

INCORPORATING CRITICAL LITERACY IN ELT: IMPROVING INDONESIAN STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

This research investigates how critical literacy is applied in an English Language Teaching (ELT) context and how it promotes students' critical thinking, engagement, and writing expression. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the researchers converged data through observation and semi-structured interviews with four participants from a private university in North Jakarta. It is shown that critical literacy guides students to examine social and political topics from various points of view, improves their classroom engagement, and assists the growth of organized and logical written arguments. Instead of simply emphasizing on enhancing writing details, this research focuses the function of critical literacy as a pedagogical approach that enable students to think intensely, communicate convincingly, and captivate with real-world topics in meaningful ways.

Keywords: critical literacy; ELT; Indonesian student; critical thinking; writing engagement

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menginvestigasi bagaimana literasi kritis diterapkan dalam konteks pembelajaran bahasa Inggris (ELT) serta bagaimana pendekatan ini mempromosikan pemikiran kritis para mahasiswa, keterlibatan, dan tulisan mahasiswa. Dengan menggunakan studi kasus kualitatif, para peneliti menggabungkan data melalui observasi dan wawancara semi-struktur bersama empat mahasiswa dari universitas swasta di Jakarta Utara. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa literasi membimbing para mahasiswa untuk menguji topik sosial dan politik dari berbagai sudut pandang, meningkatkan keterlibatan di dalam kelas, serta mendukung pengembangan tulisan yang lebih terorganisir dan argumentatif yang logis. Alih-alih berfokus dengan meningkatkan kemampuan menulis secara teknis, para peneliti berfokus pada fungsi literasi kritis sebagai pendekatan pedagogi supaya mahasiswa dapat berpikir secara mendalam, berkomunikasi dengan lebih meyakinkan, dan terlibat dalam topik-topik nyata secara lebih bermakna.

Kata Kunci: literasi kritis; ELT; mahasiswa Indonesia; berpikir kritis; keterlibatan menulis

INTRODUCTION

Critical literacy is a practical framework that can easily face challenges to create a critical world for everyone (Vasquez, 2017). Employing critical literacy as a framework can involve developing critical literacy skills in education, encouraging social awareness, and promoting active participation in creating positive change. Critical literacy is a way that can be used as a guide in sorting information. It is needed since the massive spread of invalid information cannot be justified. Cai et al. (2023) and Hazzard (2021) state that critical literacy is considered before deciding something. Therefore, it can be concluded that it is not assessed from someone's point of view but is reviewed further and the facts are sought so the context can be understood clearly.

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Based on the explanation above, Adair & Kim (2023) and Kazemian et al. (2021) claim that many countries, including Indonesia, have begun to shift their focus to implementing the teaching and learning process using the critical literacy method. This helps students to think more critically in dealing with a problem (Mahardika & Kuswandono, 2022). Moreover, students are also trained to express their opinions logically and realistically. Critical literacy plays a crucial role in guiding someone's perspective since it can save recipients of invalid information. Critical literacy motivates students to question, and examine what they read, hear, and receive, and indicate various points of view (Nurcahyoko et al., 2024). According to a literature study, aside from the benefit of incorporating critical literacy into reading materials, it was found that critical literacy in reading is unable to be implemented massively for some reasons.

Gustine (2018) states the significance of critical literacy for working English teachers, strategies to assist students develop critical literacy competencies, and English teachers' knowledge of critical literacy as a teaching model. McLaughlin and DeVogd (2011) claim that in the English classroom, critical literacy is clarified in different ways in teaching and learning, however, several authoritative figures disagree that critical literacy is merely about method. However, Hazzard (2021) argues that critical literacy in the classroom encourages social justice and exploration of language and literature in several forms. He identifies that this specific type of study investigates the potential connection found in language and literature and this practice indicates to students that language is rarely neutral. Based on the subject matter and student population, critical literacy may seem different in each class. Although there is no accurate formula for teachers to assist students in mastering critical literacy, there are several practices that appear more frequently in lessons.

