

Critical Reading and Literacy in EFL Context: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to summarize and critically analyze existing empirical research on critical reading and literacy in EFL classroom contexts. The descriptive statistics characterizing the studies (e.g., research designs, participant characteristics, settings) were presented alongside the qualitative content analysis findings results containing the emerging themes, which were arranged sequentially according to their prevalence. The research articles reviewed in this study met the following criteria: (1) peer-reviewed studies, (2) critical reading and literacy in EFL contexts, and (3) published within the last 9 years by using search engine databases (e.g., SINTA, Google Scholars) and reputable journal websites (e.g., journals.sagepub.com, tanfonline.com, link.springer.com). This analytical review revealed three emerging themes of findings informing the outcome of critical reading discourse enhancement in classroom context, critical thinking, and the challenges of integrating critical reading and literacy. The findings of this study should be able to shed light on what has been done thus far and highlight implications for future research and practice regarding critical reading and literacy.

Keywords: Critical Reading; EFL Context; Literacy; Analytical Review; Reading

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the need of capability in literacy among students is getting higher. Literacy is not only an ability to read, but how to interpret, making inference and meaning beyond the written information through any media. The society needs to understand what the literacy is and how important to master literacy skill. On the contrary, it tends to be ignored by society (Carr-Hill & UNESCO Institute for Statistics., 2008). Keefe and Copeland (2011) define literacy as an ability to read and write information about daily lives of someone in a short summary. The importance of literacy are to prepare students for their future life, a good quality basic education requires literacy skills for life and further learning which even more important than in the past (Carr-Hill & UNESCO Institute for Statistics., 2008). In the implementation of teaching literacy, any challenges could not be avoided. Teachers tend to overcome challenges in preparing their students with literacy skill (Veliz, 2021; Yunus & Ubaidillah, 2021). Furthermore, literacy needs to spread widely among society. The only way to achieve widespread literacy is by building literate societies that encourage individuals to acquire and use their literacy skills (Carr-Hill & UNESCO Institute for Statistics., 2008). In this case, the classroom setting plays an important role to build our students into literate people. To enhance their literacy skill, integrating critical reading and literacy can enhance the capability to understand, making inference, and meaning in literacy through any form of media. As humans, we have a special ability to think differently than other creatures. We can make decisions, inferring meaning, analyzing certain information, communicating and discussing about certain topic around us. However, each person has different state of their thinking ability. Sometimes we can find someone is able to think in a broad understanding and others might want to dig more information. If we can illustrate it, someone is able to see the surface of an iceberg.

Meanwhile, others might use certain tools to dive deeper beyond the iceberg. They want to see how deep or big the ice berg is. Thus, they try to reach deeper under the sea until the tip of the ice berg is visible. When it does, it is such a great accomplishment to see the tip of the ice berg under water. That illustrates how the critical thinking would work, by diving deeper under the sea to see the tip of the ice berg. We accomplish many things by using critical thinking in our life, especially in studying. It is needed in accomplishing certain targets in learning something new and it must be taught among students. We can say that critical thinking is essentials that we bring in our journey, such as map, compass, bag, utensils, notebook, pen, and many more that can fit in our bag. These essentials are important to face complex challenges ahead. Critical thinking can affect the way we think, make decision, and taking action. Will it be a positive or negative result? It depends on how we think about the challenge in front of us.

For students, it is a basic skill that they should master. It should be taught in the classroom and teachers should provide practices to sharpen their critical thinking skill. Facione (1990) had mentioned three main aspects in critical thinking: problem-solving, decision making, and creative thinking. Problem solving is related to the process of finding the core of the problem and its solution. Creative thinking is defined as a process of creating new ideas, innovations, insights, perspective, and approaches in understanding new information. Lastly, decision-making helps to organize certain choices from variety of information which has been gained before. These three aspects should be taught in the classroom in any subjects which could lead us to apply the critical pedagogy in the classroom. Larson (2014) defines the critical pedagogy as the student-centered approach which focuses on problem-solving, discussion, and creating new ideas during the lesson.

