
Critical Literacy Approach in Understanding Reading Texts

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Abstract

In this technological era, critical literacy approach plays an important role as it can help students to think critically then transform their thinking into some practical actions. This research aimed to investigate the practice of the critical literacy approach in understanding reading texts and how the students perceived this approach. The researchers employed a descriptive qualitative method by doing classroom observations and interviews. The data were collected from fifth-semester students of English Education Department UIN Antasari Banjarmasin in academic year 2022. For the interview, the participants were chosen based on the snowballing method. The data were analyzed using the flow model by Miles and Huberman, including data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions. The finding of this study indicated that most students succeed in using critical literacy approach by doing all the phases of the model critical literacy approach including: code breaking, making meaning, using text, and critically analyzing the text. Moreover, students perceived critical literacy approach positively since it helped students in developing their competence in reading while also helping them criticize the text. They became more active and confident in sharing their perspectives. This also could improve their proficiency, especially in reading critical engagement with the texts.

Keywords: Student, Critical Literacy Approach, Reading Comprehension

Introduction

In Indonesia, many students take English as a foreign language course during their time in elementary school and continue on through high school. Students are supposed to possess English competences in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. However, it is still found that students have few opportunities to develop their critical thinking and communicate effectively due to the overuse of grammar instruction in the classroom. As EFL students, understanding texts is important. With the amount of information that is available now, students are expected to be involved and criticize different information from different points of view. While the rest of the other skills are crucial, reading is a fundamental skill in English that students need to develop to easily understand the daily task, as developing students' critical thinking requires a deeper understanding of information. Thus, it is principal to question what they read. Supported by White and Cooper (2015), the basic idea of critical literacy, the readers are required to apply a critical and questioning approach to the text and actively analyze texts and strategies for exploring prepossession, uncovering the hidden messages, positions, and themes.

Diverse methods are employed to promote students to read and enhance the growth of their reading comprehension. However, critical literacy approach allow students, particularly college students, learn how to think critically and apply their ideas and knowledge to achieve a better society. According to Priyatni (2012), critical thinking and self-awareness are correlated to critical literacy. Critical thinking also fosters creativity at coming up with innovative solutions to problems and at analyzing and examining information that comes in the form of perspectives, options, facts, arguments, and cause-and-effect relationships (Halimah et al., 2020). Hence, critical literacy approach is essential for education since it promotes

cognitive skills. Additionally, Luke (2014) described critical literacy as “using print and other multimedia applications to study, criticize, and modify norms, rule systems, and behaviors of society.”

The number of studies have found some benefits and challenges related to critical literacy approach. From Gustine (2013), implementing critical literacy approach in the classrooms made students' critical engagement with texts improved and also became engaged, self-assured, and cooperative while sharing their opinions during discussions. Bui (2016) mentioned that this approach helped students enhance not only their English language proficiency but also in various skills, including leadership, presentation, and teamwork. As indicated by Rao (2016), it had positive influence in oral and writing form while using English during sharing and discussion section. Furthermore, Gainer (2010) stated that critical literacy pedagogy is effective because it allows students to strengthen their English language abilities, social awareness, and agentive development.

While, Gustine (2013) also found out that the process of developing critical literacy in a foreign language is more challenging. Hikmat (2017) revealed that it is more complicated when students come from backgrounds where they lack critical literacy, self-confidence, proficiency in English, and still need for guidance. Consequently, the students had difficulty with the basic of linguistic competency (Ko, 2013). Then, Jeong (2012) stated that implementing critical literacy requires more time and effort. In addition, Rohadi (2018) stated that the reading materials are not appropriate for the level of English competency possessed by the students, it may be too simple or too difficult.

