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MOVING FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW ON ESTABLISHING CRITICAL LITERACY IN EFL SETTINGS

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Abstract: Research in critical literacy (CL) has conventionally put an emphasis on English as a second language contexts, with limited exploration in environments of English as a foreign language (EFL) where English is seldom utilized outside of the classroom. This study aims to examine the incorporation of critical literacy within the context of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), a domain that has been disregarded by TESOL scholars and practitioners in EFL contexts, as it is increasingly important for TESOL practitioners as it moves language teaching beyond functional skills to include the analysis of power, identity, and ideology in texts. By fostering This systematic literature review systematically analyzed 55 peer-reviewed studies published between 2012 and 2025, focusing on the implementation of CL praxis in EFL classroom. This study assesses and integrates existing literature through delineating the theoretical framework of CL in TESOL, demonstrating instances of its implementation, and deliberating on the advantages and shortcomings linked with integrating CL into teaching practices. These findings have significant implications for teacher education, curriculum development, and policy-making, particularly in ensuring that EFL instruction empowers learners to engage critically with texts and their sociocultural contexts. Ultimately, the study calls for further research into the long-term impact of CL pedagogy on language learners' critical thinking, identity, and social awareness in EFL settings.
Keywords: *Critical literacy; TESOL; English as a Foreign Language (EFL).*

INTRODUCTION

In previous eras, the pedagogical approach to reading and writing education predominantly emphasized the cultivation of students' fundamental literacy capabilities, with a particular emphasis on essential linguistic elements encompassing vocabulary acquisition, grammatical formations, and the development of phonological sensitivity. Not until the last thirty years have researchers and educators acknowledged the importance of integrating students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds into classroom teaching rather than keeping them separate. Teachers are now encouraged to offer students the tools needed to make meaningful changes in their lives (Maghsoudi et al., 2022; Rahmadina & Emilia, 2022; Sirén & Sulkunen, 2023). In alternative terms, instructional objectives serve to advance sociocultural perspectives of language and literacy education (Dwikamayuda et al., 2024), wherein literacy is perceived as a communal activity that both shapes and is shaped by sociocultural elements (Adunyarittigun, 2022; Bakken, 2024). Therefore, educators must possess a deep understanding of the real-life experiences of students, as these experiences have the potential to impact how students comprehend and generate texts.

This study aims to examine the implementation of critical literacy (CL) within the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), an area that has received limited attention from both researchers and practitioners in the contexts of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Research in CL has historically been carried out within English as a second language (ESL) settings (Brown, 2022; Lee, 2022; Rizqiani et al., 2024). Additionally, a

limited amount of CL research has been embarked upon in EFL contexts, where the utilization of English outside the educational setting is infrequent (Appatova & Horning, 2023; Arvianti, 2023; Brownell, 2023). This study particularly endeavors to elucidate the theoretical framework that supports CL pedagogy and to explore the practical implications of employing the CL approach within EFL settings. The article will initially define CL within the context of TESOL, followed by illustrating instances of CL implementation. Subsequently, it will expound upon the advantages and shortcomings associated with adopting the CL approach.

CL, adhering to the sociocultural perspective on language instruction and acquisition (Hromova et al., 2022; Sirén & Sulkunen, 2023), holds significant importance in modern language and literacy education and research. Emerging from the focus on interdisciplinary areas, CL can be defined as the utilization of various communication technologies to evaluate, criticize, and modify the standards, regulations, and behaviors that oversee the societal domains of daily existence (Egitim & Watson, 2024; Fajardo-Dack et al., 2024; Fu & Wang, 2022). In other words, rather than accepting the existing state of affairs or *status quo* unquestioningly, CL education revolves around the principle of critical theory (Tentolouris, 2023; Wang et al., 2022; Yulianto et al., 2024). The objective is to enhance critical consciousness regarding inequitable power dynamics, as well as to advocate for equality and societal justice for marginalized groups.