In educational setting, critical thinking plays an important role in enhancing students' academic performance and daily life quality. A researcher mentioned the role of critical thinking plays in our studying process, either in the classroom or beyond its walls. Furthermore, mastering critical thinking also prepares students in their future life after they graduate from their study (Masduqi, 2011). In some researches also supported the idea of implementing critical thinking among students from middle to higher education. For example, Ko & Wang (2013) investigated critical literacy practices among EFL college students in Taiwan. They conducted a qualitative study on the analysis of essays about gender-related related article and their perception of critical literacy in English class. The result shows certain degrees between the four participants in this study. They had different strategies to read critically, some of them focus on the social and cultural context of the text instead of analyzing the text in detail. In another research, Yang (2013) also conducted a research about a blended learning environment which utilized Moodle to learn English and enhance speaking and listening skill. The participants were 83 students of university in Taiwan. The result of implementing critical thinking through this platform shows a positive result. There is improvement in the end of post-test which was taken among students.

Based on the examples of research about implementing critical thinking, it proves that critical thinking skill is important to master it. The significant improvement among students shows positive impact in learning English. Critical thinking not only can be applied in learning English, but in another subject as well.

Critical reading entails, by definition, paying closer attention to the text than usual, an intensified awareness - in short, the opposite of automaticity (Wallace, 2003). There are two strands of CLA in critical reading, the macro awareness of literacy practices in social settings and, at the micro level, the awareness of effects in specific texts. The first strand explores language and literacy practices in a variety of cultural contexts, such as who reads what type of text to whom, when, where, and why. The second strand is process-oriented, drawing attention to the processes at work in the creation and reception of the meanings integrated through texts (Wallace, 1999). Moreover, the ideological content of text can invite students to challenge themselves in their critical reading discourse. The linguistic choices of the writer are indicated

through these discourses (Fairclough, 2013). Thus, the goal of critical reading is to teach students how to read the relation between word and the world to power, identity, difference, and access to knowledge, skills, tools, and resources (Janks, 2013).

In EFL context, critical reading is still facing challenges in its implementation. Some researchers had conducted research about how the critical reading was applied in the classroom from middle to higher education. The emergence challenges mostly about implementation of critical reading and literacy among students (Alqatanani, 2017; Arini & Sulistyarini, 2021; Halimah et al., 2020; M. Y. Ko, 2013; M. Yun Ko & Wang, 2013; Kuo, 2014; Liu, 2017; Par, 2018; Setya et al., 2022; Sriwantaneeyakul, 2018; Suarcaya & Prasasti, 2017; Surdyanto & Kurniawan, 2020; Varaporn & Sitthitikul, 2019; Widowati & Kurniasih, 2018), the teachers' challenges in teaching critical reading in EFL class (Cho, 2015; Sultan et al., 2017; Veliz, 2021; Yunus & Ubaidillah, 2021), and enhancing critical thinking through critical reading discourse (Aghajani & Gholamrezapour, 2019; Damaianti et al., 2020; Dumrong, 2022; Husna, 2019; Kusumaningputri, 2019; Sari & Prasetyo, 2021; Yulian, 2021).

Based on the challenges that had been faced from the teachers, some researchers had conducted experimental research in their articles and presented their solution toward challenges in teaching critical reading and literacy. For example, Alqatanani (2017) conducted the potential of implementation of multiple intelligence toward critical reading performance. The participants were divided into two groups, the controlled and the experimental group. The result shows that the experimental group which had been taught with the multiple intelligence strategies had a significant outcome in their reading post-test. Meanwhile, the controlled group only had a slightly different outcome in the reading performance after the post-test. Another research related to improving critical reading and literacy is classroom action research in the setting of digital device application. In this case, the researcher used an application called 'Kahoot!'. The participants included the higher education students who were taking English Education majors. The result shows the use of Kahoot! is able to enhance students' participation and learning autonomy during the class. Moreover, the post-test result also shows the significant outcome from the pre-test. The research about improving critical reading also has another approach which is proposed by Halimah (2020). The unique point in her research is using a critical literacy approach in literature appreciation toward Indonesian short stories. This approach enables students' awareness in social relationships and its power which is held by certain roles in the Indonesian short stories. The result shows a positive outcome of students' significant performance in critical reading in the post-test which means that using a critical literacy approach can enhance and improve students' critical reading and literacy.

