Revista de Științe Politice. Revue des Sciences Politiques • No. 92 • 2026: 226 – 233

ORIGINAL PAPER

Reading Beyond the Text: The Role of Critical Literacy Skills in English Language Education

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Motto: *To speak a true word is to transform the world.*
(Paulo Freire, 2005: 87)

Abstract
It is well known that words have power, the power to influence people by promoting certain ideas and individual messages meant to shape readers'/ listeners' viewpoints. In this light, language is never neutral, and words always have contextual and subtextual meanings that can be decoded by critical literacy. In our increasingly globalised world, information floods in from all possible sources which are more or less reliable; therefore, we need to be equipped with the right skills to approach a text and read beyond the words in order to understand the writer's cultural and political background, motivation, intention and overall aim. As globalisation is closely linked to English as the main means of communication around the world, English language teaching have broadened the core competencies in language acquisition to include a number of literacies, such as digital and critical literacies, along with biliteracy and multilingual literacies. The aim of this article is to explore critical literacy in English language education. We shall start by scrutinising the literature on the topic in order to define the concept, its tenets, benefits and challenges in the classroom. The theoretical presentation is backed by practical advice on the strategies and activities that teachers can use in order to develop their students' critical literacy skills. The conclusion is that EFL education can make learners critically literate citizens who have a saying in the global civic discourse.
Keywords: *critical literacy, fake news, language learning, meaning making, power*.

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Introduction

We live in a world blessed with the rapid growth of technology that, in the context of "the fast forward dynamics of globalization" (Giroux, 2005: 21), has facilitated and greatly enhanced communication across borders, be they geographical, political, social, ethnic, racial, gender, religious, or personal. At the same time, as Diana Marcu points out, "the advancements in technology, the IoT [the Internet of Things] together with the appearance of smart devices have turned the 21st century into an era known for its digital revolution" (Marcu, 2026: 227). In the era of digitalisation, social media connects people around the globe, news is spreading even before being officially released, people can react instantly to events and statements, businesses are expanding online, and the AI can offer advice on any subject that we can think of. Yet, the blessing comes at a cost, since this very easy and rapid access to information and the speed at which any news or comment is consumed, leave no space or time for thinking, reflecting on, or questioning the validity of the online content. Fake news and misinformation are not accidental; on the contrary, they can be carefully orchestrated and used as weapons of mass manipulation for the benefit of specific social, political or economic interests. While many fake articles are spread online in order to drive website traffic and generate income from numerous online ads, others are designed on purpose to cause confusion, undermine trust in governments and other official institutions, and ultimately trigger social division. History has proved that carefully designed discourses have the power to influence masses and change people's thinking and feeling, and nowadays, the internet enhances the chances of any sort of propaganda to reach far and deep into public consciousness.

In this context of massive manipulation, the ability to analyse information and its sources has become a necessary skill, known as critical literacy. Understanding a text is no longer a matter of reading comprehension alone, but it implies the identification of the power structures embedded within language (Janks, 2012), and the examination of the writer's cultural and political background, motivation, intention and overall aim. As English is the main language of communication around the world, dominating international business, media and academia, learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) need to know how to approach the information provided by the texts they read in the target language. Developing EFL students' critical literacy skills is crucial, since they need not only to succeed in their academic and professional lives, but also to be actively involved in the global civic discourse (Alhamdi & Albishri, 2023). Rizqiani and Elida stress the importance of addressing critical literacy in the context of teaching and learning English, arguing that: "Without strong critical literacy skills, these learners may struggle to discern credible sources from misinformation, recognize subtle biases, or fully engage with diverse perspectives." (Rizqiani & Elida, 2025: 828)

Given the fact that critical thinking and analysis are vital in decoding the hidden implications of texts, this paper focuses on presenting critical literacy skills in the context of English language education. It starts by mapping the territory of investigation, that is, by presenting a general theoretical overview of critical literacy with the aim of providing background knowledge on the topic. It then addresses a number of strategies and activities that teachers can use in the EFL classroom in order to foster global awareness and critical consciousness among their students.