The establishment of critical literacy skills has the aim of enabling students to improve their critical literacy so they can acknowledge social issues and understand messages in the modern world critically. Nichols et al. (2021) claim that critical literacy aims to help students understand the content by changing the common perspective, reading from various perspectives, focusing on social and political issues, and taking steps based on the texts the readers have read. In establishing critical literacy, students also employ their writing skills (Adair & Kim, 2023). This can help them to apply their critical literacy on social and political issues daily. Critical literacy skills can also help students to grow their ability to give and strengthen their arguments in written text (Rerung, 2021). In addition, critical literacy also encourages students to improve their personalities so they can maximize their way of thinking (Moje & Lewis, 2020). In simpler terms, by employing critical literacy in the learning process, students can have broader insights and can address the issues successfully. Critical literacy aims to make everyone aware of experiences that have been built in certain relationships and strengths through critical reading and writing (Ratama et al., 2021). Besides, Kazemian et al. (2021) argue that critical literacy skills have a purpose to have an important effect on students and can help them to acknowledge both oral and written information.

Critical literacy and writing skills are connected and those can help the students empower their analytical thinking skills by analyzing texts, identifying hidden meanings, challenging assumptions, and translating text directly (Shapiro, 2021). By employing critical literacy, students can understand how ideas are expressed and structured in the text, enabling them to create well-organized and persuasive written content. In addition, critical literacy encourages them to think about the social and cultural settings in which texts are produced, increasing their understanding of the readership and the power dynamic at work. Therefore, students improve their ability to modify their writing style, tone, and subject by experiencing critical literacy through education.

In critical literacy education, students are asked to get involved and start thinking from a broader and more critical perspective. Critical literacy learning is connected to writing skills (Adair & Kim, 2023). Writing skills and critical literacy are also very closely related because the students need to write about the issues being discussed. As written by Ratama et al. (2021), critical literacy is used by the teachers to make the students understand so that they are motivated to make several strategies that can help them to become confident proficient, and critical writers. Critical literacy

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and writing skills have a positive relationship and impact on the students, it is shown that the students who are used to writing have a more stable mental health than someone who rarely writes (Brownell & Rashid, 2020). This research aims for researchers to get the answers to two research questions, namely (a) How is critical literacy applied in the Indonesian ELT classroom? (b) How does critical literacy influence students' critical thinking and writing engagement?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is an approach to reading and writing that engages the readers to analyze and question the social, cultural, and political contexts based on the texts they have read (Leander & Burriss, 2020). The concept of literacy continues to develop in a broader sense in all disciplines and is translated flexibly in all scientific perspectives and it is often associated with a pedagogical approach that encourages the students to strengthen their analytical skills (Bishop, 2023). Rosfiani et al. (2021) state that critical education, which was developed by Freire (1970), is based on three key concepts. Firstly, attention must be paid to raising awareness of the students. Besides, it precedes and is intertwined with the knowledge of the world. Secondly, dialogue is the core of learning. Lastly, teaching should recognize students' prior knowledge. Bobkina and Stefanova (2016) claim that critical education is the root of sociocultural perspective on language, critical philosophy, pedagogy, educational sociology, feminist concerns, and poststructuralist theory which in fact, the term of critical literacy was coined by social critical theorist concerned with social injustice and inequality. Critical literacy is often the focus in writing course, since the aim of writing in English is to produce effective and persuasive writing so they will learn to consider multiple perspectives, discover social and political contexts, and share interest and motivations within the texts (Mbato, 2019).

Writing skills are a vital skill to be mastered since they can improve students' abilities in learning foreign languages and provide a positive impact to develop their proficiency in writing (Witari & Mahardika, 2024). In writing, we should also pay attention to the use of appropriate language structure and spelling (Rao, 2019). Employing concise and easy-to-understand language also indicates appropriate writing skills and most likely becomes successful in expressing the ideas that will be conveyed which can develop students' creativity (Mahardika, 2025). Furthermore, Kazemian et al. (2021) claim that to improve students' writing skills, learning should be followed by brainstorming ideas and the right choice of vocabulary and language structures.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Four interviewees were interviewed in this research. Table 1 indicates the four confidential interviewees' demographic information. The researchers used pseudonyms to protect the interviewees' privacy.

