

Indonesian higher education students' perception on critical literacy

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ABSTRACT

Critical literacy is a crucial aspect of education that empowers individuals to analyse, interpret, and evaluate texts critically. Despite its significance, the integration of critical literacy in the Indonesian higher education system remains limited. This study aims to bridge this gap by examining the perceptions of Indonesian higher education students about critical literacy. The research question guiding this study is: What are the perceptions of Indonesian higher education students regarding critical literacy and its importance in the context of their academic and professional development? The study employs a qualitative research design using the single-case study method. Data collection is conducted through interviews, and the data is analysed using case study analysis techniques. The study takes place in an English language education program at a private university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, which prioritises critical literacy in its curriculum. The findings of this study contributed to the understanding of how Indonesian higher education students perceive and engage with critical literacy and inform strategies to promote critical literacy skills among students. Ultimately, it aims to cultivate a generation of critically literate individuals who can actively engage in social, cultural, and professional contexts, contributing to the development of a knowledgeable and empowered society.

Keywords: *Critical literacy; Higher education student; Students' perception; Metacognition; EFL writing; Indonesia; Teacher's facilitation*

1. Introduction

Critical literacy is a significant aspect of education that empowers individuals to analyze, interpret, and evaluate texts critically. It plays a crucial role in fostering critical thinking, promoting social justice, and enabling individuals to engage meaningfully with information and society (Yoon, 2016). However, in the Indonesian context, the integration of critical literacy into the learning concept remains limited. Previous studies by Gustine (2018) and Hidayat (2019) have found that many English teachers in Indonesia have a limited understanding of critical literacy and often confuse it with critical thinking. Khalifatussalam (2021) highlighted the low level of critical literacy among Indonesian students, while Mbau and Sugeng (2019) identified various issues related to critical literacy in Indonesia, including low levels of critical literacy among students, inadequate skills and knowledge among teachers, insufficient facilities, and a need for improvement in English books provided by the government.

Despite the growing body of research on critical literacy, there is a research gap regarding the perceptions of Indonesian higher education students on this subject. Understanding the perspectives of Indonesian higher education students is crucial to developing effective strategies to promote critical literacy skills and address the challenges mentioned earlier. Furthermore, educators must be equipped to educate students from diverse cultural backgrounds as the student population becomes increasingly diverse, recognizing the significance of critical literacy in diverse societies (Norris et al., 2012).

Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by examining the perceptions of Indonesian higher education students on critical literacy. By investigating their perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes, this research seeks to gain a deeper understanding of how Indonesian higher education students perceive and make sense of critical literacy. Additionally, it aims to explore the factors that may influence their perceptions, such as educational experiences, cultural background, and exposure to critical literacy practices.

This study seeks to answer the following research question: What are the perceptions of Indonesian higher education students regarding critical literacy and its importance in the context of their academic and professional development? This research question aims to investigate the perceptions of Indonesian higher education students, specifically in relation to critical literacy. The focus is on understanding how these students perceive critical literacy, its relevance, and its potential impact on their academic and professional growth. By exploring their perceptions, the study seeks to gain insights into the students' awareness, beliefs, and attitudes towards critical literacy and how they perceive its role in their educational and future career endeavours.

By addressing these research questions, this study aims to contribute to the existing knowledge on critical literacy and its implementation in the Indonesian higher education context. The insights gained from this study can inform educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers in developing strategies to promote critical literacy skills among higher education students. Ultimately, it aims to cultivate a generation of

critically literate individuals who can actively engage in social, cultural, and professional contexts, thereby contributing to the development of a knowledgeable and empowered society.