Although many researches related to the English Language Teaching had been conducted in the past, there are some researches which provide systematic review toward the recent topic trends through the past years (Dündar & Merç, 2017; Hashemi & Si Na, 2021; Inawati et al., 2023; Nur et al., 2022). For example, Nur (2022) has compiled a systematic review about integrating mobile assisted language learning (MALL) in English Language Teaching research. Furthermore, the newest research about MALL in English Language Teaching was conducted by Inawati (2023). Similar research related to integrating information communication technology (ICT) had been conducted by Hashemi & Si Na (2021). Lastly, Dündar & Merç (2017) had written a critical review over 86 studies toward curriculum development and evaluation in ELT.

Based on the explanation above, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding critical reading research. Despite the importance of critical reading skills in language learning, systematic investigations into trends and themes within this area are scarce. Addressing this gap, the current study aims to investigate the patterns and themes present in critical reading research within the context of ELT, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of this essential skill in language education.

METHOD

This analytical review synthesizes and critically interprets empirical research on critical reading and literacy in the EFL context over the last 9 years in order to understand the current landscape of critical reading and literacy. This study follows the definition of literature review as a condensed version of the literature review found in a dissertation or master's thesis can be found in journal articles (Cresswell W., 2014). The steps are as follows: (1) identify keywords related to the topic, (2) search the keywords using a library resource or a computer searching engine, (3) locate about 50 articles or books related to the research topic, (4) skim reading to make a group of articles or chapters that are central to the research topic, (5) make a mapping of literatures that have been read, (6) summarize the most relevant articles into major themes, (7) assemble the literature and structuring it. Based on the following steps, the researcher started to provide 25 reputable articles to be analyzed and reviewed. Then, the following criteria were used to evaluate studies on critical reading and literacy: (1) peer-reviewed studies, (2) studies on critical reading and literacy in EFL contexts, and (3) scientific studies in the last 9 years. The articles reviewed were among others taken from A Journal of Culture English Language Teaching Literature & Linguistics, Arab World English Journal (AWEJ), Asia-Pacific Education Researcher, Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching, English Language Teaching, Eurasian Journal of Educational Research, Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics, International Journal of Instruction, JEELS (Journal of English Education and Linguistics Studies), LEKSEMA: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra, Reading in a Foreign Language, Studies in English Language and Education, TEFLIN Journal, The Journal of Asia TEFL.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

There are a total of 25 articles published over the last 6 years, from 2019 to 2024. As can be seen in the Table 1, the studies were mostly conducted studies on critical reading and literacy were mostly conducted in 2020 (6 articles). The second most conducted research was in 2019 (5 articles) and 2022 (5 articles). The majority (14 articles) of the empirical studies research design was quantitative. Then came the qualitative (8 articles) and mix method (4 articles). Most of the studies involved students (21 articles) then followed by teachers (4 articles). Lastly, the context of critical reading and literacy mostly in the classroom setting (14 articles), the second was related to critical thinking (7 articles), and few with challenges in teaching critical reading (4 articles).

Table 1. Summary of Research Studies on Critical Reading (N=25)

Characteristics	N
Publication Year	
2019	5
2020	6
2021	2
2022	5
2023	4

2024	3
Research Design	
Qualitative	8
Quantitative	13
Mix Method	4
Participant	
Students	21
Teachers	4
Context	
Critical Reading and Literacy	14
Challenges in Teaching Critical Reading	4
Critical Thinking	7

Discussion

The Emerging Themes of Critical Reading Studies

1. Theme One: The Role of Critical Reading in EFL Classrooms

The most significant theme discovered throughout review on critical reading and literacy was taking in classroom context. The classroom setting such as critical reading practices, approach, media, and assessment tool. In critical reading practices pointed out that critical reading discourse showed a positive result of critical reading enhancement among students (Kurniati, 2024; Mekuria et al., 2024; Phimphimon et al., 2024). Then, some researchers used different media to teach critical reading, such as short stories (Halimah et al., 2020), critical reading module (Surdyanto & Kurniawan, 2020), and mobile assisted learning by using Kahoot (Arini & Sulistyarini, 2021). Lastly, assessment also had been developed (Setya et al., 2022) and investigated by integrating multimodal task (Varaporn & Sitthitikul, 2019).