Theoretical Framework

A variety of teaching methods has been employed in ELT throughout its history, from the old Grammar-Translation Method to the very popular Communicative Language

Teaching, all mirroring different theories and approaches to language teaching and learning (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). In the 1990s, the language teaching profession started to take into consideration sociolinguistics' research that had underlined the close connection between language and culture. As Perkins pointed out, "language doesn't exist outside a cultural context" (Perkins, 1988: 25), and the intercultural approach to language learning has given rise to a "critical turn" (Dasli & Diaz, 2017) which suggests that "language education needs to address culture as intrinsically linked to meaning-making" (Brown & Alford, 2023: 36). From a sociological perspective, the meaning-making varies, being shaped by social factors, such as age, gender, ethnicity, education, or social class. Apart from being a social act, communication is also political, used to influence people's beliefs and choices, thus leading to social change. The power of words resides in their contextual and subtextual meanings, and critical theory provides the key to unlock all these. Critical literacy has consequently emerged with the aim of critically analysing the connection between language and society (Ada & Campoy, 2017; Shor, 1996; Wink, 2005), and therefore, researchers argue that the introduction of critical literacy pedagogy into the ELT curriculum will "foster social justice by helping students realize how language is affected by and affects social relations" (Derince, 2023: 395).

Although teaching critical thinking as a basic language skill has become a big "buzz" (Fisher, 2001: 7) in educational settings in the past two decades, its roots can be traced back to ancient times, when Platon, for instance, was critical of some of the traditions of Homer (Abedina & Crookes, 2019). Modern critical literacy emerged out of the work of Paulo Freire (1970), the famous educator and philosopher who got involved in the process of educating people in marginalised rural communities in Brazil. It was in that environment that he closely observed what he called "the banking model of education" (Freire, 2005: 72) where knowledge and skills that served upper class interests were "deposited" in learners' minds as money is deposited in the bank. To this model of oppression, Freire proposed "the problem solving education" alternative which encourages readers/learners to take active part in the reading process by inviting them to ask questions, think beyond the text, examine its authority and its influence on readers. People must be allowed to speak their word, because the word has the power to transform the world (Freire, 2005: 87-88). In this context, the teacher ceases to be the main source knowledge, and becomes instead the guide on the side, the one who assists students in the process of learning. As Mihaela Chiriţescu and Anca Păunescu point out, "teaching does not consist merely in transmitting information, but in establishing a meaningful social interaction between teacher and learner" (Chiriţescu & Păunescu, 2026: 78).

Modern critical literacy is broadly viewed as "an approach to literacy that places particular emphasis on the social and cultural contexts of text production and reception" (Brown & Alford, 2023: 40). Reading goes beyond text comprehension, and becomes a dialogue between the reader and the text, a fact which increases learners' motivation to engage in the process (Ada & Campoy, 2017: 116). Texts, be they written or oral, images or signs, are regarded as a means of "representing and reshaping possible worlds" (Luke, 2013: 145); hence, the importance of readers' decoding texts and uncovering their agenda. From this perspective, in the context of online fake news, critical literacy becomes a valuable skill in evaluating content, its credibility and the writer's hidden intentions.

It is worth making a distinction between critical thinking and critical literacy. Critical thinking is the process of thinking about a piece of information, event or idea in order to fully understand them. The skills involved refer to predicting, analysing, questioning, synthesising, identifying values, considering options in a particular situation.

Fisher and Scriven stress the idea that critical thinking is "skilled and active interpretation and evaluation of observations and communications, information and argumentation" (Fisher & Scriven, 1997: 21). By mastering these skills, learners will be able to deal with complex issues in the future. Critical literacy means looking beyond the text in order to understand the intentions of the author. It is a thinking skill that explores issues of fairness and social justice, thus becoming a useful instrument in the process of "awareness raising and rejection of violation and discrimination against people" (Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011: 77). In this light, critical literacy acquires social and political dimensions.