2. Literature review

2.1. Critical literacy

The concept of critical literacy encompasses several essential elements. According to Freire (1970), critical literacy recognizes readers as active participants in the reading process, promoting the questioning and challenging of power dynamics between authors and readers. It entails an examination of power issues, encourages reflection, transformative change, and facilitates action. Critical literacy theory, as explored by Yoon (2016), is a branch of critical theory that focuses on analyzing the power dynamics inherent in language and texts. Critical literacies encompass cultural, social, and political practices that investigate the relationship between language and power within texts. It is important to acknowledge the diversity and complexity of critical literacy practices across different contexts. While scholars may approach critical literacy differently, there is a shared understanding that it provides both philosophical foundations and instructional strategies for uncovering the connection between language and power in texts. This perspective advocates for critically examining and rewriting texts to challenge and transform existing power structures and societal norms.

Fajardo (2015) highlights that critical literacy also involves scrutinizing pedagogical practices that may perpetuate dominant ideologies. It aims to democratize education by valuing students' choices and voices, encouraging them to challenge the perception that a text is authoritative and final, and exploring multiple perspectives. The ultimate goal of critical literacy is to cultivate the critical consciousness of individuals, institutions, and communities, fostering social change. According to Hearfield and Boughton (2018) critical literacy is a process of learning and utilizing language for social and political reconstruction. It entails using language to comprehend and question power structures and social injustices. In essence, critical literacy empowers individuals to become agents of social change, envisioning a future characterized by equality, justice, and the eradication of discrimination.

Despite its variations, critical literacy empowers individuals to act as agents of social change, fostering a future characterized by equality, justice, and the elimination of discrimination (Saygılı et al., 2018). Serpa and Santos (2020) further emphasize that critical literacy serves as both a theoretical and practical framework, offering a foundation for engaging in literacy work that contributes to the development of a more critically informed and just world. By equipping individuals with the tools to critically analyze and challenge power dynamics, critical literacy has the potential to bring about transformative societal shifts and create a better global landscape.

In summary, critical literacy is an educational approach that encourages students to critically analyze and question texts, media, and other forms of communication. It

involves developing the ability to engage with information critically, understand power dynamics, challenge assumptions, and explore multiple perspectives. The ultimate objective of critical literacy is to empower students to become active, informed, and socially conscious participants in society. While interpretations may differ, the overarching understanding of critical literacy revolves around its capacity to address challenges and create spaces for literacy work that fosters critical awareness and contributes to a more just society.

2.2. *Key aspect of critical literacy*

Critical literacy is a way of thinking and being that involves questioning the world around us, analyzing texts and social systems, and striving for a more equitable and just society. Vasquez (2017) highlights key aspects of critical literacy that further elucidate its nature and importance. First and foremost, it is important to see critical literacy as more than just a topic or unit of study. Instead, educators should embrace critical literacy as a lens or perspective for teaching that permeates all aspects of the educational experience. Critical literacy entails adopting a critical perspective or mindset, integrating it into daily instruction, across different subjects and extending beyond the confines of the curriculum. Secondly, when designing a curriculum that incorporates critical literacy, it is essential to leverage the diverse cultural knowledge, funds of knowledge, and multimodal and multilingual practices of students. By acknowledging and incorporating students' backgrounds and experiences, the curriculum becomes more relevant and meaningful to them.

A critical literacy perspective views the world as a socially constructed text that people can read and interpret. All texts are created from viewpoints with specific messages in mind, and no text is entirely neutral, according to this perspective. Consequently, it is crucial to question the perspectives of others and critically analyze our own interpretations of texts. Moreover, critical literacy entails comprehending and questioning the sociopolitical systems that shape our lives. It necessitates a focus on social issues like race, class, gender, and disability and an examination of how language is used to influence our understanding of these issues.

Lastly, critical literacy practices have the potential to be transformative, leading to changes in inequitable social norms and practices. By engaging in critical literacy from a young age, students are better equipped to contribute to a more equitable and socially just world. They develop the ability to make informed decisions about power dynamics, actively participate in democratic citizenship, and think and act ethically. These key aspects of critical literacy emphasize the importance of fostering critical thinking, social awareness, and active engagement in educational settings. By embracing critical literacy, educators can empower students to question prevailing narratives, challenge societal inequities, and work towards a fairer and more inclusive society.

