

Critical Literacy in EFL Reading: A Classroom Practice and Students' Perspectives

Rahmatunnisa^{1*}, Ahn Dang²

¹MI Unggulan Al Falah Banjarbaru, Indonesia

²Ho Chi Minh University of Technology and Education, Vietnam

¹email: rahmatunnisaa5@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the increasing importance of integrating critical literacy in EFL reading classrooms, particularly in response to the demands of 21st-century education that require students to engage critically with diverse texts. Despite its recognized potential to promote higher-order thinking, the implementation of critical literacy in EFL contexts remains inconsistent, especially in relation to classroom practices and students' experiences. This discrepancy indicates a gap between theoretical expectations and practical application. Therefore, this study aims to explore how critical literacy is implemented in EFL reading classrooms and how students perceive its role in developing reading comprehension. This study employed a descriptive qualitative design involving fifth-semester students in an English Education Department. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, and analyzed using an interactive model comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that implementing critical literacy, guided by the Four Resources Model, facilitates students' progression from basic decoding to the critical analysis of texts. Students demonstrated the ability to relate texts to personal experiences, interpret the purposes of texts, and express evaluative perspectives. Additionally, students reported positive perceptions, including increased critical thinking, engagement, and confidence, although challenges related to vocabulary limitations and time constraints persisted. In conclusion, this study highlights critical literacy as a transformative approach in EFL reading instruction, while emphasizing the need for linguistic scaffolding and interactive pedagogical strategies to optimize its implementation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language from elementary to secondary education, with the expectation that students develop competence in the four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Pradhani, 2025). However, achieving proficiency in these skills remains challenging for many learners, particularly in developing higher-order thinking abilities. In the

context of 21st-century education, the demands placed on EFL learners have shifted significantly, where mastering basic linguistic skills alone is no longer sufficient. Instead, students are required to critically engage with information from diverse sources, including digital and multimodal texts.

Among the four language skills, reading plays a fundamental role in supporting students' academic development. Through reading, learners not only gain information but also expand their vocabulary, deepen their knowledge, and construct meaning from texts. Nevertheless, reading comprehension is not merely a process of decoding words and understanding grammar; it involves interpreting, analyzing, and critically evaluating information. Recent studies highlight that many EFL students still struggle to move beyond literal comprehension due to limited exposure to analytical reading practices and insufficient instructional support for the development of critical thinking (Akbar et al., 2025; Liu & Puteh, 2025).

To address these challenges, critical literacy has emerged as a significant pedagogical approach in language education. Critical literacy encourages students to question texts, uncover implicit meanings, and examine how language reflects power, ideology, and social context. Rather than passively receiving information, learners are guided to engage with texts and actively consider multiple perspectives. Recent research indicates that integrating critical literacy into EFL classrooms can enhance students' critical thinking, reading engagement, and interpretive skills (Adiantika et al., 2025; Sangaji et al., 2023). Furthermore, critical literacy supports students in developing awareness of how texts shape and are shaped by social realities, making it highly relevant in today's information-rich environment.

Despite its potential benefits, implementing critical literacy in EFL contexts remains limited and challenging. Previous studies have reported that students often face difficulties related to linguistic competence, such as vocabulary and grammar, as well as challenges in analyzing texts critically (Aziz et al., 2024). In addition, instructional practices that explicitly integrate critical literacy are still not widely adopted in many classrooms, particularly in higher education settings. This suggests a gap between the theoretical importance of critical literacy and its practical application in EFL reading instruction.

Several earlier studies have explored critical literacy practices in EFL classrooms, showing varied results. For instance, some studies found that students' critical awareness can be enhanced through discussion and exposure to multiple perspectives (Brown, 2022; Khadija Baddane, 2025; Santos & Weinberger, 2025), while others revealed that students' low proficiency and lack of confidence hinder their engagement in critical literacy activities (Aziz et al., 2024; Rizqiani et al., 2024; Yoon, 2022). These inconsistent findings indicate the need for further investigation into how critical literacy is implemented in real classroom contexts and how students respond to such practices.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to explore the implementation of a critical literacy approach in EFL reading classrooms, with a particular focus on classroom practices and students' perspectives. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize outcomes, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of both the process and students' responses in applying critical literacy to reading comprehension. Therefore, this research is expected to contribute to the development of more effective and contextually relevant pedagogical practices in EFL reading instruction.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Reading Comprehension in EFL Contexts