Instead of centering attention on deciphering language like traditional literacy teachers, CL teachers engage with students in examining the diverse perspectives presented in written materials or digital sources through questioning and reshaping the entrenched "normative practices and ideologies" found in textual or multimodal resources that uphold and perpetuate stereotypical identities (Akkuş & Uysal, 2024; Murillo Egurrola & Flórez García, 2023; Sirén & Sulkunen, 2023). Traditional literacy in EFL is mostly about teaching language forms and comprehension centered on correctness and decoding (Brownell, 2023). EFL teacher, following a traditional literacy approach focused on vocabulary and grammar, missed the opportunity to unpack the cultural assumptions embedded in the text. Had a CL approach been used, students could have analyzed the portrayal, discussed its cultural bias, compared it with their own realities, and engaged in meaningful, identity-affirming conversations. Instead, the lack of critical engagement reinforced stereotypes and limited students' ability to see English not just as a language to be learned, but as a tool for voice, questioning, and empowerment. In contrast, CL invites learners to interrogate texts, embrace multimodal authentic materials, question ideology, and take social agency (Dwikamayuda et al., 2024; Novianti, 2023; Yulianto et al., 2024). It shifts from teaching about language to teaching with language in socially meaningful ways. In other words, students not solely attain vocabulary and grammar knowledge, but also engage in a critical analysis of tangible societal issues. Consequently, literacy is perceived not merely as a form of communication, but also as an integral component of the norms, traditions, and interactions that influence social connections (Louloudi, 2022; Nkealah & Simango, 2023; Riwayatiningsih, 2022).

CL can be concisely outlined through the four principles as proposed by McLaughlin & DeVoogd (2023). (a) Texts are constructed (b) Texts are constructed for particular purposes (c) Texts can be critiqued from multiple perspectives (d) Reading and writing are tied to identity and social action as well as challenge the *status quo* to sustain social justice (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2023).

While CL is often mistakenly conflated with critical thinking (CT), it extends beyond mere CT in essence. CT is frequently associated with the advanced cognitive skill needed for understanding written texts, whereas CL extends beyond advanced cognitive processes and is dedicated to the sociological and political aspect of literacy skills, aiming for the mitigation of human suffering and the development of a more equitable society (Jones & Manion, 2023; Louloudi, 2022; Olson, 2024; Sirén & Sulkunen, 2023) as fundamental principles. CL puts an emphasis on matters concerning social justice and equity (Barkas et al., 2022; Egitim & Watson, 2024; Qoyyimah et al., 2022; Sirén & Sulkunen, 2023), with the objective of enhancing students' critical understanding of social concerns (Brown, 2022; Nugraha et al., 2024; Pederson, 2023; Rumaf et al., 2024). Furthermore, it aspires to facilitate a transformation in the *"self or one's world"* through advocating literacy as a means for societal transformation.

As globalization and digital technologies reshape the landscape of language education, CL has emerged as a powerful pedagogical framework that encourages learners not only to

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comprehend texts but also to analyze, question, and transform them. In EFL contexts, where language teaching traditionally emphasizes grammar, vocabulary, and standardized texts, the integration of CL represents a paradigm shift toward empowering learners as active thinkers and social participants. While several studies have explored the implementation of CL in EFL classrooms, the findings remain fragmented, and a comprehensive synthesis is still lacking.

To address this gap, this systematic review aims to investigate how CL has been conceptualized, implemented, and evaluated within EFL teaching and learning settings over the past decade. Specifically, this review is guided by the following research questions: (1) How is CL defined and framed in recent EFL research and practice? (2) What challenges and barriers do educators face in implementing CL in EFL settings?

By systematically examining peer-reviewed studies published between 2012 to 2025, this review seeks to provide insights into the current state of CL in EFL, identify research gaps, and offer practical implications for educators and curriculum designers.