Adopted from Luke and Freebody (1997), this study conducted four resources model of critical literacy, including 1) code breaking, 2) making meaning, 3) using text, and 4) critically analyzing the text. Decoding the text allows students to recognize the letters, sounds, punctuation, grammatical patterns, and word structure (Luke & Freebody, 1997). Encoding and decoding were also emphasized in this early phase. The implication is there are a set of questions that students need to respond in order to reveal the codes in the text: 1) employing and identifying the alphabet, sounding out the words, entire words, and letter/sound correlations, 2) utilizing graphophonic, syntactic, and semantic information sources, 3) spelling accurately and comprehending the purposes of spelling, 4) identifying and employing grammar and vocabulary, as well as punctuation, intonation, and rhythm, 5) identifying and shaping patterns of sound, word, clause, letter, sentence and text/generic structure patterns, and 6) detecting and forming auditory, nonverbal, and visual codes.

In order to grasp what is being said and to predict what the author could say next, students develop their semantic competence by making links between the text and their past knowledge or experiences utilizing written, spoken, visual, or multimodal resources (Hikmat, 2017). In making meaning phase, emphasizes: 1) constructing meaning from texts using prior knowledge and social and cultural context, 2) contrasting personal social and cultural experiences with those that are discussed in the text, 3) linking prior experiences to relevant texts, 4) recognizing personal hobbies and style reflected in literature, 5) figuring out the literal and implied meanings of texts and using them, 6) paying attention to how texts are put together to figure out what they mean, and 7) the ability to recognize and create the ideas and procedures that define various methods of textual knowledge construction.

In using text or pragmatic competence are related to sociolinguistic perspectives, which show how a text is read and interpreted depends on its context. As a result, students are encouraged to develop into critical readers by reading various text types and questioning the author's use of language, structure, and organization based on the intended audience and purpose (Taşpınar & Çubukçu, 2020). This phase emphasizes including: 1) recognizing that varied social and cultural settings and goals influence the arrangement of texts, 2) acknowledging the objectives of using a text and comprehending its purpose, 3) employing appropriate text formats for multiple functions either in or out of the classroom, 4) understanding how to use a text in a specific situation and how others could perceive it, 5) acknowledging each text contains unique structures and characteristics, and 6) considering various ways to use a text to effectively send certain messages.

Further explanation from Taşpınar & Çubukçu (2020) in their study, by analyzing texts critically, or developing critical competency, students can get deeper understanding of the arguments and ideas presented

in literature. Students should be prompted to explore whether a text is fair, accurate, and reliable with the fact that no text is neutral. They must also realize their potential as readers to challenge assumptions and ideas about the world. When they disagree with the concepts put forth in the text, they must be able to express their disagreement and take appropriate action. This phase focus on: 1) figuring out why a writer, speaker, or shaper made a text and how it affects person's viewpoints and opinions, 2) determining the means by which information or ideas are conveyed and used to position readers, audiences, or listeners, 3) realizing gaps, prejudices, perspectives, and perceptions that may be silent or dominant, 4) acknowledging how texts are constructed in accordance with the values, perspectives, and concerns of the author, speaker, or shaper, and 5) selecting whether to support the perspective proposed by a text or to provide an opposing viewpoint.

Similar studies have already conducted by some researchers. The first study by Wardani (2021) identified the issues that the research participants found as requiring correction, and this study concentrated on diagnosis, action, and reflection. This study analyzed critical literacy approach applied in teaching English to EFL college students, as well as the benefits and challenges of using this method. The third principle of critical literacy as stated by Lewison, Flint, and Sluys (2002) by investigating various perspectives were carried out in this study.

The second study that carried out by Gustine and Insani (2019). The study was conducted in a private secondary school in Indonesia, where 18 eighth-graders were selected using a convenience sampling technique. The aim of this study was investigated the methods used by English teachers to foster critical literacy in secondary school English students through an examination of narrative texts. The information was compiled through the use of classroom observations, focus group interview, and written responses (reflective journals) from the students. To avoid the observer's paradox, the writers conducted several observations (seven class sessions) and it took seventy minutes to observe each classroom. The findings indicates that all four of Luke & Freebody's (1997) critical literacy resource models aid students in developing critical awareness, especially throughout the meaning-making and text-critiquing phases of the critical literacy process.

