Similar studies in Korea and Taiwan also show similar trends (Shin & Crookes, 2005; Ko, 2013; Lau, 2013). Below are data on teacher readiness based on several Asian countries:

Table 1. Data on Teacher Readiness in Asian Countries

Country	Number of EFL Teachers Surveyed	Ready to Integrate Critical Literacy (%)
Indonesia	100	25%
South Korea	75	32%
Taiwan	80	28%

Table 1 presents comparative data on teacher readiness to integrate critical literacy in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction across several Asian countries. Notably, Indonesia has the lowest percentage, with only 25% of surveyed EFL teachers reporting readiness, compared to 32% in South Korea and 28% in Taiwan.

This relatively low level of readiness in Indonesia may stem from multiple interrelated factors. Culturally, critical literacy often challenges hierarchical classroom norms and encourages questioning of established texts and authority, which may contrast with the traditional pedagogical models that are dominant in some Indonesian educational contexts. Structurally, limited access to professional development programs focused on critical pedagogy and an insufficient emphasis on higher order thinking in curriculum standards may also contribute to this readiness gap. Moreover, integrating critical literacy often requires both pedagogical shifts and adequate institutional support, as well as access to digital literacy and diverse learning materials, all of which may vary widely across schools and regions.

Therefore, beyond simply highlighting readiness levels, these findings suggest an urgent need for targeted teacher training, curriculum reform, and culturally responsive strategies to foster a more critical, reflective approach in EFL classrooms in Indonesia and similar contexts.

Critical literacy originates from Paulo Freire's (1970) ideas on liberation pedagogy, which encourages learners to understand and transform the world. Luke and Freebody (1999) assert that literacy involves social practices that are not neutral, while Janks (2010) offers an integrative approach that emphasizes dominance, access, design, and critical understanding of texts. These theories have been used to design critical literacy based learning in EFL contexts (Beck, 2005; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Norton, 2004).

Various studies have examined the implementation of critical literacy in EFL classrooms. For example, Ko (2013) in Taiwan noted that teachers face obstacles in implementation due to curriculum pressure and limited resources. In Korea, Shin and Crookes (2005) noted that critical literacy practices remain limited despite a theoretical understanding. Meanwhile, Alford (2020) proposed a project based classroom strategy to strengthen students' engagement in critical reading.

In Indonesia, Yulianti & Sulistyo's (2021) research is one of the primary references highlighting EFL teachers' low adoption of critical literacy. Other studies by Safnil (2020) and Musthafa (2017) also pointed out the gap between the national curriculum and critical pedagogical approaches. Limited teacher training and the dominance of traditional methods are the main barriers (Siregar & Ningsih, 2021; Zaim, 2020; Hapsari, 2019).

Although many studies highlight the importance of critical literacy, few explicitly explore EFL teachers' perceptions and actual practices in integrating this approach (Comber, 2015; Vasquez, 2017; Alford, 2020). Especially in Indonesia and other developing countries, few studies have employed qualitative approaches to explore teachers' perspectives in depth (Riasati & Mollaei, 2012; Ajayi, 2008; Yulianti, 2021).

Many EFL teachers understand the importance of critical thinking but hesitate to integrate socio political topics into lessons for fear of violating prevailing norms or curriculum (Ko, 2013; Wallace, 2003; Shin & Crookes, 2005). In addition, lack of access to relevant learning materials is also a significant challenge (Lau, 2013; Beck, 2005; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004).

Critical literacy can be integrated into the EFL classroom through various approaches, such as project based learning, discussion of contemporary issues, and multimodal text analysis (Vasquez, 2017; Janks, 2010; Luke, 2012). However, to implement these innovations, teachers need appropriate pedagogical training and policy support to sustain them (Norton & Toohey, 2004; Morrell, 2008; Alford, 2020).

This research offers a unique contribution by exploring the perceptions and practices of EFL teachers at the secondary level in implementing critical literacy in the Indonesian context. It describes the constraints and teachers' innovative strategies in translating theory to practice (Yulianti, 2021; Alford, 2020; Shin & Crookes, 2005). This attempts to bridge the gap between critical literacy theory and pedagogical reality.

Indonesia, a developing country with complex social, cultural, and political backgrounds, provides a rich context for implementing critical literacy approaches (Safnil, 2020; Musthafa, 2017; Zaim, 2020). EFL classes in Indonesia can potentially encourage students' awareness of local and global issues (Siregar & Ningsih, 2021; Hapsari, 2019; Yulianti, 2021).

Teachers are not just language teachers, but also agents of social change who can shape a critical and reflective generation (Freire, 1970; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Morrell, 2008). Their perceptions and actions in implementing critical literacy reflect the readiness of the education system to move towards a more humanistic and democratic direction (Beck, 2005; Alford, 2020; Comber, 2015).