METHOD

The proposed framework is derived from a comprehensive analysis of the literature on CL, its advancement, and the relevant pedagogical practices in language learning contexts (Novianti, 2023, 2024). To situate the framework within a specific EFL context, a review of classroom practices concerning CL in EFL environments was conducted through scholarly literature from 2012 to 2025, concluding with a thematic analysis of these practices (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Garner & Ragland, 2015). A qualitative meta-analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ha & Murray, 2021; Witt et al., 2004) was subsequently employed in our endeavor to enhance the current understanding and frameworks of CL, as derived from our examination of the methodologies in practice. To ensure a systematic and comprehensive review of the literature on the implementation of CL in EFL classrooms, a PRISMA-guided search strategy was employed (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The initial identification stage involved systematic database searches using key academic platforms including *Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, and Web of Science*. The search terms used were: *"critical literacy" AND "EFL" OR "English as a Foreign Language"*, with filters applied for peer-reviewed publications published between 2012 and 2025. A total of 612 records were retrieved through database searching, and an additional 38 records were identified through manual searches of reference lists and relevant journals, resulting in 650 total records. After the removal of 120 duplicate entries, 530 records remained for screening. During the screening phase, titles and abstracts were reviewed against the inclusion criteria. A total of 420 records were excluded at this stage due to irrelevance. These included studies that did not focus on EFL contexts, did not involve critical literacy implementation, or were not empirical in nature. 110 full-text articles were then assessed for eligibility. After full-text review, 55 articles were excluded for reasons such as being purely theoretical, lacking clear implementation data, or focusing on ESL or L1 contexts instead of EFL. The final review included 55 empirical studies that met all inclusion criteria. The PRISMA flow diagram (Table 1) provides a detailed overview of the identification, screening, and selection process followed in this review.

Table 1. *PRISMA flow table: Literature search process on CL in EFL classrooms (2012–2025)*

Stage	Description	Number of Records
Identification	Records identified through database searching (Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, Web of Science) using keywords: "critical literacy" AND "EFL" OR "English as a foreign language".	609
	Additional records identified through reference lists and hand-searching relevant journals	41
	Total Records Identified	650
	Records after Duplicate Removed	530
Screening	Titles and abstract screened	530
	Records excluded based on relevance (e.g., not EFL, not critical literacy, not empirical studies)	420
Eligibility	Full-text articles assessed for eligibility	110

	Full-text articles excluded, with reasons (e.g., theoretical only, not focused on implementation, insufficient data)	60
Included	Studies included in qualitative synthesis (systematic review)	55
	Studies included in quantitative synthesis (if any)	0 (qualitative review only)

As with any systematic review, the process of study selection in this review was susceptible to several potential biases. One major concern was publication bias, as the majority of the included studies were sourced from peer-reviewed journals indexed in databases such as *Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar* and *Web of Science*. This may have excluded relevant insights from gray literature, such as conference proceedings, theses, or practitioner reports, which could offer rich accounts of CL implementation in less formal or underrepresented EFL contexts. To mitigate this, manual searches of institutional repositories and reference lists were conducted, resulting in the inclusion of several relevant studies from non-indexed sources. Another source of bias involved language and regional bias. Only studies published in English were considered, which may have led to the exclusion of locally published research in regions where English is not the dominant academic language. To address this, special attention was given to identifying studies conducted in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, even when published in English, to ensure broader geographic representation. Selection bias may have also occurred during the screening phase, especially given the overlap between CL and other frameworks such as critical language awareness, digital literacy, and media literacy. To minimize this, clear inclusion criteria were established, focusing on studies that explicitly referenced and applied McLaughlin and DeVoogd's (2023) or similar conceptualizations of *'critical literacy'*. Titles and abstracts were screened independently by two reviewers, and disagreements were resolved through discussion and re-evaluation of full texts. These strategies enhanced the trustworthiness and transparency of the review process, in line with PRISMA guidelines, and helped ensure that the final sample of 55 studies provided a balanced and methodologically sound foundation for synthesis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of CL in EFL contexts

Drawing upon the thematic review and meta-analysis, this study examines the classroom practices associated with CL within language learning contexts, there is no universally prescribed or rigidly established framework that dictates the parameters and characteristics of CL. The concept of CL is not confined to a singular, static model that is universally applicable across all contexts and situations. Some scholars hold differing opinions on the extent to which CL can serve as a guiding framework for language educators and professionals to adhere to, as a considerable number of individuals have made efforts to simplify CL into a one-step technique or a marketable product for publishing companies. Teachers are expected to comprehend the principles of CL, take into account the requirements and preferences of students, and construct their personalized pedagogical frameworks of CL within a specific community context (Dwikamayuda et al., 2024; Li, 2022; Novianti, 2023, 2024). In this particular section, an examination will be conducted concerning prior research on teachers' demonstrations of CL within EFL settings, emphasizing the *interaction with various modes of (multimodal) texts, creation multiple viewpoints and generating alternative narrative*, and *implementation of initiatives to advocate for societal equity*.