Table 1. Interviewees' demographic information

No	Name	Gender	Age
1.	Interviewee 1	Male	19
2.	Interviewee 2	Male	20
3.	Interviewee 3	Female	19
4.	Interviewee 4	Female	19

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This qualitative research aims to observe how students think in dealing with certain situations. Qualitative research focuses on the processes, events, and authenticity that involve interactions with the reality it examines (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By employing the qualitative method, the researchers understand how critical literacy can be used as an effective learning approach to improve students' writing skills and gain deeper views and experience. It allows the researchers to answer the research questions and provide the opportunity to obtain comprehensive insight into how critical literacy can be applied effectively in Indonesia. A semi-structured interview is employed in this research so the collected data can answer the questions discussed in this research appropriately (Aung et al., 2021). It aims to gain reliable and comprehensive data from the participants.

Participant observation is used to combine observation and interviews, it involves direct observation in a real situation to study human behavior and social interaction (Kawulich, 2005). The researchers taught a class in the 4th semester where the participants studied writing courses in the previous semester and the duration was 60 minutes. The researchers began the class by explaining critical literacy and started giving examples of some cases as objects of critical literacy. The case that was brought was "underage prostitution" and the researchers asked the participants to think critically by discussing it together in a group of three. The researchers then showed some examples of opinion essays and proceeded by giving assignments to the groups. The participants were asked to write an essay consisting of 150 words from the introduction, content of arguments, and conclusion. After the essays were made, the researchers invited the participants to discuss them together. By doing this, the researchers were able to observe the interactions between the participants and their teachers actively and accurately.

To analyze the gathered data, the researchers conducted a semi-structured interview with four participants. It aims to find out more about the learning outcomes earlier. The four participants would convey their perspectives to the researchers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The researchers attempted to answer two research questions namely (a) How is critical literacy applied in the Indonesian ELT classroom? (b) How does critical literacy influence students' critical thinking and writing engagement?

The findings section will include the data analysis from the interview with the participants.

Engaging approach for school

The interview conducted with four interviewees gained a conclusion that the Critical Literacy class they experienced left them a good impression for its engaging approach.

"I think the most interesting thing was when we read a piece of literature and we understood what the intent and purpose of the text was." (Interviewee 1)

"In my opinion, the interesting part was when we got an assignment to write the opinion essay. Since it increased the students' critical thinking skills, they were required to develop ideas." (Interviewee 2)

The Critical Literacy class employed an engaging approach that combined close reading of texts with opportunities for students to express their opinions effectively. By fostering a deeper

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understanding of literature and promoting critical thinking through concise writing tasks. The class encouraged active engagement and intellectual growth among students. As the Critical Literacy class leave gave them a good impression, the interviewees also suggested that it would be great if Critical Literacy could be taught in schools.

“I think it is necessary because we should think critically about everything.” (Interviewee 1)

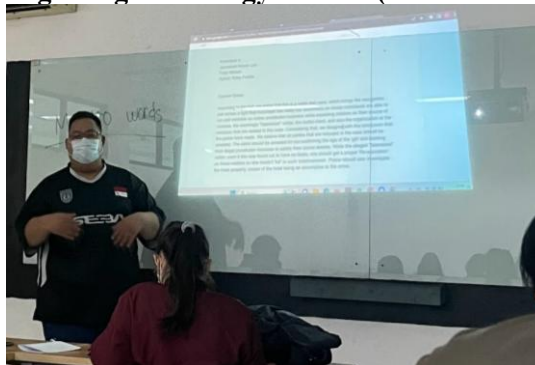
“I think yes, because classes like this can enhance students’ critical thinking. In my opinion, this is a crucial skill that is needed in the workplace and everyday life.” (Interviewee 3)

Those responses highlighted the importance of implementing critical literacy in schools due to its broader impact on student’s critical thinking abilities and their ability to navigate the complexities. Interviewee 1 stated that critical literacy expanded beyond the realm of literacy itself enabling students to develop critical thinking that applies to various aspects of life. On the other hand, Interviewee 3 mentioned the practical value of critical literacy in both professional and personal aspects. It can be concluded that both responses highlighted the significance of incorporating critical literacy into school.

Enhancing perspective through technology

The use of teaching media and technology in the Critical Literacy class enhances its impact and shapes a deeper understanding of the importance of utilizing critical literacy in daily life, while also fostering a broader perspective on social and political issues.