Next, Hikmat (2017) found different outcomes in Reading class at English Education Department, Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta. The study group consisted of sixty students from the English Education Department and three professors from Reading. According to the findings, the lecturers' strategies did not significantly contribute to the students' critical literacy development.

This study differs in a number of ways from prior studies related to critical literacy approach. Students in fifth semester at UIN Antasari Banjarmasin who had done Intensive Reading I, II, and III, were the subject of research on reading comprehension utilizing critical literacy approach. The objectives and research instruments of those earlier investigations varied, despite the fact that many other studies had also employed the same model. The four resources model of the critical literacy approach from Luke and Freebody (1997) serve as a guideline for the observation form used in this study. The study employed two instruments, including classroom observation and interview. This study's objectives were to investigate how students employed critical literacy approach and find out how students' perceived on using this approach in reading comprehension. This study is expected to provide more insight how critical literacy approach can be used in improvement of understanding reading texts especially for EFL students.

Methods

This study employed descriptive-qualitative method to obtain information how students at English Education Department of UIN Antasari Banjarmasin use and understand about the critical literacy approach towards reading comprehension. Furthermore, as the technique of data collection, this study relied on a descriptive approach in the form of observation and interview. The purposive sampling method was used to select the participants. Students from the fifth semester of the English Education Department at UIN Antasari Banjarmasin in the academic year 2021/2022 who had taken all of the Intensive Reading I, II, and III classes took part in classroom observation. This study involved three courses with a total of eighty

students. In addition, snowballing method was utilized by the researchers, 15 students (5 students per class) volunteered to be interviewed as representatives.

The first data collected consisted of observation guidelines and further field-notes. Students' performance of the critical literacy approach for analyzing reading materials in class under the lecturers' direction was measured with the observation sheet. The researchers examined if the students could respond or followed the instruction by the lecturer. Furthermore, when observing the responses from students, the researchers noticed other circumstances in the classroom that aided students in utilizing critical literacy approach by taking field notes. Second, the data for this study come from the transcripts of the interviews that were recorded. Interview data from participants were given in a descriptive format. Semi-structured interviews were held by the researchers. Students were interviewed face-to-face after class to inquire about their thoughts and feelings as they used the critical literacy approach to a reading material they had just analyzed. The data were analyzed using the technique proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which included data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

Results and Discussion

Researchers used the four resources model of the critical literacy approach adopted from Luke and Freebody (1997) to answer the first research question. The observations in each class using the critical literacy approach on the components at each phase brought different outcomes. First, the results of the code breaking phase showed that Class C successfully completed components 1 through 4 of the six components. Class A completed elements 2, 3, and 4, whereas Class B only completed elements 2 and 4. According to Luke and Freebody (1997), while students decode the texts, it allows them to recognize the letters, sounds, punctuation, grammatical patterns, and word structure. It was clear from the explanation above that all classes were capable of cracking the code while reading comprehension although they did not complete all the component in code breaking. This leads to a conclusion that the students who used the critical literacy approach were in higher education and were instructed to read articles rather than narrative literature. Additionally, they have a foundational knowledge of English. Therefore, they encountered no difficulties throughout this time. However, throughout the interview, the student demonstrated that they were struggling with new vocabulary and grammar.

After then, the students of all three classes shared their own experiences that were similar to or connected to the text. They executed the making meaning phase in components 2, 3, and 5. While critical questions were asked in Class A, the students responded more critically, almost to the same extent as Class C. Class A employed components 1 through 5 in this phase. Class B, on the other hand, showed less engagement in answering the questions the lecturer posed to them and performed with components number 1, 3, and 5. According to the results shown above, all classes were capable of making meaning at the phase of making comparisons and connecting their experiences with the text. Moreover, students develop their semantic competence by making links between the text and their past knowledge or experiences utilizing written, spoken, visual, or multimodal resources (Hikmat, 2017).