Interaction with various modes of (multimodal) texts

Literacy practices within CL educational settings, such as conventional literacy teachings on a practical basis, encompass the process of decoding meaning from various forms of texts (multimodal). Lee (2022), Jones and Manion (2023), and Bendraou and Sakale (2023) highlight the importance of traditional functional literacy in CL classrooms for fostering CL. It is imperative for teachers in the EFL context to find a harmonious equilibrium between the notions of "critical" and "functional" literacy during the implementation of critical literacy pedagogy. EFL teachers have employed a range of materials as instructional tools to cultivate students' proficiency in English reading and writing. Specifically, teachers often utilize children's and young adult literature within CL instructional settings.

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Several studies emphasized activities where learners analyzed narrative structure or authorial positioning to understand how texts are socially and linguistically constructed, aligning with the first and the second model of critical literacy proposed by McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2023) in which the *texts are constructed* and *the text are constructed for particular purposes*. Romero & Bobkina (2023) integrated literature into their EFL classes; Jones and Manion (2023) and Borge et al. (2022) incorporated graphic novels into their EFL classes; and Lee (2022) and Njonge (2023) employed fairy tales as a means of confronting gender stereotypes. Equally, teachers in EFL context have incorporated the utilization of multimodal picture books as a strategy to enhance the critical awareness of bilingual children regarding issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and religion (Bakken, 2024; Novianti, 2023, 2024; Qoyyimah et al., 2022; Rizqiani et al., 2024; Yulianto et al., 2024). Furthermore, EFL teachers often incorporate news articles into their teaching practices. Illustratively, Bendraou and Sakale (2023), Utami and Mahardika (2023), Nkansah (2025), and Wells et al. (2022) have documented instances where teachers have exposed their students to a variety of news stories. Furthermore, the studies conducted by Njonge (2023), Ryan et al. (2023), as well as Yulianto et al. (2024) illustrate the utilization of video by teachers as a tool for encouraging students to engage in reflective analysis and critical evaluation of issues related to racism and sexism within the context of their English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Utilizing a variety of texts in the classroom can effectively involve students and provide them with opportunities to enhance their functional and CL skills.

Creation multiple viewpoints and generating alternative narrative (counternarratives)

In classrooms focused on CL, students are given the ability to question and challenge the established order of societal frameworks and present alternative narratives (counternarratives) to represent a variety of viewpoints. Students are offered various chances to analyze texts, formulate diverse perspectives, and create narratives that challenge the dominant social norms in order to critically examine commonly accepted social occurrences (Brownell, 2023; Qoyyimah et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022). Therefore, the concept of classroom learning is understood as a sociopolitical space, as opposed to being regarded as a neutral setting (Arvianti, 2023; Dwyer, 2023; Hmood, 2024).

Students in several studies rewrote traditional fairy tales from marginalized characters' perspectives, engaging in dialogue around culture, gender, and power as it is in line with the second and the third model of critical literacy from McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2023) namely *the text are constructed for particular purposes* and *texts can be critiqued from multiple perspectives*. Tentolouris (2023) proposes three essential literacy approaches that may aid learners in contemplating texts from a critical viewpoint. Initially, the concept of *juxta- positioning* is highlighted as a fundamental strategy in CL educational settings, wherein students analyze two different texts, images, videos, or sets of lyrics in parallel (referred to as *intertextuality*) to emphasize the similarities and variances between them. Vi (2024) and Romero and Bobkina (2023) utilized a blend of linguistic materials and multimodal elements, including textual descriptions and visual aids, to analyze *Beauty Product Advertisement*. This analysis also incorporated video content sourced from YouTube that focused on *Beauty Standards*. Specifically, the study conducted by Vi (2024) indicated that the implementation of critical pedagogical principles through the aforementioned resources within an EFL setting facilitates the cultivation of students' CT abilities, improves their linguistic competence, and provides them with insights into advocating for disability rights. Additionally, it expands their understanding of the nuances of the target language (English) and most importantly, fosters self-awareness. Furthermore, Maghsoudi et al. (2022) utilized a combination of linguistic texts along with multimodal resources. By engaging in this process, students have the opportunity to delve deeper into the complexities of how a singular occurrence can be analyzed and understood through a myriad of contrasting viewpoints. Through this exercise, students can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of interpretation and the subjective nature of perspective.