This study aims to: (1) explore EFL teachers' perceptions of the concept of critical literacy; (2) identify teaching practices used in integrating critical literacy into the classroom; and (3) uncover challenges faced by teachers in the implementation process (Ko, 2013; Shin & Crookes, 2005; Yulianti & Sulisty, 2021).

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the development of critical literacy based teacher training, more contextualized curriculum revision, and the expansion of the critical literacy discourse in foreign language teaching in developing countries (Luke, 2012; Janks, 2010; Vasquez, 2017). Thus, this study is important in strengthening the pedagogical foundation and policies of a more progressive language education.

2. Method

Type of Research

This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to provide an in depth description of the perceptions and practices of EFL teachers regarding the integration of critical literacy in the learning process. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the context, experiences, and dynamics of the classroom in a naturalistic manner (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Population and Sampling

The population in this study consisted of all secondary level English teachers in City/District X, Indonesia, who teach in junior and senior high schools, both public and private. The sample was selected using a purposive sampling technique, with the following criteria:

- 1) active teachers who have taught EFL for at least 3 years;
- 2) willing to engage in interviews and classroom observations;
- 3) have experience or interest in critical literacy based teaching approaches.

The sample in this study consisted of 30 English teachers from various high schools in three cities in Indonesia: Yogyakarta, Bandung, and Surabaya. These locations were selected based on the diversity of social backgrounds, levels of access to technology, and differing regional education policies, thus allowing researchers to capture variations in the implementation of critical literacy practices. Although the number of respondents was small, the purposive sampling strategy was employed to

ensure that participants had experience integrating critical issues into language teaching. As such, this sample is considered representative enough to illustrate the common trends and typical challenges EFL teachers face in the context of secondary education in Indonesia. However, these findings still need to be interpreted in light of the limitations in geographic coverage and sample size. A total of 10 EFL teachers were selected as participants representing a variety of schools and experience backgrounds.

Research Instrument

The primary instruments in this research were a semi structured interview guide, a classroom observation guide, and supporting documents. The semi structured interview guide contained open ended questions to explore participants' understanding, perceptions, strategies, and challenges in implementing critical literacy. These questions were categorized around key dimensions of critical literacy, including awareness of power relations, recognition of multiple perspectives, critical questioning, and socio political consciousness.

The classroom observation guide was developed to systematically capture teaching and learning practices that reflected critical literacy principles. Specific observation criteria included the use of teaching strategies that encouraged student dialogue, critical questioning, and reflection on social issues; the level of student engagement with controversial or socially relevant topics; and observable indicators of critical thinking, such as identifying bias in texts, questioning dominant narratives, and articulating alternative viewpoints. The observation sheet used during classroom visits contained sections for descriptive notes (detailing classroom activities and teacher student interactions) and analytical notes (identifying critical literacy indicators). For instance, one item in the observation sheet asked observers to assess whether students analyzed a text from multiple perspectives, such as the author's intent, marginalized voices, or broader cultural contexts, using a rating scale of "Not Observed," "Partially Observed," or "Fully Observed."

In addition to interviews and observations, supporting documents such as lesson plans, teaching materials, and student assignments were collected and analyzed. These documents were examined using a rubric based on critical literacy principles, looking for the inclusion of relevant social themes, opportunities for critical engagement, and tasks that required evaluative or reflective thinking.

To ensure validity, all research instruments were reviewed and validated through expert judgment involving two language education experts and one EFL practitioner. They evaluated the instruments for clarity, relevance, and alignment with critical literacy constructs, and their suggestions were incorporated into the final versions used in data collection.

Data Collection Technique

Data was collected through several techniques: (1) Semi structured interviews of 45 60 minutes each with the teachers, (2) Direct classroom observations were conducted 2 3 times per teacher, recorded, and analyzed using an observation sheet based on critical literacy indicators (Ko, 2013; Alford, 2020), (3) Analysis of documents, such as syllabi and teaching materials, to trace the integration of critical literacy elements, whether explicitly or implicitly. All data were collected over two months.

Research Procedure

The research procedure consisted of several stages, as follows: (1) developing a proposal and obtaining research permits from relevant institutions and schools; (2) Screen participants according to the inclusion criteria; (3) Collecting data: interview, observation, and documentation; (4) Recording, transcribing, and transcribing interview and observation data; (5) Analyzed the data using a thematic approach; (6) Performing member checking to increase data validity; (7) Compile a research report based on the findings that have been thematically categorized.

Data Analysis Technique

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedure, which includes six stages:

1. Familiarizing with data (reading and reviewing data),
2. Generating initial codes,
3. Searching for themes (categorizing codes into themes),
4. Reviewing themes,
5. Defining and naming themes, and
6. Producing the report.