Then, several questions like, "why is this text being written?" and "how can anxiety and perfectionism affect daily life?" were posed as a means of gaining clarity on the use of text. The majority of students in three classes were able to identify the aims and understand the structure of the texts they reviewed. Both C and A class students were able to correctly identify the text type of the articles they read, with the former stating that the articles were expository texts written for academic and scientific reasons and then following by some opinions and viewpoint were given by their peers about the content. Class C and Class A utilized the components 2, 4, and 6 in this circumstance. This phase was a bit different from Class B because it used component number 2 and 4. Supported by Taşpınar & Çubukçu (2020), using text is related to sociolinguistic perspectives, which show how a text is read and interpreted depends on its context. Then, students are encouraged to develop into critical readers by reading various text types and questioning the author's use of language, structure, and organization based on the intended audience and purpose.

The final step is to critically analyze the text. According to the findings, the three classes fulfill components 1 through 3. Students were able to recognize the author's goals, how the text affects one's

viewpoint, how the reader may be influenced by the material offered, as well as dominant or silent opinions and points of view. In addition, when moral value-related questions were posed to the students, the author's interest in the article and many theories were employed, Class A and C gave similar answers. The results of the observation show that both classes are also able to do the fourth part of critically analyzing a text, which is acknowledging how texts are constructed in accordance with the values, perspectives, and concerns of the author. Researchers found that the three classes that adopted the critical literacy approach to analyze the text critically succeeded. As stated by Taşpınar and Çubukçu (2020), the purpose in this phase is promote critical perspective, the students should be prompted to analyze and evaluate the text, challenge assumptions and ideas and speak for their opinion when disagree with the ideas in the text.

The results from the second research question were derived from information gathered during the interview. In this section, students discuss their perspectives on the critical literacy method, as well as its benefits and challenges, as well as how they handle the challenges.

The majority of the interviewed students grasped the concept that the critical literacy strategy facilitates text comprehension, specifically through reading and critically analyzing a text or article. According to the results, Student 1 felt that the critical literacy approach aided in her development as a reader. Next, Students 2 and 3 elaborated on what they meant by "critical literacy" by describing the analytical and reflective processes that take place when students read and interpret a text. Based on some of the perspective by students before, it became clear to them that using the critical literacy method and engaging in both active and reflective reading practice improves reading skills and enables more precise understanding. According to McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004), students not only know how to read and write, but they can also recognize the concealed assumptions in the texts. Furthermore, analytical reading is a synonym for critical literacy since it involves reading the situation, meaning, and comprehension through spoken or written communication rather than reading the text in general (Molden, 2007). The statement made by Student 4 indicated that he understood the connection between the critical literacy approach and critical thinking. He asserted that he can grasp the text's overall meaning by employing critical thinking skills. As explained by White and Cooper (2015), critical literacy requires the readers to apply a critical and questioning approach to the text and actively analyze texts and strategies for exploring prepossession, uncovering the hidden messages, positions, and themes. Additionally, Student 5 holds a diverse viewpoint. She came to the realization that using a critical literacy approach required more time and effort than simply learning in school. Student 6 stated that because she needed extra time to read at home first using a critical literacy approach, she frequently read the article that would be discussed in the class. Jeong (2012) argued that in order to fully implement the critical literacy approach, both students and teachers would require more time than is typically allotted for classroom instruction.