Benefits and Challenges of Critical Literacy in EFL

In the process of teaching and learning English, one of the main goals of the critical literacy approach is to make students aware of the power of words in promoting certain discourses, and teach them how to read texts with a critique eye. Learners need to see that texts are never neutral; they work to make the reader embrace the writer's viewpoint. At the same time, reading is not neutral either, since when we read, we draw from our own knowledge, cultural background, ideological perspective, or past experiences (Wardani, 2021: 48). To be critically literate thus implies reflecting on the position from which we engage with the text. Tung and Chang underline the idea that reading is a complex process that requires readers' ability "to recall, retrieve and reflect on their prior experiences or memories to construct meanings of the text" (Tung & Chang, 2009: 291).

Teaching critical literacy skills has many benefits:

- It teaches learners that meaning is not found in a text in isolation, but must be interpreted contextually, taking into consideration the time and place of events.
- It makes students aware of social, cultural and political issues around the world.
- It encourages learners to analyse texts from different perspectives.
- It increases students' motivation and active participation in class due to the fact that they are engaged in topics that are relevant to their age and interests.
- It offers teachers and learners the practical alternative "to reconnect literacy with everyday life" (Luke & Woods, 2009: 13).
- Given the relationship between critical literacy and intercultural competence, critically literate students have more chances to become effective global communicators.
- Critically literate learners understand that texts reflect the writers' viewpoint and can serve as a means of manipulation and propaganda.
- Faced with the flow of digital information, learners who have critical literacy skills are unlikely to take everything for granted and believe blindly what they read. In other words, they are equipped to spot fake news and resist manipulation.
- It gives students a voice, that is, it provides them with the space to express their ideas and beliefs, instead of learning and echoing what the teacher says.

In spite of these benefits, there are a number of challenges when implementing a critical literacy approach in the EFL classroom. First of all, critical literacy skills are closely linked to language proficiency. Higher-order text analysis requires certain levels of linguistic competence (Park, 2020) and, as Ada and Campoy comment with reference to reading skills, "a large number of students do not attain these levels" (Ada & Campoy, 2017: 116). In this context, critical literacy cannot be integrated into all EFL programmes.

In order to develop learners' critical literacy skills, teachers should place greater emphasis on critical literacy work in the design of teaching materials and classroom

activities. This is quite a challenge since teachers around the world usually complain about having to navigate a crammed curriculum. Moreover, school curricula generally revolve around printed texts; yet, it is the social media, websites and apps that present great opportunities for critical literacy instruction in EFL classes. Researchers point out that: "This digital turn necessitates a rethinking of traditional literacy pedagogies to encompass a broader range of text types and media." (Rizqiani & Elida, 2025: 829) Meanwhile, it is teachers' responsibility and challenge to integrate various types of texts in their teaching, a task which considerably burdens their already busy agendas.

The implementation of critical literacy in EFL also raises the issue of assessment. How are these skills going to be evaluated? Traditional language proficiency tests do not measure the higher-order skills involved in a critical analysis; hence, the necessity of developing more sophisticated assessment tools (Rizqiani & Elida, 2025: 829).

Another challenge may be the political, emotive or controversial content of the texts analysed. Teachers may feel uncomfortable to tackle certain topics with their students, while parents may be opposed to exposing their children to sensitive issues. Moreover, critical literacy borders on cynicism and, while the cynical spirit may be useful for unlocking critical thinking skills, it may also be too harsh for children at a tender age. At the same time, in multi-ethnic/multilingual groups, there are political issues that can "inflame" the spirits in the classroom. It is therefore advisable for teachers to ensure that learners have the appropriate age and the prior knowledge to engage with certain topics.

A further challenge would be implementing critical literacy in EFL classes within dictatorial or authoritarian regimes around the world. In these contexts, education serves as a tool for supporting and disseminating the state policy, and teaching learners to uncover power structures and biases and question underlying ideologies in a text can carry serious risks for both teachers and learners. One possible way of dealing with this challenge and implement critical literacy safely would be to focus on texts that carry low political risks, such as commercial advertisements, speculative literature like science-fiction, or texts on neutral topics, such as sports or the global warming. The aim is to teach students to detect manipulation and hidden agendas, building critical literacy skills that they can later use to question dominant political narratives.