Triangulation of data sources (interviews, observations, documents) and confirmation with participants were conducted to increase credibility. The data analysis in this study followed the six phases of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke. First, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data by reading and re reading the transcripts of interviews, observation notes, and supporting documents to gain a deeper understanding of the content. Second, initial codes were generated systematically across the entire dataset, identifying significant features relevant to critical literacy. Third, these codes were categorized into potential themes that captured recurring patterns across different data sources. Fourth, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the coded data and the broader dataset. Fifth, each theme was clearly defined and named, capturing the essence of the participants' experiences and teaching practices. Finally, a detailed

The report was produced, integrating data extracts and an analytic narrative to support each theme.

Triangulation was conducted to enhance the credibility and consistency of the findings by comparing and cross checking data from three primary sources: interviews, classroom observations, and relevant documents. This process involved mapping similar codes across data types to identify convergence and divergence in the information. For example, if a theme emerged in interview data, such as "promoting student voice," the researcher examined whether corresponding evidence appeared in classroom practices (as observed) and in instructional materials (e.g., lesson plans or student assignments). Consistencies across these sources strengthened the validity of the theme, while discrepancies were analyzed further to understand contextual or situational factors. Additionally, member checking (participant confirmation) was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with selected participants to verify interpretations and clarify any ambiguous points. This process helped ensure that the analysis accurately represented participants' perspectives and instructional practices related to critical literacy.

3. Results & Discussion

EFL Teachers' Perception of Critical Literacy

Most of the EFL teachers in this study demonstrated a basic understanding of critical literacy as a reading process that involves analyzing and evaluating the meaning behind the text. Teachers understood critical literacy as students' ability to question the values and ideologies contained in teaching materials (Luke, 2012; Janks, 2010; Vasquez, 2017). Some teachers also associate critical literacy with higher order thinking skills, especially in responding to social issues.

Teachers with postgraduate education tend to demonstrate a deeper understanding of critical literacy, particularly in sociocultural contexts. They identify critical literacy as a tool to empower students to confront injustice and understand power dynamics in language (Freire, 1970; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Morrell, 2008). However, this understanding has not been fully systematic or firmly theory based.

Other teachers consider critical literacy only as the ability to answer in depth reading questions, not as a transformative pedagogical approach. This suggests a significant gap in understanding among teachers (Ko, 2013; Beck, 2005; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). The lack of professional training and exposure to critical pedagogical theory also has an impact.

Table 2. Key findings related to teachers' perceptions

Perception Aspect	Number of Teachers	Percentage
Critical literacy as text analysis	7 teachers	70%
Critical literacy as a social tool	3 teachers	30%
Limited understanding of HOTS	4 teachers	40%

Source: Researcher Interview Data, 2025

Teachers with more than 10 years of teaching experience are more likely to be open to critical literacy, although not all of them explicitly use it in practice. They attribute it to personal experiences teaching sensitive topics, such as social inequality and diversity (Ajayi, 2008; Comber, 2015; Shin & Crookes, 2005).

Critical Literacy Teaching Practice in EFL Classrooms

In classroom observations, it was found that critical literacy practices are implemented through various approaches, such as discussions of social issues, analysis of advertisements, and debates on controversial topics. However, the frequency and depth of these activities still vary widely between teachers (Ko, 2013; Alford, 2020; Lau, 2013). Some teachers integrate authentic texts, such as news or opinion articles, on topics like gender equality, poverty, and climate change.

For example, a teacher uses an article about air pollution in a big city for class discussion. Students are invited to identify who benefits and suffers from environmental policies and how the language in the text reflects a particular point of view (Janks, 2010; Wallace, 2003; Beck, 2005). This activity illustrates an attempt to develop critical awareness through the reading of contextualized texts.

However, most teachers still rely on textbooks and multiple choice questions as the primary method, with little room for critical reflection or exploration of alternative perspectives. This aligns with previous research findings on the dominance of traditional approaches in EFL teaching in Southeast Asia (Yulianti & Sulisty, 2021; Riasati & Mollaei, 2012; Musthafa, 2017).

Teachers who successfully implement critical literacy tend to adapt teaching materials to students' contexts in a flexible manner. They are also more reflective in evaluating their teaching of language (Freire, 1970; Norton, 2004; Vasquez, 2017). This shows the importance of pedagogical awareness in implementing critical literacy.

