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Critical Literacy in an EFL Setting: Lecturers' Perception

I Putu Andre Suhardiana Postgraduate Program, Ganesha University of Education, Singaraja, Indonesia

Luh Putu Artini

Postgraduate Program, Ganesha University of Education, Singaraja, Indonesia

Ni Nyoman Padmadewi

Postgraduate Program, Ganesha University of Education, Singaraja, Indonesia

Putu Kerti Nitiasih

Postgraduate Program, Ganesha University of Education, Singaraja, Indonesia

Abstract—This study intended to determine lecturers' understanding of critical literacy, how they applied it in reading class, and their reasons for continuing to teach critical literacy to students. This study involved five English lecturers as the subjects of the study. The researchers used various techniques to obtain data, namely interviews, documentation, and observation. The collected data were analyzed qualitatively using the interactive data analysis model. This study found that the lecturers' have different ways of defining critical literacy. However, their understanding of critical literacy aligns with the concept of critical literacy in general. Furthermore, lecturers' understanding influences their strategies to promote critical literacy in their English as a foreign language class. Thus, they applied various teaching strategies to ensure that the students could improve their critical literacy. In addition, they also have strong reasons for promoting critical literacy sustainably. Detailed findings are discussed in this article.

Index Terms—critical literacy, EFL, language proficiency, reading, tertiary education

I. Introduction

Teaching reading with a critical perspective is greatly strengthened by connecting reading with the activity of seeing, explaining, and describing culture (Muspratt et al., 1997). An ideology embedded in a text to further understand the representation, the author's subjectivity, and position on a particular issue should be the intention of current reading learning in tertiary education. Liu (2017) asserted that the distribution of knowledge and power in society is the scene of reading. Undergraduate students' cognitive level certainly needs those above, particularly English as a Foreign language (EFL) learning, by considering the essentials of transformative critical pedagogy and focusing on mastering language skills at a certain level.

For those reasons, tertiary education must construct their learning according to the obligations of producing critical students. Students' participatory role as global citizens necessitates being prepared by understanding the various sociopolitical perspectives. Critical literacy has been in the spotlight for many years in Western Education, notably through first language (L1) classes. In the context of EFL, Ko and Wang (2009) remark that, in an EFL classroom, critical literacy theory and its implications are still inadequate. However, in recent years, literacy practitioners have explored critical literacy in stages. The primary or secondary education levels are the targets of these studies. It means that the tertiary education level has not yet investigated critical literacy in EFL.

Critical literacy is defined in various ways by some scholars. Huang (2011) asserts critical literacy as a social practice encapsulated in language learning. Students undergo the process of knowing themselves as social agents. They are concurrently increasing their expertise and language development. Meanwhile, M. Yun Ko & Wang (2013) argue that critical literacy should be considered socio-political. It is an approach linked to theory or practice but not yet a unit. Kuo (2014) views that a particular society's discursive system references texts' ideological development. Students recognize ideological messages by enriching themselves with critical literacy insights and social forces encoded in the text. Furthermore, Izadinia and Abednia (2010) reinforces that students' social identity is implicated in language learning. It is a complex phenomenon; thus, critical literacy skills are inherent to explore.

In the Asian context, Koo's (2008) research emphasized that tertiary education students still reflect literary practice in schools and have not articulated what they think. The EFL examination system and memorization practice in EFL teaching show low students' critical literacy (Huh, 2016). A lack of understanding of students' need for critical literacy is why they lack critical literacy practice and knowledge and skills about its application in non-Western contexts (Park, 2011). Students are frequently in a submissive position. When it is not polite to express critical opinions to the teacher,

it implies a cultural reason characterized by a hierarchical structure that turns students passive (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016)

A similar thing happens in Indonesia. Thus the studies on critical literacy were mostly about improving students' critical literacy (see Novianti et al., 2020; Mbau & Sugeng, 2019; Afifuddin, 2017; Aimah & Purwanto, 2019). Moreover, critical literacy investigation that explains its practice in tertiary institutions is scarce, such as research conducted by Setyaningsih (2019) and Setyorini (2018). However, those studies are insufficient to ensure that critical literacy is already part of the education system. A profound investigation of teachers' perception of critical literacy is needed to see whether building students' critical literacy is already a part of their daily instruction. Thus, this study was intended to address this gap by converging on exploration and in-depth breakdown of the current state of critical literacy learning and the feasibility of integrating it into reading activities in tertiary institutions. Various learning tasks in critical literacy learning require students to complete them all. Therefore, this study dissected multiple perspectives, emphasized ideas, and reported language learning specifically.