Figure 1. Integrating technology in class (source: the researchers)



“In my opinion, it is a good idea to utilize technology and teaching media in the class. It is easier for teachers to convey the materials and the students can also understand the materials easily.” (Interviewee 2)

“I think the use of technology in the class is effective and efficient, especially now that we are entering the digital era. It is very suitable to use technology as long as we can use it wisely and for educational purposes only.” (Interviewee 3)

The responses from two interviewees highlight the importance of incorporating technology and teaching media in the Critical Literacy class, emphasizing its helpfulness, effectiveness, and alignment with the digital era. Interviewee 2 acknowledged the benefit of utilizing technology and teaching media in the class to support the students in understanding teachers’ explanations.

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Interviewee 3 supported the use of technology in the class by considering its effectiveness and efficiency, especially in the digital era.

Alongside the benefits of using technology, the interviewees also agreed that Critical Literacy class could also broaden their vision or political view about the world.

“Yes, we can develop our mindset so we don’t give a subjective opinion toward something.” (Interviewee 2)

“I think so, for example in Critical Literacy class, it explains about issues related to social or culture and other things, and it trains our brains to deal with those things automatically, like the underage prostitution case in Indonesia.” (Interviewee 4)

Those responses indicate that the Critical Literacy class plays a crucial role in broadening students’ political views and fostering a more informed mindset. Interviewee 2 highlights the potential the students have to gain an impact on social and political issues, while Interviewee 4 supports this notion by emphasizing that Critical Literacy exposes the students to political and social issues. As students engage with such topics, their cognitive abilities are honed which can enable them to navigate complex issues and think critically. Therefore, the critical literacy class made the students expand their way of thinking about social and political issues.

The improvement of writing skills and discussion ability

The participants perceived that critical literacy enhanced their ability to categorize ideas in writing. The process of discussing, negotiating, and drafting essays elevated both their communication and writing confidence. Moreover, they were able to provide effective strategies to overcome the challenges they faced. Their responses to the researchers’ questions about whether Critical Literacy class could improve writing skills by providing instructions and opportunities to develop effective arguments amazed the researchers.

“We were instructed to write and there was an explanation in a structured manner namely an introduction, body paragraph, and conclusion.” (Interviewee 1)

“Yes, it does. Since the opinion came from our thoughts. However, we also need a backup explanation to support our opinions. That is why we have to find some articles and read more to strengthen our opinion.” (Interviewee 3)

Interviewee 1 acknowledged that the class provided instructions that covered crucial components such as introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion which guided the students to structure their writing in a coherent and organized manner. Interviewee 3 added that Critical Literacy enhances writing skills. The essay assignment required the students to formulate their thoughts independently.

“We ended up having an intense discussion with others in the class. We were also asked to divide ourselves into several groups and distributed the tasks such as which sentences we had to make. We learned to communicate and invited the group to think about how to convey the opinions nicely.” (Interviewee 1)

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“Before writing the essay, we discussed the case within our groups. There were pros and cons regarding the case we discussed. However, as a group, we must agree on one point. It helped us to improve our communication skills and strengthen our negotiation skills.” (Interviewee 3)

It can be seen that Critical Literacy class can improve discussion ability by fostering good communication, teamwork, and the development of well-conveyed opinions. Interviewee 1 highlighted the importance of discussion within the class and emphasized the need for effective communication and collaboration when working in groups. By engaging in discussions, the students are prompted to articulate their thoughts. Furthermore, they considered different perspectives and conveyed their opinions collectively. While still on the same page, Interviewee 3 came up with a further supporting idea on this notion by mentioning the group discussions that preceded the essay writing process. These discussions involved weighing pros and cons, reaching consensus, and focusing on a common goal.

Discussion

Based on the findings section, three main factors will be discussed in this section namely spurring critical thinking in students, helping students to think logically in concluding a case, and helping students to express their opinions.

Spurring critical thinking in students

Based on the result of the interview, the researchers found several answers from the students about how this writing class can trigger their critical literacy against the cases the researchers provided. More than one student gave a similar answer, where they argued that critical literacy is very important and can be beneficial for them in the future. This is supported by Bishop (2023) who explains that critical literacy is about how a person can expand their literacy skills and be able to find social inequalities.

Leander and Burriss (2020) mention that critical thinking is one of the most important things for students to guide them to become more independent, especially in a highly competitive environment making decisions and solving problems. Critical literacy can help students analyze problems in their everyday lives by implementing ideas that they have in the application of technology and scientific development (Rosfiani et al., 2021).