Critical Literacy Implementation Challenges

Various obstacles are encountered when implementing critical literacy, including institutional, cultural, and personal factors. The main barrier is the lack of formal training that equips teachers with the theoretical knowledge and practical skills to implement critical literacy (Yulianti, 2021; Comber, 2015; Shin & Crookes, 2005). Various obstacles were identified in implementing critical literacy, spanning institutional, cultural, and personal aspects. The most prominent barrier is the lack of formal training that equips teachers with the theoretical foundation and practical strategies to incorporate critical literacy into their teaching effectively. Without adequate training, many teachers feel uncertain about designing activities, selecting appropriate texts, or facilitating discussions on socially relevant and potentially

sensitive issues. This gap highlights the urgent need for targeted professional development programs that not only introduce the core concepts of critical literacy but also provide hands on experience in applying these concepts in diverse classroom contexts. Such training is essential for building teachers' confidence, deepening their understanding, and enabling them to create meaningful learning experiences that foster students' critical thinking and social awareness. The national curriculum, which focuses on linguistic competence, limits the space for critical approaches.

Teachers also expressed concerns about the sensitivity of specific social topics, such as gender, religion, and politics. They worry about negative responses from parents, principals, or even students (Ajayi, 2008; Beck, 2005; Ko, 2013). This highlights the significance of structural support and school culture in fostering safe environments for open and critical discussions.

Additionally, the administrative burden and limited learning time pose significant obstacles. Teachers often find it challenging to balance the demands of national exams with the need to foster students' critical thinking (Lau, 2013; Wallace, 2003; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004).

Table 3. Summary of Challenges Faced

Key Challenges	Frequency (Number of Teachers)
Training limitations	8 teachers
Curriculum pressure	6 teachers
Social topic sensitivity	5 teachers
Limited time and resources	4 teachers

Source: Interview and Observation, 2025

Thus, policy interventions and ongoing training are needed to support teachers in implementing critical literacy effectively and contextually (Alford, 2020; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Morrell, 2008).

Teachers Adaptive Strategies in Integrating Critical Literacy

Despite facing various obstacles, some teachers demonstrate innovation in overcoming these limitations. One effective strategy is integrating local issues closely related to students' everyday lives and socio cultural contexts. For example, teachers raise topics such as environmental problems in the community (e.g., river pollution or waste management), social inequality in access to education, or local cultural practices and their changing relevance in modern society. These locally grounded issues resonate more strongly with students, reflecting their immediate reality and lived experiences. Teachers also employ collaborative discussion methods and adapt popular media such as local news articles, social media content, or short videos to stimulate critical thinking and dialogue (Vasquez, 2017; Janks, 2010; Luke, 2012).

Interestingly, students often exhibit higher engagement and more active participation when discussing local issues than when discussing general or global topics. They are more willing to share personal experiences, express opinions, and question underlying assumptions because the topics feel relevant and meaningful to their daily lives. This relevance enhances critical awareness and encourages a sense of agency, as students begin to see themselves as capable of contributing to change in their communities. These strategies enable teachers to introduce elements of critical literacy in a manner that aligns with the curriculum, while remaining contextually relevant and impactful for learners.

Some teachers also utilize an inquiry based learning approach, where students are encouraged to formulate questions, research information, and present findings through presentations or argumentative essays (Ko, 2013; Alford, 2020; Norton, 2004). This increases student engagement and encourages them to think more deeply.

In digital contexts, teachers utilize social media and YouTube videos as teaching materials to analyze gender representations, stereotypes, or public opinion. These resources provide EFL students with an authentic and engaging dimension (Beck, 2005; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004; Wallace, 2003).

Table 4. Examples of teaching materials used by teachers

Type of teaching material	Usage Example
Local news articles	Analyze media bias and news framing.
YouTube advertising video	Discussion of gender stereotypes and consumerism
Songs with social themes	Interpretation of lyrics and discussion of ideology
Short narrative text	Critical reading and discussion of cultural values

Source: Teaching Material Documentation, 2025

These innovations demonstrate that, although critical literacy is not yet systematically integrated into education policy, teachers can still actively develop progressive and contextualized practices (Freire, 1970; Morrell, 2008; Vasquez, 2017).

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that EFL teachers' perceptions of critical literacy remain highly diverse. Most teachers understand critical literacy as limited to text analysis and strengthening higher order thinking skills, while a few relate it to broader ideological and social aspects. Teachers' level of understanding is generally influenced by their educational background, teaching experience, and exposure to critical pedagogy theories. These findings suggest the need to enhance the conceptual

Understanding of critical literacy in the context of foreign language teaching.

Applying critical literacy in EFL classes tends to be sporadic and unstructured. Some teachers can adapt learning materials and methods to encourage student engagement in critical discussions, such as through media analysis, discussions of social issues, and the examination of authentic texts. However, limited professional training, curriculum pressure, and sensitivity to social issues are the main obstacles to consistent and in depth implementation. Therefore, this study emphasizes the importance of critical literacy based teacher training, educational policy support, and the provision of contextualized teaching resources to integrate critical literacy in EFL learning sustainably.

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