Secondly, the utilization of *alternative text* as a counter-hegemonic approach involves students critically analyzing the ideological principles conveyed in written and visual materials. Through the creation of alternative texts, individuals are able to cultivate their own perspectives, rather than passively adopting the viewpoints of the original authors. This process enables students to

present a variety of viewpoints and articulate their unique voices (Cicchino et al., 2023; Soomro & Mirza, 2023; Walker et al., 2024). For instance, Zarobe and Gutiérrez (2024) documented that the utilization of CL practices involves the dissemination of counter texts, which results in a beneficial impact not solely on the comprehension of reading but also on the language proficiency of EFL students. This is achieved by enhancing their skills in coding, semantics, pragmatics, and critical analysis. Additionally, Appatova and Horning (2023) demonstrated the manner in which her students at the university level engaged in offering counter texts for the purpose of interpreting the initial meanings present in texts subsequent to a thorough critical analysis of articles within the context of an English reading and writing course in EFL context.

Thirdly, *problem posing* emerges as a prevalent pedagogical approach within critical literacy educational settings, wherein students actively participate in dialogic exchanges through the employment of interrogative prompts. Through the utilization of probing questions, such as inquiries regarding the voices that are either highlighted or oppressed, students are prompted to contemplate the absences within textual representations and consider strategies for addressing the inherent disparities within them (Cuevas-Cerveró et al., 2023; Lamsal, 2024; Olson, 2024; Walker et al., 2024). For instance, Yulianto et al. (2024) employed problem-posing and multimodal strategies to create opportunities for CL spaces, aiming to enhance the children's ability to critically engage with various texts. The study carried out by Dwikamayuda et al. (2024) suggest an examination of how young children grasp textual content from various perspectives, offering valuable prospects for academics and educators. This may empower teachers to offer improved support to young children as they develop their capacities to interrogate, evaluate, and interpret the meanings and purposes of textual materials from an early age. In addition, Lee (2022) emphasize the analysis of presentations by Korean female high school students regarding the portrayal of gender inequality in Korean society. They explore opportunities for equipping students with the tools to critically examine and reshape the imbalanced power relations between genders using the problem-posing approach (Hromova et al., 2022; Kortesoja, 2023; Li, 2022; Sayekti et al., 2022).

Implementation of initiatives to advocate for social justice

In CL classrooms, literacy activities are perceived as mechanisms through which students can engage in action and advocate for social justice. Several studies revealed that teachers implemented some activities that align with the last model of CL as proposed by McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2023) explicitly *reading and writing are tied to identity and social action***.** Thus, students are viewed not as inert receivers of information but as dynamic scholars capable of altering societal change (Akkuş & Uysal, 2024; Fajardo-Dack et al., 2024; Romero & Bobkina, 2023). In the pursuit of attaining this transformative objective, teachers or educators specializing in CL advocate for students to facilitate a shift in the *"self or one's world"* with the aspiration that they can serve as catalysts for societal transformation to establish an enhanced world. For instance, Louloudi (2022) utilized the concept of social justice to investigate how Canadian and Finnish teachers reconstruct their views on CL and their understanding of the social in relation to CL. In other words, S. Lee and Suh (2022) illustrated the agentive behaviors of her students as they composed letters addressed to Disney, with the purpose of challenging the gender disparities depicted in fairy tales. Hayik (2022) demonstrated the manner in which her Israeli and Arab students composed letters addressed to the President of the United States, appealing for his involvement in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Through the implementation of agentive practices by students, literacy is conceptualized as transformative actions aimed at fostering social change and cultivating individuals into advocates for societal transformation (Akkuş & Uysal, 2024; Dwikamayuda et al., 2024; Qi et al., 2022). Below is the table that reviews key studies on CL in EFL contexts based on McLaughlin & DeVoogd's Framework.