II. METHOD

This study can be classified as a case study that involved five respondents. This study's participants were five English lecturers who teach at a state college in Bali, Indonesia. Since there were only five English lecturers in that college, the researchers took all of them as the respondents. In other words, the researcher used a saturated sampling technique where all of the population was taken as the study sample. The researcher used R1, R2, R3, R4, and R5 to substitute their names in this study. The letter R means respondent.

In-depth individual interviews were conducted with the respondents. The researchers also collected the respondents' lesson plans to teach English to their students. In addition, the researcher also observed the teaching and learning process conducted by the respondents. In other words, the researchers collected the data using three different methods, interview, documentation, and observation. The researchers used three different methods of collecting the data because the researcher used the data triangulation technique to ensure that the data were valid and reliable. The collected data from the interview, documentation, and observation were analyzed qualitatively using the interactive data analysis method. There were three steps in this method, namely: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles et al., 2014).

III. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

A. Concepts of Critical Literacy in EFL Learning

In this study, the researchers tried to identify the lecturers' perception of critical literacy. Perception is someone's views, opinions, and ideas from an observation or experience. It denotes how someone perceives and reacts toward a particular subject. It relates to the attitude of receiving information through the senses (Matherne, 2015; Maba, 2017). They can broaden their ideas on a specific matter, consider problems they face, and develop conclusions and solutions through senses (Qiong, 2017).

The researcher examined five respondents' understanding of critical literacy even though they had comprehended this concept earlier through various workshops; then questioned their ideas in proposing critical literacy when EFL teaching took place. The five respondents admitted blending the critical literacy concept into their respective teaching and were driven by a strong will that grew from themselves. However, the concepts of critical literacy were slightly different from one another. R1 emphasized that students' ability to generate ideas while reading articles and respond critically to each discussion was what he meant by critical literacy. After reading a text, they can analyze and provide detailed input.

R2 asserted that critical literacy advances students' creativity in presenting personal interests linked to previous reading material. The reading is more meaningful than earlier reading if, later, it can be discussed with a definite mind and wholly reviewed on each side. R3 stated that the most valuable task as a reader is reading and finishing the text, noticing essential elements, questioning sides that have not been recognized, and presenting input according to former knowledge. R4 stated that to have a critical understanding of a text. Sometimes it takes more than three times of readings to get every point comprehensively. By cultivating students' critical literacy, they are more stimulated to think precisely. R5 declared that critical literacy could perform students think about whether the article they read is an issue that needs a solution or just a daily reading so that later it is supposed that they can follow up with various resolutions regarding the issues.

What R5 conveyed is under the concept of critical literacy. Students were expected to understand the connection between a foreign language and its strengths by studying various texts; this is a learning approach (Luke, 2012). R5 revealed that they required critical thinking to determine whether a text comprised problems that necessitated resolution. The text's significance linked to the topic was critically analyzed by students, such as social justice or power. Students were given actions, critical attitudes, and responses to these texts' problems. Setyaningsih (2019) strengthened what Luke (2012) announced, mainly that critical literacy is often manifested through reading and writing, which refers to the process of realizing one's experiences relative to power relations.

Multiple learning environments and cultural contexts are areas where critical literacy can occur. Students are encouraged to reconstruct, accept, or reject the text's ideas in their reading and writing process. Critical literacy needs a

topic to discuss or a unit to study and should be seen as a frame or perspective for teaching across all subjects (M. Y. Ko, 2013). A way of life that provides students with a continuous, critical orientation to text and practice is a critical perspective of critical literacy learning. It invites students to write down the messages they see, as mentioned by R1, R2, and R3, such as taking a photo at a place, cutting out an advertisement from a magazine or public transportation, and reading the daily text they encounter critically. Furthermore, (Mbau & Sugeng, 2019) states that encouraging a deeper understanding of socially constructed concepts is facilitated by actively reading texts from a critical literacy perspective, such as inequality, power, or social relations. Students are encouraged to question and understand values and attitudes in critical literacy.

B. The Application of Critical Literacy in EFL Teaching

R2's foremost concern regarding implementing critical literacy in Indonesian tertiary education is that, unlike students in European or American countries, Indonesian students tend to find it challenging to express their ideas autonomously. This is because they are accustomed to passively accepting what the lecturer says (Pertiwi et al., 2021). So critical literacy is vital to enforce. But, according to her, most students are not critical in seeing problems in the text and tend to ignore them.

In contrast, R4 concerns students' English language skills who cannot comprehend the text more comprehensively. However, according to her, this is still understandable, and she is looking for a solution gradually. According to R4, the process of designing teaching or selecting reading material must be carried out carefully by the lecturer. A list of words or sentences can be prepared before applying the text to understand the suit words. It is one of the solutions before carrying out further discussion. Expressing English ideas will not be easy for all students, notably those at the middle and lower levels. In this case, the teacher must help them to experience the text first. R3 also offers another concept. According to him, the material should be linked with students' lives to discussion material.