2.3. Strategies for improving students' critical literacy

Elevating critical literacy among students stands as a pivotal element in contemporary education, providing them with the essential competencies to navigate a multifaceted and information-abundant milieu. Researchers frequently discuss extensive reading as one of the numerous literacy practices and strategies that can be harnessed to advance critical literacy. Extensive reading (ER), as articulated by Day and Bamford (2002), involves students engaging with a plethora of accessible materials in the new language. Research by Asanti and Syamdianita (2017) underscores ER's pivotal role in motivating students to approach texts critically, challenging societal assumptions, connecting texts to global issues, enhancing awareness of how to perceive and comprehend human beings, and scrutinizing the intent of texts from diverse perspectives.

Effective strategies proposed by Hasan (2015) encompass a range of activities, including reading, note-taking (considering biases related to religion and gender), responding, questioning, summarizing, and writing. Teachers implement these strategies through modelling and scaffolding techniques. The outcomes of this approach demonstrate its efficacy in fostering the development of critical literacy skills. Several key factors contribute to this success: firstly shared writing encourages students to autonomously engage in writing using the demonstrated knowledge and skills of the teacher; secondly, collaborative writing involves students working collectively to compose critical essays; thirdly, scaffolding is applied to facilitate and augment students' comprehension of critical literacy, providing additional opportunities for skill practice; and finally, modelling skills and allocating ample time for student practice further contribute to the success of this approach.

Hikmat (2017) explored strategies employed to cultivate critical literacy among students. These strategies encompass the utilization of diverse and captivating readings, posing critical questions to stimulate profound thinking, connecting texts with students' background knowledge, guiding text comprehension through activities like compiling lists of challenging vocabulary, and assigning tasks for writing summaries and responses. Moreover, instructors encourage collaborative discussions regarding questions related to the text, fostering an exchange of opinions. These strategies collectively contribute to creating an engaging and critical learning environment, emphasizing the significance of diverse readings, critical questioning, stimulating prior knowledge, facilitating understanding, and encouraging collaborative discussions.

3. Method

This study employs a qualitative research design using the single-case study method. Creswell (2012) defines a case study as a comprehensive exploration of a bounded system, which may be an activity, an event, a process, or individuals, based on extensive data collection. This method enables researchers to focus on a particular instance and gain a holistic and practical perspective on various aspects such as

individual development stages, group dynamics, administrative and managerial procedures, and academic achievement (Yin, 2018). The research setting for this study is a private university located in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

To adequately address the central phenomenon, we employed a purposive sampling technique and intentionally selected three higher education students based on predetermined criteria. We conducted data collection in this study through interviews. We chose interviews as the method of data collection because they provide valuable information when direct observation is not feasible and allow participants to provide detailed personal insights (Creswell, 2012). The interviews conducted were semi-structured in nature, allowing the incorporation of open-ended questions and follow-up inquiries to elicit in-depth responses from the participants.

The researchers utilise the interactive data analysis model provided by Miles et al. (2014) to examine the acquired data, which consists of four crucial stages. Firstly, the data collection phase involves gathering raw information to identify patterns and explore new avenues of analysis beyond the original research questions. Following this, the data condensation stage employs techniques such as selection, concentration, simplification, abstraction, and transformation to organize and validate conclusions using diverse sources like field notes and interview transcripts. Subsequently, the data display step becomes crucial, organizing and presenting condensed information through matrices, graphs, charts, and networks. Finally, the conclusions-drawing and verification stage represents the ultimate phase.

3.1. Research context

The research setting for this study is an English language education program at a private university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. This program is an ideal context for investigating the perceptions of higher education students regarding critical literacy due to its emphasis on these concepts. The program's curriculum intentionally prioritizes critical literacy through dedicated courses focused on critical reading, literacy, and instructional design. A notable feature of the research setting is the program's commitment to integrating critical literacy into its curriculum and instructional practices. This commitment is evident through the program's emphasis on developing students' critical thinking skills, encouraging them to engage critically with texts, and fostering an awareness of social justice issues. The inclusion of such courses and the expertise of the program's lecturers in the field of critical literacy create a supportive environment for exploring students' perceptions.