Table 2. *Summary of key studies on CL in EFL contexts based on McLaughlin & DeVoogd's framework*

Study	Contexts/Participants	Critical Literacy Principles	Key Focus/Activity	Main Contribution

Y. J. Lee (2022)	EFL Korean young learners	Texts can be critiqued	Rewriting fairy tales to reflect local gender norms.	Fostered CT and enabled students to challenge traditional gender roles.
Jones and Manion (2023)	EFL Ugandan and Canadian young learners	Texts reflect identity & social action	Analyzing graphic novels to discuss child rights education.	Highlighted critical digital literacy as identity-shaping and socially empowering.
Arifin et al. (2023)	Indonesian EFL students (upper secondary)	Texts can be critiqued from multiple perspectives	Reading *"Egghead"* and discussing bullying through multiple lenses.	Showed that students could interpret characters' roles differently and develop empathy.
Romero and Bobkina (2023)	EFL Spanish pre-service teachers	Texts have purposes	Media-based argumentation writing using real-world sources (beauty advertisements).	Demonstrated how analyzing media bias supports critical reading and argument writing in EFL.
(Jumiah, 2024)	Saudi University EFL learners	Texts have purposes / Identity	Critical reflective journaling and lesson planning.	Enhanced teacher agency and awareness of how texts transmit ideology in classrooms

The advantages and shortcomings of implementing CL in EFL context

CL pedagogy has yielded numerous advantages for EFL students (Akkuş & Uysal, 2024; S. Lee & Suh, 2022; Tentolouris, 2023). According to Akkuş and Uysal (2024), EFL students derive benefits from the CL strategy as it (a) fosters the enhancement of literacy competencies as autonomous readers through exploring materials beyond the boundaries of the classroom (see also: Ijabah, 2024; Jumiah, 2024; Y. J. Lee, 2022), (b) establishes a comprehensive language-learning environment where the four language skills - listening, speaking, reading, and writing—are seamlessly integrated into the educational framework (Emilia et al., 2022; Rahmadina & Emilia, 2022; Suh & Huh, 2023), and (c) sparks their interest in language acquisition by establishing connections with their personal experiences (Muszyńska & Parra, 2023; Nguyen, 2022; Viono et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the utilization of the CL approach poses shortcomings for teachers and students within EFL contexts, particularly in the context of South East Asian nations. When viewed from the standpoint of teachers, there exist three primary obstacles in relation to the implementation of CL. Initially, the absence of established pedagogical frameworks hinders EFL instructors from integrating CL in their educational settings (Novianti, 2023, 2024). CL does not advocate for a singular pre-designed instructional framework for the educational curriculum. Instead, it urges teachers to embrace the critical principle of literacy education and formulate a CL curriculum based on students' backgrounds and local sociocultural norms. As a result, teachers might feel overwhelmed and uncertain due to the intricate nature of CL ideologies and may perceive it as excessively time-consuming to include CL in their teaching curriculums.

Secondly, instructional practices that are centered around teachers might hinder the implementation of CL pedagogy by teachers. Despite the emphasis on a student-centered approach in the EFL curriculum following the rise of communicative language teaching (Al Khreshe, 2022), the influence of institutional cultures and the assessment system on education remains significant in several Southeast Asian nations (Adunyarittigun, 2022; Arvianti, 2023; Dardjito et al., 2023; Novianti, 2023). In line with the Confucian tradition in East Asian nations where authority figures and elders are viewed as superior (S. Lee & Suh, 2022; Y. J. Lee, 2022; Li, 2022; Suh & Huh, 2023; Yang & Li, 2022), Southeast Asian teachers often hold a dominant position in the classroom, being perceived as repositories of knowledge which they impart to students. Conversely, students are seen as learners who show deference to the authority of teachers and passively acquire knowledge. In such contexts, teachers maintain their authoritative stance and are hesitant to relinquish control to students in order to question the ideologies presented in texts and media.

Third, classroom management presents challenges to educators when implementing the CL approach. Within CL classrooms, teachers adhere to the dialogic education method, where interactions between teachers and students, as well as among students, are emphasized to foster student-centered discussions on societal matters.