Reading is widely acknowledged as a fundamental skill in language learning, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, where it serves as a primary source of linguistic input and knowledge construction. Contemporary perspectives conceptualize reading not as a passive activity but as an active, dynamic cognitive process involving the interaction among the reader, the text, and the sociocultural context (Goldman, 2024; Turakulova, 2025). This perspective highlights that comprehension emerges through the integration of prior knowledge, linguistic competence, and contextual interpretation.

Reading comprehension, therefore, extends beyond decoding words and grammatical structures. It involves multiple levels of understanding, including literal comprehension, interpretive comprehension, and critical comprehension, with the latter representing the highest level of cognitive engagement (Joressa wordofa et al., 2025; Paige et al., 2024). At the literal level, readers extract explicitly stated information, while interpretive comprehension requires inference and deeper meaning construction. Critical comprehension, however, involves evaluating ideas, identifying bias, and assessing the credibility and relevance of information (Forzani et al., 2022).

In EFL settings, achieving higher levels of comprehension remains a significant challenge. Research indicates that many learners struggle to move beyond surface-level understanding due to limited vocabulary, insufficient background knowledge, and a lack of exposure to analytical reading practices (Aziz et al., 2024; Oktavianti et al., 2025). Vocabulary, in particular, plays a crucial role in comprehension, as it directly affects learners' ability to interpret and evaluate texts (A. Al Roomy, 2022). In addition, reading fluency and familiarity with text structures influence how effectively learners construct meaning.

Another important dimension of reading comprehension is its dependence on cognitive and sociocultural factors. The interaction between reader, text, and reading purpose shapes how meaning is constructed, making comprehension a context-dependent process (Britt et al., 2022). Consequently, instructional approaches that focus solely on linguistic decoding are insufficient to develop advanced reading skills. Instead, learners need opportunities to engage critically with texts, connect them to real-life contexts, and reflect on multiple perspectives.

These considerations suggest that reading instruction in EFL contexts should not only aim to improve linguistic competence but also foster higher-order thinking skills. This need has led to increasing attention toward pedagogical approaches such as critical literacy, which integrates comprehension with critical analysis and sociocultural awareness.

2.2 Critical Literacy in Language Education

Critical literacy has emerged as a significant approach in language education, particularly in response to the increasing complexity of information in the 21st century. It extends traditional literacy by emphasizing the ability to question, analyze, and transform texts rather than merely understanding them (Bishop, 2023; Burriss & Leander, 2024). In this framework, reading is viewed as a socially situated practice in which power relations, ideology, and cultural context shape meaning.

From a theoretical perspective, critical literacy is rooted in critical pedagogy, which emphasizes the role of education in promoting social awareness and equity. It encourages learners to examine how texts represent particular viewpoints, whose voices are included or excluded, and how language can influence readers' perceptions (Bishop, 2023; Ervin, 2022). This perspective challenges

the assumption that texts are neutral and instead positions them as products of specific social and ideological contexts.

In EFL classrooms, critical literacy plays an essential role in promoting higher-order thinking skills. It encourages learners to actively engage with texts by questioning assumptions, identifying bias, and considering alternative interpretations (Rachid & Sakale, 2023). Furthermore, it integrates multiple modes of communication, including written, visual, and digital texts, reflecting contemporary literacy practices (Patty, 2025).

Importantly, critical literacy is not limited to cognitive processes but also involves reflective and transformative dimensions. It enables students to connect texts with their personal experiences and sociocultural realities, fostering deeper understanding and engagement (Bishop, 2023). However, implementing this approach in EFL contexts requires careful scaffolding, as students must simultaneously develop linguistic competence and critical awareness (Afrilyasanti et al., 2025).

2.3 The Four Principles of Critical Literacy

A widely adopted framework for implementing critical literacy in reading instruction is Luke and Freebody's Four Resources Model (Olifant & Boakye, 2022), which conceptualizes reading as a combination of four interrelated practices: code-breaking, meaning-making, using text, and critically analyzing text (Adiantika et al., 2025). This model provides a structured approach to guide learners from basic comprehension to critical engagement.