Critical Literacy in the Classroom Environment

Critical literacy is "overtly a theory for practice" (Morgan & Wyatt-Smith, 2000: 124); that is, a theory that needs to be implied in practice. In order to help students think critically about the world, teachers should combine language teaching with soft skills development. We shall therefore look at a set of five practical activities designed to encourage students' critical literacy in an EFL classroom.

Real-life articles

Students are presented with a real-life article from an English-language newspaper or website, and asked to analyse it and find the underlying message and see how it attempts to shape opinions. The article may criticise a famous British politician, or refer to current events like students' street protests in France. Students have to underline keywords that suggest whether the piece of writing supports or undermines the mainstream discourse of the British government. It is an activity that encourages learners to think critically about biased information, and approach any piece of information from different perspectives.

One side of the story

Students listen to an interview that presents one side of a highly controversial topic, such as Tucker Carlson's interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin in February 2024. The first task is to find evidence of a one-sided interview, such as the uninterrupted monologue, the lack of any incisive questions, or the lack of fact-checking. It is important for students to notice what is said and what is left unsaid or unquestioned. The second task is to investigate the opposing side and find counterarguments in order to form a more balanced viewpoint on the topic. The activity uncovers the mechanisms of political propaganda, and underlines the importance of perspective.

Fake videos

Students watch a couple of fake videos such as AI-generated news or conflicts, or deepfakes where words are put into the mouths of public figures, and then are asked to analyse the specific visual, auditory and contextual inconsistencies that might indicate that the materials are fake. They have to uncover the hidden reason for spreading such videos online. It is an activity which raises students' awareness regarding distorted reality, and underlines the importance of checking sources.

Fake text messages

Using online tools like *https://ifaketextmessage.com/,* students are required to work together and write convincing scam texts. The goal of this fun engaging activity is to make students understand the inner mechanisms of online misinformation, and to show them how easy it is to fabricate a realistic screenshot. At the same time, it teaches them why even a simple image cannot be trusted as being real, and consequently builds their scepticism of digital evidence.

The case of influencers

The power of social media influencers is an undeniable fact. Students watch the content of a top-tier digital creator, such as Kim Kardashian, the architect of influencer marketing, who promotes dieting supplements, luxury cars, beauty products, tech accessories, without being a specialist in any trade. Students have to identify the promotional content and subtle marketing techniques. By analysing how influencers shape opinions, students can begin questioning their own shopping habits and understand the manipulative power of the multi-million businesses behind popular influencers like Kim Kardashian.

These classroom activities offer students the opportunity to tackle real-life issues, to interrogate the meaning making of texts, to analyse information from different perspectives, to voice their own ideas. The goal of such activities is to equip students with the skills they need to critically approach any kind of discourse.

Conclusion

Paulo Freire's 1970 work grounded in exposing the dichotomy between the oppressors and the oppressed argued that education is never neutral; it is a political act focused either on domesticating people, or empowering them for liberation. The emergent critical literacy pedagogy is a teaching approach that sees language as a vehicle of power, ideology, misinformation or manipulation for various social or political reasons. Its main focus is on teaching students to read against the grain, interact with a text, interrogate the writer's intentions, and expose underlying social ideologies. Applied in the EFL classroom, critical literacy combines the teaching of traditional language skills – reading,

listening, speaking, writing – with higher-order skills involved in the critical analysis of texts provided by social media, websites and apps. In the context of our highly digitalised world, the ultimate goal of the critical literacy approach is to develop the skills that learners need to navigate a world filled with incomplete, misleading, manipulative information, and become actively involved citizens in the global discourse.

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Article Info

Received: October 19 2026
Accepted: November 10 2026

How to cite this article:

Bălănescu, E. O. (2026). Reading Beyond the Text: The Role of Critical Literacy Skills in English Language. *Revista de Științe Politice. Revue des Sciences Politiques,* no. 92, pp. 226 - 233.