Nevertheless, addressing contentious topics may occasionally jeopardize the classroom atmosphere (Jones & Manion, 2023). Jones and Manion (2023) assert that engaging contentious subjects through CL may disrupt the classroom dynamic by challenging predominant narratives that could elicit strong student reactions, thus necessitating expert facilitation and empathetic modeling by teachers to foster a secure and supportive learning environment conducive to social justice advocacy while prioritizing effective classroom management.

From the perspective of students, challenges may arise when utilizing or opposing the CL approach if it is put into practice. Numerous obstacles highlighted in prior research exist. Initially, the imbalanced power dynamics within classrooms can lead to students pushing back against the CL approach (Njonge, 2023). It is evident that classrooms function as small-scale version of society in which there are unequal power relations. Certain students may possess greater eloquence, while others may exhibit more cynicism due to factors such as their social background, like race, ethnicity, gender, or economic standing. The existence of a unilateral form of authority that goes against the mutual requirement for authentic dialogue (Borge et al., 2022; Brown, 2024; Njonge, 2023) could result in some students refusing to engage in discussions within CL settings.

Secondly, students may exhibit reluctance to engage in active dialogues or discussions with their teachers or classmates, or simply obey to the information presented in the course materials (Bendraou & Sakale, 2023; Besral, 2022; Nkealah & Simango, 2023; Sayekti et al., 2022). As delineated by Viono et al. (2023) and Dwikamayuda et al. (2024), in numerous Asian nations, students continue to uphold the transmission model of education where teachers distribute knowledge to students. Nonetheless, in the context of CL, students also have the capacity to assume the role of teachers themselves by imparting their own experiences and knowledge to their teachers.

Thirdly, the proficiency level of students in English could hinder the effectiveness of CL within EFL curriculum (Aisyah et al., 2025; Tryanasari et al., 2024; Ulla et al., 2022). Due to the fact that CL is centered around CT, a form of higher-order cognitive thinking, students with limited English proficiency may encounter challenges when attempting to participate in critical activities. Consequently, students might experience frustration if they are unable to comprehend the meanings conveyed in texts, question the ideologies presented, and articulate their critical viewpoints.

Fourthly, the success of CL in EFL classrooms may be influenced by students' beliefs in language learning (S. Lee & Suh, 2022; Rumaf et al., 2024; Utami & Mahardika, 2023). According to the studies conducted by Utami and Mahardika (2023) and S. Lee and Suh (2022), certain students, particularly those with limited English proficiency striving to enhance their linguistic skills, displayed skepticism towards CL while showing a preference for traditional functional literacy. Their belief that reading courses in Indonesian and Korean EFL contexts should prioritize vocabulary acquisition, grammatical elucidation, and reading tactics poses a barrier to the integration of CL.

Several implications for EFL teachers can be inferred from the aforementioned discussion. First, rather than accepting the current state of affairs for granted, it is imperative for both prospective and practicing EFL teachers to comprehend the philosophical foundations of CL pedagogy and acquire the practical skills to implement it effectively in EFL settings. In other words, teacher training must begin by building a strong conceptual foundation. Many EFL teachers are introduced to CL without a deep understanding of its sociocultural and ideological underpinnings. Training programs should therefore include explicit instruction on foundational theories supported by case studies that illustrate CL in action. This will help teachers distinguish CL from traditional reading instruction and appreciate its role in empowering learners. Through enhancing critical consciousness regarding unequal power dynamics and advocating for fairness and societal justice for marginalized people, EFL teachers not only cultivate students' fundamental literacy abilities but also enhance their critical consciousness. Thus, education is not merely learning to read the word but also learning to read the world (surrounding environment) (Adunyarittigun, 2022; Akkuş & Uysal, 2024; Darling-Aduana et al., 2022; Louloudi, 2022; Suh & Huh, 2023; Yulianto et al., 2024).