The lecturers in the English language education program possess not only knowledge of critical literacy but also actively participate in research and implementation related to this area. Their expertise and involvement provide students with valuable opportunities to experience and discuss critical literacy within authentic classroom contexts. These experiences play a significant role in shaping students' perceptions and understanding of critical literacy. By selecting this specific English

language education program as the research setting, the study aims to gain insight into the unique experiences, perspectives, and interpretations of higher education students within an environment that prioritizes critical literacy. The findings from this research contributed to a deeper understanding of how students in this particular context perceive and engage with critical literacy. Furthermore, the insights obtained can inform curriculum enhancements, instructional strategies, and professional development initiatives within the program. Additionally, the findings may have broader implications for similar educational contexts in the wider landscape of higher education in Indonesia.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Higher education students' perception and understanding of critical literacy

This study aims to explore college students' perceptions of critical literacy. Cultural factors such as beliefs, values, attitudes, worldviews, and social organizations influence perception, which involves selecting, organizing, and interpreting sensory information from the environment to create meaningful experiences (Qiong, 2017) and encompasses both physical and psychological dimensions (Siegerist, 2019). This allows individuals to comprehend their surroundings, interact with the world, and shape their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours (Siegerist, 2019).

In the early stages of participants' learning journey, they realized that activities involving critical literacy were challenging and demanding. However, this perception stemmed from their limited understanding and ignorance of the concept of critical literacy itself. As they gradually became acquainted with the principles and practices of critical literacy, they began to recognize its value, essential for their development as students. Through interviews it was found that the three students had the same understanding of critical literacy. They recognize that critical literacy goes beyond written words and involves various perspectives on diverse subjects. One of the students acknowledge that: "Critical literacy involves observing, comprehending, interpreting, and taking action based on encountered texts" (A1, 2023).

This perception then develops into a deep understanding of critical literacy. Through the development of various definitions and interpretations, people often misunderstand critical literacy and critical thinking. However, the three students in this study were able to differentiate between these two things well. They view critical literacy and critical thinking as different concepts but are interconnected and capable of mutually reinforcing each other. The harmony of understanding among students shows that there is consensus regarding the definition and importance of critical literacy in the student community. This contrasts with recent research, including studies by Gustine (2018); Hidayat (2019) which underscore the limited grasp of critical literacy among English language educators in Indonesia, often confusing it with critical thinking. Furthermore, this article presents information on how the students distinguish critical literacy and critical thinking in the table below:

Table 1

The differences between critical literacy and critical thinking.

Concept	Critical literacy	Critical thinking
Focus	Focused on the ability to read, comprehend, analyze, and interpret various types of texts, including written, visual, audio, and visual, from various perspectives, aiming to develop a profound understanding of meanings and broader implications.	General and involves the ability to think logically, analytically, and objectively without being confined to specific types of texts.
Relationship	Mutually complement each other in the deep understanding of information.	Can mutually reinforce each other.
Role	Questioning information, recognizing bias, challenging ideologies advocating social justice, and understanding perspectives hidden in texts.	Analyzing and evaluating arguments in general, formulating relevant questions, understanding concepts, and designing solutions to problems.