The first component, code-breaking, refers to the ability to decode linguistic features such as vocabulary, grammar, and textual structure. This stage is particularly crucial in EFL contexts, where learners often face challenges related to unfamiliar vocabulary and limited grammatical knowledge (Tan et al., 2026). Without adequate decoding skills, students may struggle to access deeper levels of comprehension.

The second component, meaning making, involves constructing meaning by connecting textual information with prior knowledge and sociocultural experiences. This process enables learners to interpret both explicit and implicit meanings, fostering deeper comprehension (Zhang, 2024). It also highlights the importance of background knowledge in understanding texts.

The third component, using text, focuses on understanding the purpose, structure, and function of texts in different contexts. Students learn to recognize how texts are used to communicate meaning and how they can be applied in real-life situations (Tan et al., 2026). This stage bridges comprehension with practical application.

The final component, critical analysis of text, represents the highest level of reading engagement. At this stage, learners evaluate the author's intentions, identify bias, and consider alternative perspectives. This process encourages critical thinking and supports students in developing independent judgments about texts (Adiantika et al., 2025).

Through these four components, the model integrates linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural dimensions of reading. It provides a comprehensive framework for developing reading comprehension that goes beyond basic understanding and promotes critical engagement.

2.4 Benefits and Challenges of Critical Literacy

The integration of critical literacy in EFL classrooms offers several pedagogical benefits. Studies have shown that it enhances students' critical thinking, reading engagement, and communication skills (Rizqiani et al., 2024; Simango, 2023). Encouraging discussion and reflection also promotes active participation and increases students' confidence in expressing their ideas.

In addition, critical literacy supports the development of broader competencies, including social awareness and collaborative skills. Students become more capable of analyzing real-world issues, evaluating multiple perspectives, and engaging in meaningful dialogue (Kumar & Prajapati, 2025). These outcomes are particularly relevant for preparing learners for the demands of globalized, information-rich environments.

However, implementing critical literacy in EFL contexts is not without challenges. One of the main difficulties is students' limited linguistic competence, especially in vocabulary and grammar, which can hinder their ability to engage critically with texts (Afrilyasanti et al., 2025; Ramadhani & Jabu, 2024). Furthermore, critical literacy activities often require more time and effort, making them difficult to integrate into conventional classroom practices.

Another challenge relates to students' readiness and confidence. Some learners may feel hesitant to express their opinions or participate in critical discussions due to limited language proficiency (Ceneciro et al., 2023). Additionally, selecting appropriate reading materials remains a concern, as texts that are too simple may not stimulate critical thinking, while overly complex texts may overwhelm learners. Despite these challenges, critical literacy remains a promising approach for enhancing reading comprehension. Its effectiveness depends on appropriate instructional design, scaffolding strategies, and the creation of supportive classroom environments. Therefore, this study addresses the following research questions:

In what ways do students engage with critical literacy practices to understand reading texts?
What perceptions do students hold toward the use of critical literacy in reading comprehension learning?

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Design

A descriptive qualitative approach was used to capture detailed classroom practices and students' responses to the implementation of critical literacy. This design enables the researcher to provide rich, contextually rich descriptions of teaching and learning processes, particularly in natural classroom settings (Lim, 2025). The study focused on two main aspects: (1) the implementation of the critical literacy approach during reading instruction, and (2) students' perceptions of its use in enhancing their reading comprehension.

3.2 Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at the English Education Department of the Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training at a university in Indonesia. The institution offers a series of reading courses, including Intensive Reading I, II, and III, as well as Extensive Reading, which aim to develop students' reading comprehension skills.

Critical literacy practices have been increasingly integrated into reading instruction in this context, making it a relevant setting for investigating how this approach is enacted in classroom practice and experienced by students.

The participants were selected using purposive sampling, which allows the researcher to select individuals who can provide rich, relevant information related to the research objectives (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). The participants were fifth-semester students who had completed the Intensive Reading I, II, and III courses. These students were considered suitable participants as they had prior exposure to reading instruction and were familiar with classroom practices related to reading comprehension.