As one of few empirical studies, Surdyanto & Kurniawan (2020) had developed a critical reading module based on Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). They emphasized this approach can give stimulus on understanding content inside reading material and enhance students’ critical thinking in learning English. The result of this study shows the positive effectivity, validity, and practical in improving students’ critical literacy. The validator gives this module a very good category which proofs that the module has a very good practicability. It means their module can be used to teach critical reading and literacy. However, this study is still limited in higher education setting since the participant of this study is English Literature Study program. Furthermore, a study by Phimphimon (2024) aimed to examined the impact of an active learning management plan on 10th-grade students from a Thai public school, selected through purposive sampling. Utilizing a one-group pre-test and post-test design, they assessed changes in student performance before and after implementing the active learning approach. The results revealed a notable enhancement in critical reading skills. This research offers valuable empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of active learning strategies in improving critical reading abilities in educational settings.

In a similar study, some researcher also attempted to make critical reading test for Indonesian EFL students (Setya et al., 2022). This study takes twenty students from English Language and Literature program. The result of their critical reading test is valid. However, the result from the students is less than satisfactory due to lack of the participant or the inability to do the test which is caused by facing difficulty in learning critical reading in the classroom.

Overall, these studies underscore the importance of contextualized approaches in teaching critical reading and literacy, while also pointing out the need for ongoing research to address the challenges faced by students in diverse educational settings.

2. Theme Two: Enhancing Critical Thinking through Critical Reading

Research in critical reading and literacy has shown positive outcomes in enhancing and developing critical thinking skills. The cultivation of critical thinking primarily takes place in classroom settings, focusing on aspects such as assessment (Damaianti et al., 2020; Husna, 2019; Kusumaningputri, 2019) and various classroom activities (Al Roomy, 2022; Aghajani & Gholamrezapour, 2019; Dumrong, 2022; Misa, 2023; Moghadam et al., 2023; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2023). Recent studies have also explored innovative approaches, such as the flipped classroom model (Yulian, 2021) and Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) (Khoiriyah et al., 2023), both of which enhance student engagement and critical thinking development.

For instance, Damaianti (2020) employed a research-and-development approach to propose a Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)-based reading literacy scoring device model. This research was motivated by the low literacy levels among junior high school students in Indonesia, which often emphasize comprehension rather than critical reading. The model was tested with 476 junior high school students in Java and Bali, yielding positive results and establishing the model as a viable tool for assessing reading skills. The proposed model met the validity and reliability standards for a standardized reading literacy assessment product.

Additionally, Misa (2023) underscores the importance of engaging strategies, such as visual media and thought-provoking questions, to motivate students. This study highlights the role of lecturers as models, the significance of meaningful practice within a learning community, and the importance of designated roles to foster active participation and collaborative learning. The findings revealed a notable enhancement in students' critical thinking abilities due to their involvement in a series of learning activities within the Multiliteracy Pedagogy framework.

Moreover, Khoiriyah (2023) aimed to empirically investigate the impact of CSR and critical reading on the reading comprehension of second-grade students at a private junior high school in Ciputat. Data on reading comprehension were collected through a multiple-choice test, while critical reading skills were assessed via an essay test. The results indicated that: (1) CSR positively influenced students' reading comprehension; (2) critical reading also enhanced reading comprehension; and (3) there was a significant interaction between CSR and critical reading in improving students' reading skills.

In summary, these studies collectively emphasize the significance of integrating critical reading and thinking strategies within EFL education, highlighting innovative approaches that enhance student engagement, motivation, and overall reading comprehension.