According to R1, alternative literacy for students with low English proficiency levels can be adopted from lecturers' various sources. The lecturers should be accurate in gathering information initially. In expressing ideas, students adapt their ideas to their language skills. R5 assumed that literacy is not an act of linguistic decoding but a stage followed by other stages. It is a continuum. R5 agreed with R3's opinion; students were asked to think more if the given context was well known to them. Focus on decoding is performed more in foreign contexts. This decoding process is not only for students with low English proficiency levels; lecturers can still include critical literacy elements, and decoding skills are only a matter of proportion. R3's hesitation is ensuring that students think in English while reading. This still requires much practice because the students' mastery of English is still insufficient. Critical literacy cannot be fully achieved if students still think in Indonesian when reading the text. In this case, literacy is broadly interpreted as Indonesian literacy if it is forced to think about critical literacy in Indonesian. Students can discuss critical literacy in EFL teaching and think about it in English.

R1, in the interview session, explained that he was concerned about students' autonomy presently. He continued explaining that he was a student and taught by his lecturer. He then compared that his former lecturer would not teach a complicated matter related to grammar or vocabulary unless a student ordered it. The R1 lecturer regularly discussed the reading text until the time ended. At that time, no one complained about it because, according to him, R1 and his friends were autonomous learners and knew what to do at a particular moment. That is what students currently do not have, he said.

Further, R1 said that lecturers do not need to give autonomous students much consideration in language teaching. Other students may require instruction about language. Initially, adjusting to critical literacy takes time and a process. However, students will learn that both language learning and critical literacy can complete each other in a sufficient time. Other concerns he has besides student autonomy are politics and teaching resources. R1 conveyed that he did not find it challenging to talk about social problems abroad. However, he must handle them with care regarding his household matters.

Ultimately, the five respondents' concerns are cultural differences, English language skills, teaching resources, and student autonomy. Lecturers can make efforts in their teaching design to overcome students' English language skills problems; lecturers can also pay more attention to students' abilities through scaffolding. One thing that can prevent students from achieving critical literacy skills is a culture that values submission, such as eastern culture. Therefore, lecturers may initiate well-known texts or sign systems to encourage students' discussion as simple critical literacy techniques. Correcting social inequality through action is one of the principles of critical literacy. Moreover, a controversial political or social issue would be the perfect material for teaching critical literacy. Different voices and tolerating students' opinions make lecturers have to be optimally open-minded.

From the explanation above, the lecturers understand that their students have a problem with reading comprehension and try to help them improve their reading comprehension before promoting critical literacy. They tried to select the reading materials in line with the students' English mastery and use contextual reading materials to build students' background knowledge of the text. Making the learning material suit the students' English mastery and building students' prior knowledge is important in helping the students to comprehend the text being read (Sason et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2021). When they understand the text, there is a possibility that they will involve in the discussion about the text (Kovpik, 2020). In other words, it means that there is a tendency for the students to become more active during the discussion session if they understand the text well.

C. The Reasons for the Need to Continue Teaching Critical Literacy to Students

The five participants acknowledged that it was deemed necessary to have critical literacy in teaching English as a foreign language to stimulate students in their learning. It can additionally generate meaningful learning circumstances. R1 and R3 further emphasized the significance of thinking in learning. Hence, their view is identical; owning a good living in the prevailing socio-economic system and seizing a better job is important for students' language skills.

However, education is more than just teaching work-related skills. Students should apprehend the importance of critical literacy, and they necessitate to consider it rather than seeing it as a teaching method. It is better to recognize it as a teaching philosophy (R2). Students need to reveal to foreigners in the international world their thoughts. It will not be achieved if it is never stimulated out. There is no point in only training grammar proficiency by a group of students and vocabulary. In essence, communication and literacy are required to combine. Building communication skills entails a solid foundation, namely, literacy.

The goal of learning is not the language itself; it is just a tool. Solving students' problems through language is the next lecturer's goal. However, mastery of language is not the ultimate goal of a learning process; the real goal is to prepare students to think. According to R4, critical literacy is not a method but a philosophy. Like R2's idea of communicative language teaching and critical literacy, R2 further argues that communicative language teaching focuses primarily on the skill of speaking. Still, the originality of ideas issued by someone is not measured by the fluency of his/her communication. If English is seen as a learning tool, interpreting literacy should be from literacy as a communication tool. According to R5, critical literacy is decisive to be taught to students. When acts of corruption cause countless crises, it is time for students to realize and understand what is happening. The choice is up to them to do something for humanity to create an ideal world.