The participants of this study were fifth-semester students of the English Education Department at UIN Antasari Banjarmasin enrolled in the 2022/2023 academic year. The students were approximately 20–22 years old and had completed Intensive Reading I, II, and III courses, in

which critical literacy practices had been gradually introduced. A total of 80 students from three reading classes participated in the classroom observation phase. The observed classes were conducted by lecturers who integrated critical literacy activities into reading comprehension instruction through discussion, questioning, and text analysis activities.

For the interview phase, 15 students (five representatives from each class) were selected using a snowball sampling technique to obtain more in-depth insights into students' perceptions and learning experiences. Snowball sampling enables researchers to identify information-rich participants through recommendations from initial participants (Sefcik et al., 2023). The selected participants represented students with varying levels of classroom participation, reading achievement, and English proficiency in order to capture diverse perspectives regarding the implementation of critical literacy practices.

In addition to the students, lecturers also played an important role in supporting the implementation of critical literacy activities during classroom instruction. Although lecturers were not interviewed as primary participants, their classroom practices and instructional strategies were considered through classroom observations to better understand how critical literacy was facilitated in reading comprehension learning.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through classroom observation and semi-structured interviews to ensure data triangulation and enhance the credibility of the findings (Chand, 2025).

3.3.1 Observation Classroom observations were conducted to examine how the critical literacy approach was implemented during reading instruction. The observations were carried out in three fifth-semester reading classes of the English Education Department at UIN Antasari Banjarmasin during the 2021/2022 academic year. All classes were taught by the same lecturer, allowing the researcher to observe the implementation of critical literacy practices within a relatively consistent instructional setting. Multiple observation sessions were conducted in each class during regular reading comprehension lessons to obtain richer and more consistent data regarding classroom practices.

Classroom observations were conducted to examine how the critical literacy approach was implemented during reading instructions. The researcher used an observation checklist based on Luke and Freebody's Four Resources Model, focusing on code-breaking, meaning-making, using text, and critically analyzing text.

Field notes were also taken to capture classroom interactions, students' responses, and contextual factors that might influence the implementation of critical literacy. Observation allows researchers to directly examine participants' behavior in natural settings, providing more authentic data compared to self-reported information (Chand, 2025).

The researcher used an observation checklist based on Luke and Freebody's Four Resources Model (Olifant & Boakye, 2022), focusing on code-breaking, meaning-making, using text, and critically analyzing text. Field notes were also taken to capture classroom interactions, students' responses, lecturer's instructional strategies, and contextual factors that might influence the implementation of critical literacy. Observation allows researchers to directly examine participants' behavior in natural classroom settings, providing more authentic data compared to self-reported information (Chand, 2025).

3.3.2 Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students' perceptions of the critical literacy approach. This type of interview allows flexibility for participants to express their experiences while enabling the researcher to probe deeper into relevant issues (Buys et al., 2022).

The interviews were conducted face-to-face after classroom sessions, recorded, and transcribed for analysis. The questions focused on students' experiences, perceived benefits, challenges, and overall responses to the use of critical literacy in reading comprehension. structured interviews were conducted to explore students' perceptions of the critical literacy approach. This type of interview allows flexibility for participants to express their experiences while enabling the researcher to probe deeper into relevant issues (Buys et al., 2022).

The interviews were conducted face-to-face after classroom sessions and lasted approximately 15–25 minutes for each participant. The interviews were primarily conducted in English to encourage students to express their thoughts within the context of English language learning. However, Bahasa Indonesia was occasionally used when participants had difficulty understanding certain questions or requested clarification to ensure the accuracy and depth of the responses. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis. The interview questions focused on students' experiences, perceived benefits, challenges, and overall responses to the use of critical literacy in reading comprehension.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using an interactive model adapted from Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (Handayani & Setiawan, 2025), which involves three main steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Each stage of the analysis process is described in the following sections.

3.4.1 Data Reduction

Data reduction involves selecting, focusing, and simplifying raw data obtained from observations and interviews. The researcher organized the data by identifying key themes related to classroom practices and students' perceptions.