3. Theme Three: Challenges in Teaching Critical Reading in EFL Classroom

Another theme of this article addresses the challenges of teaching critical reading in EFL classrooms, as highlighted by various studies (Fung, 2020; Novianti et al., 2020; Veliz, 2021; Yunus & Ubaidillah, 2021; Wahyuni et al., 2020). Participants in this research included in-service teachers (Fung, 2020; Veliz, 2021; Wahyuni et al., 2020), and teacher educators (Yunus & Ubaidillah, 2021). Concerns were raised about the lack of systematic preparation in English teacher education (ETE) programs, which hampers the establishment and implementation of a more rigorous approach to critical thinking and reading (Veliz, 2021).

Yunus & Ubaidillah (2021) conducted the research about the EFL teacher educators' experiences in teaching critical reading. They investigated teacher educators' perspectives on critical reading instruction and how their teaching techniques aid in the development of students' critical reading skills. Thus, they proposed to incorporate the fundamental concept of teaching critical reading, teaching critical reading through a philosophical lens, and critical empowerment in reading classes.

Another study by Novianti et al. (2020) emphasizes that effectively practicing critical literacy necessitates teachers to thoughtfully consider their students' experiences, backgrounds, and relevant social justice issues. This approach requires educators to invest significant time in designing and implementing critical literacy strategies within their English instruction. However, the challenges are compounded by factors such as large class sizes, limited instructional time, and rigid curricula, which can hinder the successful integration of critical literacy practices in the classroom.

In summary, these studies collectively underscore the need for comprehensive training and support for teachers to effectively teach critical reading and literacy, while also acknowledging the significant obstacles they face in EFL contexts.

4. Themes four: Integrating Critical Thinking through Project-Based Learning in Critical Reading

The last themes of this article dealt with the implementation of Project Based Learning on critical reading to enhance critical thinking skills (Kartika, 2020; Sari and Prasetyo, 2022; Umam & Fauziah, 2022). For instance, study from Sari and Prasetyo (2022) indicated that 88.89% of students were motivated by the Project Based Learning model in critical reading, with 54% achieving excellent performance. Additionally, a questionnaire revealed that 73% of students "strongly agreed" on the improvement of their critical thinking skills. This finding is emphasized by Umam and Fauziah (2022) that Project Based Learning fosters innovation and critical analysis among students.

By engaging students in real-world projects, Project Based Learning not only enhances their motivation but also encourages them to take ownership of their learning. The structured stages of planning, implementing, and evaluating provide a clear framework for educators to guide students through complex tasks, fostering deeper engagement with texts. Furthermore, the findings suggest that critical thinking skills can be cultivated through collaborative and interactive learning experiences, which are essential for preparing students for more effective engagement in their academic and professional lives.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this analytical review is conducted in order to point towards new research directions by identifying the current landscape of critical reading and literacy in the EFL context. The research articles for this study were chosen based on a set of criteria. A total of 25 empirical studies were carefully reviewed in order to identify patterns and themes by noting research focal points, different theoretical, participant characteristics, research design, and contexts. The findings from the corpus of 25 researches showed that the most preferred study design for critical reading and literacy research was a qualitative study conducted in school settings with both teachers and students as participants. This analytical review also revealed four emerging themes of findings informing the outcome of critical reading discourse enhancement in classroom context, critical thinking, the challenges of integrating critical reading and literacy and critical thinking through Project Based Learning.

The findings of this systematic review provide important insights into the current landscape of critical reading and literacy instruction, highlighting several key implications for future research and practice. A primary recommendation is to integrate critical reading into English language learning frameworks, given the significant improvements observed among students across the studies reviewed. However, the systematic nature of this review underscores the need for further research focused on developing standardized assessments for critical reading skills and ensuring their alignment with existing curriculum requirements. Additionally, it emphasizes the necessity of investigating teachers' capabilities and preparedness to effectively teach critical reading in EFL contexts, as this is crucial for enhancing instructional quality. A notable limitation of this review is its focus on only 25 articles, which may restrict the breadth of insights and generalizability of findings. Expanding the scope of future research to include a larger and more diverse body of literature could yield a more comprehensive understanding of critical reading's role in language education and better support educators in fostering these vital skills among students.

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