Helping students to think logically in concluding a case

Students are taught to test the reliability and relevance of evidence presented in cases by questioning sources, comparing data with other sources, and making decisions based on solid evidence (Mogea, 2023). Critical literacy also encourages the students to think about the implications of the conclusions they draw and look at the consequences of an argument (Shadiev & Yang, 2020). The result of the study about critical thinking will allow them to make the right decisions and choices if needed which means that it can also help them to see various possibilities and solutions that may not be visible at first glance (Zou’bi, 2021).

Critical literacy can also develop students’ critical thinking skills because it is easier for them to process and respond to the information they receive (Ratama et al., 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to encourage the development of critical literacy skills so that students can face a complex world with an open, critical, and reflective mindset (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016).

Moje and Lewis (2020) state that by being engaged in the development of critical literacy skills, the students will be taught to recognize the privilege from some dominant discourses. They are also taught to become more aware of the consequences of discourse hegemony and be more actively participating in shaping more inclusive narratives (Zou’bi, 2021).

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Helping students to express their opinions

Students can use their thoughts to share their opinions in a clear and organized manner by employing critical literacy (Sharipova & Xalimova, 2024). Critical literacy can also encourage students to engage more in the learning process, question their assumptions, and be more open to different views and experiences which can help them broaden their perspective, consider different viewpoints, and develop more informed and fact-based opinions (Shadiev & Yang, 2020). In addition, the issues that happen around the participants can make it easier for them to express their opinions critically. As stated by Abdullaev (2021), the materials that are more related to the participants' environment can be easily explored so they can produce critical opinions of the problem. It can also enable them to develop a critical understanding and will help them to become more motivated to discuss and share their opinions on the issue (Dörnyei, 2020).

Novianti (2021) also argues that critical literacy involves the exploration of multiple perspectives on a topic that has been applied using different approaches. This can be interpreted that one of the approaches that can be used in critical literacy is to read and study from different sources, including conflicting points of view. Different approaches can also be utilized to ensure the students gain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the issue they are studying (Gill & Stewart, 2024). The purpose is to invite the participants to participate in sharing their thoughts, exchanging views, and refuting others' arguments by giving facts and statistics. It can also encourage the participants to express their opinions critically, consider alternative viewpoints, and be open to broader understanding. By employing different approaches and considering multiple perspectives, the participants can develop strong critical literacy skills and produce more in-depth and evidence-based critical opinions.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate critical literacy in an ELT context and examine how it contributes to students' enthusiasm. The findings of this research showed several significant outcomes. First, the employment of critical literacy in schools was found to be an engaging approach, fostering active students' participation and enhancing their overall learning experience. Second, the integration of technology in critical literacy instruction was found to broaden students' perspectives, providing them with access to diverse resources and platforms for exploring social and cultural issues. Third, critical literacy was found to have a benefit on students' writing skills and discussion abilities, improving their ability to think critically, logically conclude cases, and express their opinions effectively.

The discussion surrounding these findings underscores the importance of critical literacy in spurring critical thinking among students. By engaging with texts and questioning assumptions, students develop the ability to think critically and analyze information more effectively. In addition, critical literacy helps students to think logically in concluding cases, as they are encouraged to consider multiple perspectives and evidence. Moreover, critical literacy provides students with the necessary tools and skills to express their opinions confidently and articulate their thoughts coherently. Besides, the existence of critical literacy can also make the students understand the issues around them. This research reveals how important it is to incorporate critical literacy into ELT settings. The benefit of an engaging method, the use of technology, and the good effects on students' writing and conversation skills are all highlighted.

Suggestions

It can be concluded that the students were motivated to learn more about critical literacy. Learning critical literacy in ELT, helps the students to be more critical and can easily express their

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ideas based on facts. Students can understand and appreciate the differences and issues around them. Moreover, this research is expected to have benefits for the students so they can employ critical literacy in their daily activities. It also highlights the connection between critical literacy and the growth of critical thinking, logical reasoning, and persuasive opinion expression, which in turn fosters a more enthusiastic and engaged student body. Therefore, future researchers may use this as a reference for similar research in broader education contexts.

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