3.4.2 Data Display

The reduced data were then presented as descriptive narratives and thematic categories. This step allows the researcher to identify patterns and relationships within the data more clearly (Handayani & Setiawan, 2025).

3.4.3 Conclusion Drawing and Verification

The final step involved interpreting the data and drawing conclusions in line with the research questions. The findings were continuously verified by revisiting the data to ensure consistency and credibility. This process helps strengthen the trustworthiness of qualitative research findings (Megheirkouni & Moir, 2023).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings concerning the implementation of the critical literacy approach in EFL reading classrooms and students' perceptions of its use. The analysis is organized based on the two research focuses, namely classroom practices and students' perspectives, and is interpreted in relation to relevant theoretical frameworks and recent studies.

4.1 The Implementation of Critical Literacy in EFL Reading Classrooms

The findings reveal that the implementation of critical literacy across the observed classes (20-A, 20-B, and 20-C) generally followed the Four Resources Model proposed by Luke and Freebody (Olifant & Boakye, 2022). However, the depth of engagement varied depending on classroom interaction and students' readiness. Overall, the teaching practices enabled students to gradually move from basic decoding to more critical engagement with texts.

4.1.1 Code Breaking

At the initial stage, students demonstrated their ability to engage in code breaking by identifying vocabulary, recognizing grammatical structures, and understanding basic textual information. For instance, in class 20-C, students began the lesson by reading an article entitled "Anxiety and Perfectionist", followed by presenting a summary of the text. In contrast, students in class 20-B relied more on translating the text into Indonesian and answering factual questions, such as identifying the topic and the author. These practices indicate that students were able to perform fundamental reading processes; however, their engagement remained largely focused on surface-level comprehension.

This observation is further supported by interview data, which indicate that students experienced difficulties with vocabulary and linguistic processing. One student stated, "When I read English texts and use critical literacy, I need to think harder while also figuring out unfamiliar words." This suggests that students experience a dual cognitive demand when engaging with texts in a foreign language. While they are required to understand meaning critically, they are simultaneously constrained by their limited vocabulary. This finding aligns with Afrilyasanti et al (2025), who emphasize that linguistic limitations often hinder deeper engagement in EFL reading. Therefore, although code breaking was successfully achieved, it remains a foundational stage that requires further support to enable higher-level comprehension.

4.1.2 Meaning Making

As the lesson progressed, students began to engage in meaning-making by connecting the text to their personal experiences and sociocultural contexts. The lecturer facilitated this process through reflective questioning, such as asking students how they perceive anxiety or perfectionism in their own lives. Students responded by linking the text to real-life situations. For example, one student explained, "Indonesia still has a strong competition mentality, so many people become perfectionists and feel they must always be perfect." Another student added, "I often feel anxious when I have to speak in public, especially with people I do not know."

These responses indicate that students were able to move beyond literal comprehension and construct meaning based on their own experiences. This supports the argument that critical literacy promotes deeper understanding by encouraging learners to interpret texts within their sociocultural context (Zhang, 2024). However, participation levels varied across classes. Students in classes 20-A and 20-C were more actively involved, while those in class 20-B were less responsive and required more teacher prompting. This suggests that meaning-making processes are strongly influenced by classroom interaction and the extent to which students are encouraged to participate.

4.1.3 Using Text

Further analysis shows that students were able to engage with text by understanding its purpose and relevance in real-life contexts. When asked about the article's purpose, students provided reflective responses indicating functional comprehension. For instance, one student stated, "I learned that we do not always have to be perfect because it can affect our mental health." At the same time, another noted, "This article gives us new knowledge about anxiety and perfectionism in real life."

These responses demonstrate that students were not only able to understand the text's content but also to recognize its broader implications. In this sense, reading becomes a meaningful activity that connects knowledge to real-world issues. This finding is consistent with Tan et al (2026), who highlight that critical literacy enables students to use texts as tools for understanding social realities. Nevertheless, differences in depth of understanding were still evident. While some students were able to identify text types and purposes more comprehensively, others provided more limited interpretations. This variation suggests that the ability to use texts effectively depends on both students' cognitive readiness and instructional support.