Second, there is a clear need for practical, classroom-oriented training. Teachers often struggle to translate theory into pedagogy. Teacher education should include hands-on activities such as modeling lessons, designing critical reading tasks, and microteaching sessions

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where trainees deliver CL lessons and receive feedback (Fagsao & Mi-Ing, 2023; Romero & Bobkina, 2023; Sayekti et al., 2022). These practices will bridge the gap between theoretical awareness and classroom confidence. Third, to address the digital and multimodal demands of contemporary literacy, training programs should incorporate critical digital literacy. Teachers must be equipped to help students critically evaluate and create content across digital platforms (Y. J. Lee, 2022; Njonge, 2023; Yulianto et al., 2024). This includes navigating bias, misinformation, and multimodal texts—skills increasingly vital in globalized communication. Furthermore, Furthermore, teacher education must support contextualization and cultural responsiveness. In exam-driven or culturally conservative EFL environments, educators may perceive CL as incompatible with existing expectations. Training should therefore encourage the use of culturally relevant texts and "soft entry" strategies—such as reinterpreting stories or analyzing media—that align with curriculum goals while promoting critical awareness (Diaz, 2024; Kumlu & Çomoğlu, 2021; Novianti, 2024). Equally important is the cultivation of critical teacher identity. Many teachers may not initially see themselves as agents of change or feel confident facilitating socially engaged discussions. Reflective practices, such as journaling and peer dialogue, can help teachers explore their own biases and positionalities, fostering the mindset needed to guide students through complex social and textual analysis (Dwyer, 2023; Şenbayrak & Hart, 2024; Viono et al., 2023). Finally, teacher education must address assessment challenges by introducing alternative forms of evaluating CT and CL. Workshops on rubric development, performance-based assessments, and student portfolios can help teachers align CL outcomes with institutional requirements without compromising critical engagement (Al Khreshe, 2022; Njonge, 2023; Romero & Bobkina, 2023).

Several studies have demonstrated the possible shortcomings of incorporating CL within EFL settings. Nevertheless, recent studies have pointed out that with suitable teaching methodologies employed by EFL teachers, the implementation of CL pedagogy can be effectively carried out in EFL environments (Appatova & Horning, 2023; S. Lee & Suh, 2022; Lee, 2022; Riwayatiningsih, 2022; Wells et al., 2022). Consequently, it is imperative for EFL teachers to collaborate with researchers or academics in developing instructional plans that provide local students' educational requirements in manners that are culturally and pedagogically recognized. Furthermore, this study delineates three prevalent elements of instructional methodologies derived from prior CL studies. Teachers are afforded the opportunity to select from a range of available strategies, integrate them into their pedagogical approach and their teaching philosophy, and develop *de facto* curricula aligning with their educational objectives.

While CL offers numerous advantages for English language learning, it is indisputable that the incorporation of CL within EFL settings presents a considerable challenge. The majority of study on CL has predominantly been carried out in ESL environments; nonetheless, there has been a limited amount of CL study conducted in EFL contexts as well (Adunyarittigun, 2022; Hromova et al., 2022; Romero & Bobkina, 2023). As a result, this study advocates for further empirical investigations into CL within EFL contexts, providing a platform for upcoming researchers to delve into the role of teachers' agency in overcoming the shortcomings encountered during the integration of CL. Moreover, there is a call within this article for an increased emphasis on action research concerning EFL teachers currently in service (Akkuş & Uysal, 2024; Bakken, 2024; Ijabah, 2024). Researchers can gain a comprehensive insight into the implementation of CL practices in educational settings by analyzing the strategies employed by teachers. This analysis allows for a thorough understanding of how CL manifests within specific local environments.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review set out to explore how CL has been established in EFL settings, drawing on empirical studies aligned with McLaughlin and DeVoogd's (2023) four foundational principles. The analysis revealed that CL is gaining momentum as a transformative pedagogical framework in EFL classrooms, offering learners opportunities to go beyond language acquisition to engage with texts as socially constructed, ideologically positioned, and open to critique from multiple perspectives. In summary, this review reinforces the relevance of CL in enhancing both language learning and social consciousness among EFL learners. From EFL teachers' perspectives, equipping them with the theoretical grounding, pedagogical strategies, digital skills, and reflective tools necessary for implementing CL is essential for systemic change. As classrooms become more culturally diverse,

technologically mediated, and socially complex, the role of teachers as facilitators of critical, ethical, and empowering language education will only grow. As global issues such as media bias, inequality, and intercultural conflict increasingly intersect with language education, CL provides a necessary framework for cultivating reflective, responsible, and empowered users of English. Future research should continue to explore how these training components influence teacher practice and student outcomes across varied global EFL contexts to expand its reach and refine its application across varied EFL landscapes.

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