Furthermore, Lee (2011) elucidates the distinctions between critical literacy and critical thinking. Critical literacy entails the ability to critically examine and analyze various texts and information from diverse perspectives, aiming to uncover bias, challenge dominant ideologies, and promote social justice. On the other hand, critical thinking requires the ability to think objectively, analyze, and evaluate arguments and conclusions. These two concepts complement each other, as individuals with strong critical thinking skills are more likely to develop effective critical literacy. Critical thinking facilitates the evaluation of encountered texts, understanding presented arguments, and formulating rational conclusions. Conversely, individuals with well-developed critical literacy skills can apply critical thinking in interpreting and evaluating the information they encounter. Critical literacy encompasses a comprehensive approach involving sociopolitical analysis, the pursuit of social justice goals, and transformative action. By applying critical literacy, individuals can navigate and deconstruct the complexity of texts, media, and societal structures, ultimately empowering themselves to actively participate in creating a fair and just world.

4.2. *Critical literacy roles in academic and everyday life*

Critical literacy serves as a foundation in the academic environment, equipping students with essential skills to critically engage with texts, ideas, and information. In the academic world, the ability to analyze, evaluate, and interpret various sources is crucial for intellectual growth and scientific inquiry. Therefore, critical literacy plays a vital role in enhancing understanding. In this regard, critical literacy acts as a catalyst for students to cultivate a deeper understanding of various subjects. Critical literacy

empowers students to delve beyond surface-level understanding and explore the meanings, assumptions, and underlying implications embedded in texts.

Extensive research conducted by Kaur (2013) indicates that students adopting a critical reading approach demonstrate increased openness of mind, activity, and strategic thinking when facing various types of texts. This leads to the second role of critical literacy in fostering critical thinking. Through the practice of critical literacy, students learn to question, challenge, and evaluate the validity of arguments, theories, and perspectives presented in academic discourse. This encourages the development of critical thinking skills, enabling students to analyze information critically, discern biases, and formulate reasonable arguments.

The fundamental aspect of critical literacy lies in the act of reading. In line with this, Kuo (2014) outlines several activities that facilitate the application of critical literacy, including reading picture books, engaging in discussions from various perspectives, and completing writing tasks. As expressed by the participants, group discussions are among the most frequently conducted activities. In these discussions, students are encouraged to actively participate by reading, understanding, and sharing opinions on various topics. Here, critical literacy empowers students to become active agents in their own learning journey. Through such collaborative exchanges, students can develop and refine their critical literacy skills, effectively connecting their understanding of readings to social values and real-life contexts.

The importance of critical literacy extends beyond the boundaries of academic learning and permeates into everyday life. A1 also asserts that critical literacy is inherent in almost all activities. For instance, when planning an annual event following a recurring pattern, students can use critical literacy to introduce innovation and rejuvenation in both conceptualizing and implementing the event. Specifically, as active student organizers, A1 emphasizes the importance of critically examining the objectives behind an activity. Without critical literacy, students may perceive an activity merely as a means to entertain other students. However, by incorporating critical literacy, they can delve deeper into perspectives and motivations that drive the creation of an activity. This aligns with the findings of Novianti, Thomas, & To (2020), where through critical literacy, students can question the construction of social identity, promote views on the non-neutrality of literacy and texts, and create students who will act as change agents in their communities and globally.

Moreover, A3 highlights that critical literacy has opened their eyes to the profound meanings hidden in seemingly ordinary aspects of life. A3 revealed that they often do not realize that behind something simple, sometimes there is an extraordinary meaning. However, through critical literacy, they can understand each meaning from various different points of view. This realization underscores how critical literacy expands students' knowledge base and enables them to understand various aspects from diverse perspectives. Suhardiana et al. (2023) further examined the implementation of critical literacy in English language teaching, emphasizing its emergence in various

learning environments and cultural contexts. Students are encouraged to critically reconstruct, accept, or reject ideas presented in texts throughout the reading and writing process. This discussion also underscores the importance of critical literacy in fostering meaningful learning experiences and nurturing students' communication and literacy skills.

In conclusion, critical literacy emerges as a crucial component in higher education, fostering critical thinking, deep understanding, effective communication, and appreciation for diverse perspectives. It equips students with the skills needed to navigate complex information, challenge existing power structures, and actively engage in social activities.