4.1.4 Critically Analyzing Text

At the highest level of engagement, students demonstrated their ability to critically analyze texts by evaluating ideas and expressing their own perspectives. When asked whether being a perfectionist is beneficial or harmful, students responded with evaluative statements such as, "Perfectionism is not always good because it can make people anxious and stressed," and "Having friends to share feelings with can help reduce anxiety." These responses indicate that students were able to take a position and reflect on the text's implications.

From a critical literacy perspective, this stage represents a shift from passive comprehension to active interpretation and evaluation. Students begin to question ideas, identify implications, and construct their own viewpoints, which are essential elements of critical literacy (Adiantika et al., 2025). However, not all students reached this level equally. Students in classes 20-A and 20-C demonstrated stronger critical engagement, while those in class 20-B showed more limited participation. This suggests that critical analysis requires not only comprehension but also confidence, language proficiency, and a supportive classroom environment.

4.2 Students' Perceptions of Critical Literacy in Reading Comprehension

4.2.1 Understanding of Critical Literacy

In addition to classroom practices, students' perceptions of critical literacy provide further insight into its effectiveness. The findings indicate that most students understood critical literacy as a process of reading beyond surface meaning. As one student explained, "Critical literacy is reading while thinking critically and understanding the deeper meaning of the text." This shows that students were aware of the purpose of critical literacy and recognized its role in enhancing comprehension. This understanding is consistent with Bishop (2023), who highlights that critical literacy promotes analytical reading and deeper interpretation.

4.2.2 Perceived Benefits

Students also reported several benefits of the approach, particularly in terms of improving critical thinking and engagement. They emphasized that critical literacy helped them move beyond memorizing texts toward understanding key ideas. Moreover, students felt more confident in expressing their opinions during discussions. This suggests that critical literacy not only enhances

cognitive skills but also promotes active participation, which is consistent with previous findings (Rachid & Sakale, 2023).

4.2.3 Challenges and Strategies

Despite these benefits, students also encountered challenges. The most prominent difficulties were related to vocabulary, language processing, and time constraints. Students reported that they needed to spend more time understanding texts, especially when encountering unfamiliar words. This indicates that critical literacy places additional cognitive demands on learners, particularly in EFL contexts where linguistic competence is still developing (Ramadhani & Jabu, 2024).

To overcome these challenges, students adopted several strategies, such as reading texts before class, using contextual clues to infer meaning, and discussing with peers. These strategies reflect the development of metacognitive awareness, as students actively regulate their own learning processes. This finding suggests that critical literacy not only enhances comprehension but also encourages the use of independent learning strategies.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the critical literacy approach plays a significant role in supporting students' reading comprehension by guiding them through different levels of engagement, from decoding to critical analysis. However, its effectiveness is influenced by multiple factors, including students' linguistic competence, classroom interaction, and instructional design. Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on outcomes, this study highlights the implementation process and students' lived experiences, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how critical literacy operates in EFL reading classrooms.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that implementing the critical literacy approach in EFL reading classrooms can transform students' reading practices from surface-level comprehension to deeper, critical engagement with texts. Through the application of the Four Resources Model, students progressed from basic decoding to interpreting meaning, understanding text purpose, and critically evaluating ideas. Importantly, the findings reveal that critical literacy not only enhances reading comprehension but also fosters students' critical thinking, engagement, and confidence in expressing their perspectives.

However, the study also highlights that the effectiveness of this approach is closely influenced by students' linguistic competence, classroom interaction patterns, and the level of instructional support provided by lecturers. These factors determine the extent to which students can move from comprehension to critical analysis.

Beyond confirming the pedagogical value of critical literacy, this study contributes to the field by offering a nuanced understanding of how critical literacy is enacted in real EFL classroom contexts and how students experience its implementation. It suggests that critical literacy should be viewed not merely as an instructional technique but as a transformative pedagogical approach that requires sustained scaffolding, interactive learning environments, and active student participation.

Future research is recommended to explore more student-centered instructional designs, integrate digital and multimodal texts, and examine the long-term impact of critical literacy on students' academic development. Such efforts will strengthen the role of critical literacy in preparing

EFL learners to critically engage with information and participate meaningfully in a globalized world.

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