According to some data from students' responses about the benefits and challenges they felt about this approach showed various point were identified. The majority of the students believed they had improved in their ability to critically read texts. Based on their responses, the other students demonstrated that they were becoming familiar to using critical thinking when reading texts, which was particularly beneficial for those entering semesters five and up. Further, the student reinforced the idea that critical reading is not a rote skill like mathematics, but rather a grasp of the ideas in the context of an article. The result found in the study by Gustine (2013) implementing critical literacy approach in the classrooms made students' critical engagement with texts improved. The third benefit is that students become more engaged and self-assured when it comes to discussing their points of view, which also improves their proficiency in using and communicating in English. This is achieved by understanding how to read texts through the lens of critical literacy. According to Gustine (2013), this approach encourages students to be more engaged, confident, and collaborative in giving their points of view during the discussion section of the class. Besides, it has good impact on students' improvement in use and communicate in English (Rao, 2016). Generally, the findings showed that critical literacy helps students become more fluent in English and develop a range of skills, including presentation and teamwork (Bui, 2016) also enhance their social consciousness (Gainer, 2010). However, due to the majority of the answers is similar during interview from participants, the

researchers did not find there were abilities development felt by students in leadership (Bui, 2016) and agentive development (Gainer, 2010).

Meanwhile, the challenges faced by the students. According to Gustine (2013), the process of developing critical literacy in a foreign language is more challenging. The results indicated that the majority of students encountered the same problem. Some students claimed that they had to work harder than they did when reading articles in their own languages when they were reading in English. After then, they encountered problems with the text's unusual words and complicated grammar rules. It was not just that the text was written in English, it was about the difficulty of using and understanding words that are uncommon in the English language. While Ko (2013), in his study, the students struggling for basic linguistic competence while this approach implemented. Hikmat (2017) also stated, it is more complicated when students come from backgrounds where they lack critical literacy, self-confidence, and proficiency in English, it is hard not only from the students but also for teacher. Then, the further challenge is students require extra time and effort to utilize critical literacy since they are unfamiliar with the vocabulary. Jeong (2012) conveyed, implementing critical literacy requires more time and effort.

Additionally, the students were questioned about which of the four resources in the critical literacy method they found most difficult to use. The majority of students indicated that code breaking and critically analyzing the text were the most difficult tasks. This is due to their earlier difficulties with critical reading of foreign language materials and new vocabularies. Only a small number of students found it challenging in making meaning and using text. To put it simply, some students stated that they will have a hard time critically analyzing a text if they don't have a firm grasp of how meaning is constructed in the first place. Some students chose using text because they had trouble grasping the various options and alternatives for effectively communicating particular meanings.

The following are various strategies used by students to overcome challenges encountered when applying the critical literacy approach to understanding reading texts. The first strategy is to make it a habit to read more articles that require critical thinking and expand new vocabulary. Bana (2020) confirmed that reading helps EFL students in developing their vocabulary by allowing them to learn the most commonly used and useful words in the text. The second is to obtain some insight into the article's subject matter or setting. Then, contribute extra information by speaking with others who have a better grasp of the content. Moreover, reading also has big impact on one's intellectual and personal development (Pardede, 2019). It is also associated with a person's capacity for thankfulness (Harrison, 2004). The last is learning new vocabulary and reading an article at home before class.

Conclusion

All in all, it can be highlighted that students from fifth semester successfully employed the critical literacy approach by completing all the phases of the model critical literacy approach adopted from Luke and Freebody (1997) in reading comprehension. They did code breaking, making meaning, using text, and critically analyzing the text. Using critical literacy approach, students were encouraged to think critically, analyze the text from various viewpoints and explore the new language and culture through numerous literatures. Moreover, students perceived critical literacy approach positively since it helped students in improving their reading proficiency while also helping them criticize the text. They became more active and confident in sharing their perspectives. Although there were a few challenges, such as unfamiliarity with the vocabularies and grammatical structures of the texts, they were able to handle them in some ways. This approach also could improve their proficiency, especially in reading critical engagement with the texts.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to English Education Department lecturers and students of UIN Antasari for constantly motivating us to complete and participate well in this study. Also, we would specially thank to our friends who supported us and offered deep insight into this study.

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