4.3. Addressing challenges in developing critical literacy

Recognizing potential challenges or barriers that may arise in the development of critical literacy skills is crucial, requiring active efforts to overcome them effectively. By acknowledging these challenges, appropriate and effective steps can be taken to continually enhance critical literacy abilities. A1 emphasizes that being in an environment less concerned with social issues and showing a diminished interest in reading can pose significant obstacles to developing critical literacy skills. When lacking encouragement or inspiration from the surrounding environment, individuals may become complacent and fail to realize the importance of improving their critical literacy skills. To overcome this challenge, it is essential to actively seek a supportive environment and engage in extracurricular activities, such as joining organizations or participating in discussion forums that foster critical thinking. Correspondingly participant A1, Amgott (2018) suggested that utilizing online forums and websites for idea-sharing and collaborative endeavors can be effective strategies when one finds themselves in an environment with low critical literacy levels. Additionally, one of the students indicates that “A lack of motivation or reading habits can be a significant barrier to the development of critical literacy” (A3, 2023).

This observation aligns with Khalifatussalam's (2021) findings, aiming to uncover factors causing low literacy rates in Indonesia. Reluctance or unwillingness to engage in reading can limit access to a broad and diverse knowledge base. To address this challenge, it is important to build a regular reading habit and cultivate an interest in reading by selecting topics that are interesting and relevant.

Furthermore, some individuals may struggle with processing information quickly and critically. One of the students mentions that “As English language learners, they may need more time to understand and analyze material due to their unfamiliarity with the critical literacy process” (A2, 2023).

Fajardo (2015) explains that this difficulty may stem from a lack of in-depth understanding and critical exploration of sociocultural issues in texts, as well as a tendency to unquestionably accept the author's perspective. English language learners

may find it challenging to interrogate the meaning behind the text's design and identify discourse elements perpetuating social disparities.

Moreover, some English language learners may hold ambivalent attitudes toward critical literacy, primarily viewing reading as a means of gathering information and entertainment rather than as a platform for social critique. Consequently, they may prioritize activities centered on print material and reading for comprehension over actively developing their critical literacy skills. Novianti, Thomas, & To (2020) identify additional challenges in critical literacy, including the absence of critical literacy in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum, difficulties in taking social action, rigid curricula, limited resources and time, and pressure from standardized exams. To overcome these challenges, it is crucial to train critical thinking skills while applying strategies that facilitate more effective understanding and analysis, such as note-taking, engaging gradually and consistently in discussions with peers, or seeking guidance from instructors or classmates.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the perceptions of Indonesian higher education students regarding critical literacy and its importance in the context of their academic and professional development. Through qualitative research methods and interviews with three selected students, the study shed light on their understanding and beliefs about critical literacy. The findings revealed a consensus among the participants regarding the definition and importance of critical literacy. They recognized that critical literacy goes beyond reading written words and involves understanding, interpreting, and taking action based on various perspectives encountered in different texts. The students also acknowledged that critical literacy promotes critical thinking by encouraging the analysis, critique, discussion, and interpretation of texts. Their understanding aligned with the notion that critical literacy serves as a lens or perspective for teaching that permeates all aspects of the educational experience.

The study also highlighted the distinction between critical literacy and critical thinking. The students understood that while these concepts are interconnected, they have distinct characteristics. The integration of critical literacy and critical thinking can enhance individuals' abilities to critically understand, analyze, and evaluate information. The research contributes to the knowledge on critical literacy and its implementation in Indonesian higher education. It can inform curriculum improvements, instructional strategies, and professional development in English language education programs. The study also has implications for similar educational contexts in Indonesia and beyond, highlighting the significance of cultivating critical literacy skills among culturally diverse students. Overall, the study underscores how critical literacy empowers individuals to engage with texts, analyze information, challenge dominant ideologies, and promote a more just society. By promoting critical literacy in higher education, educators can nurture a generation of individuals capable of actively participating in

various contexts and advocating for diverse perspectives, social justice, and democratic citizenship.

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