The five respondents admitted that education's ideal goal could be achieved if critical literacy, an educational philosophy, and enhanced language learning, mainly reading and writing. If it is seen as a pedagogical method, it will pass through without impacting students. The modern world's propaganda demands to be examined with critical and independent thought; thus, it is not easy to become a victim of a particular situation (De Paor & Heravi, 2020; Lutzke et al., 2019). Students should realize the value of thought. They can re-emphasize the greatness of critical thinking skills that learn words in a foreign language and read the world's direction with multiple purposes. The lecturers' idea aligns with the global concept that critical literacy is crucial in this digital era, where information spreads easily through a digital platform, and the students have to filter it (Polizzi, 2020; Purnama & Nurdianingsih, 2019).

IV. CONCLUSION

Active learners confer a critical attitude to what they see, read, experience, smell, touch, and work together. Society wants them to counter the increasing demands that remain to progress. Thus, through modern language education, critical readers and writers are formed. Therefore, critical literacy is required in 21st-century education, where students become active participants in their learning. This study explored the perceptions of five lecturers who incorporated elements of critical literacy teaching into EFL learning, notably for reading subjects. Besides, this study revealed concepts and the suitability of critical literacy in further EFL teaching, the use of critical literacy in EFL teaching, earlier and further teaching based on the five participants, lesson plans for teaching critical literacy-based texts, and the reasons for continuing to teach students critical literacy.

This study showed that critical literacy was considered necessary by the five respondents to continue its integration into EFL learning. If they pay attention to students' ability to speak English and enhance learning design, lecturers can implement it successfully. In addition, all respondents emphasized teaching a balance between critical literacy and language learning, focusing on students' abilities to acquire and understand vocabulary. If it is ensured that it can be held well, the lecturers will direct their students to use particular critical literacy to participate in critical discussions. Respondents felt that other hidden aspects of reading are essential for students to see; it is not enough to equip students with the four language abilities in EFL teaching. They need to recognize social inequality to encourage them to take social action

This study focused on the lecturers' perception of critical literacy and how they implement their concept in teaching EFL to help the students build their critical literacy. A further study needs to be conducted to see how effective the implementation of their strategies to promote critical literacy is based on their perception and concepts. The study should involve students as the study subject to confirm the lecturers' ways of promoting critical literacy, the student's opinions about the teaching and learning process, and the students' critical literacy competence after they have been taught using the strategies.

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I Putu Andre Suhardiana is a lecturer at Universitas Hindu Negeri I Gusti Bagus Sugriwa, Denpasar, Bali, Indonesia. He got his bachelor's and master's degree from the Ganesha University of Education, Singaraja, Indonesia. His research interest is in teaching English as a foreign language. He has written several articles that were published in national accredited journals. He is also actively involved in national and international English-language teaching conferences, both as a presenter and participant. Now, he is completing his doctoral degree at the Ganesha University of Education, majoring in Language Education.



Luh Putu Artini was born in Denpasar on July 14, 1964. She studied S1 at FKIP Udayana University, majoring in English Education (1982-1986); Master's degree in 'Applied Linguistics' at La Trobe University, Australia (1992-1994); and Ph.D. in English Education at Newcastle University, Australia (2002-2006). Her field of research is English pedagogy, which includes curriculum, methods and strategies, and material development. Luh Putu Artini has attended non-degree training in Children's Literacy at Indiana University (2010) and Bilingual Education at Leuven Education College, Belgium (2011). Since 1989, she has devoted herself to his undergraduate alma mater, namely the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Udayana University, and now the Ganesha University of Education. Many studies have been carried out, some of which have resulted in publications in indexed journals, namely collaborative research with Newcastle University on

the cruise ship phenomenon, which has resulted in publications in the Asian Social Science Journal (Scopus); International Education Journal (Scopus), Journal of Youth Studies (nationally reputable); Journal of Language Teaching and Research (internationally reputable); Book Chapter (Routledge); and researches in the field of English language education, among others published in the International Journal of Instruction (Scopus); Asian EFL Journal (Scopus), Lingua Cultura (nationally accredited). Currently, Luh Putu Artini is developing a research field in children's literacy and an English literacy model for English as a foreign language for children.



Ni Nyoman Padmadewi is a professor in English education at Ganesha Education University, Singaraja, Bali, Indonesia. Padmadewi completed his master's studies at Macquarie University, N.S.W Australia, and received his doctorate from Udayana University. Padmadewi's research covers various topics related to pedagogy, development of competency standards, and assessment of English language learning at various levels of education. Apart from being active in teaching and researching, Padmadewi is also actively involved and organizes various social activities in the context of community development in rural areas.



Putu Kerti Nitiasih is a professor in English language education at the Faculty of language and art, Ganesha University of Education. She got her master's degree from Sydney University, Australia, and completed her doctoral degree at Udayana University. She has published her articles on English language teaching in various national and international journals. As a presenter, she also actively attended national and internal conferences on linguistics and language teaching.