Embedding Critical Literacy within Higher Education EFL Reading Courses: A Narrative Inquiry of an Indonesian Lecturer's Practice

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ABSTRACT

Nurdani Yulian Ahmad. (2026). Embedding Critical Literacy within Higher Education EFL Reading Courses: A Narrative Inquiry of an Indonesian Lecturer's Practice

This narrative inquiry examines how one EFL lecturer ("Ayu") at a private Indonesian university embedded critical literacy in a first-semester Reading 1 course. Using three narrative interviews, weekly reflective journals, and course documents collected over one semester, the study found that Ayu reframed course goals from basic comprehension to "reading the world," implemented scaffolded strategies aligned with the Four Resources Model and locally relevant texts, supported students' gradual shift from silence to cautious critical voice through journals and small-group discussion, and negotiated constraints of time, proficiency, and exam-driven assessment by hybridizing conventional instruction with formative critical tasks. The study suggests aligning assessment with critical literacy aims, expanding professional development, and conducting multi-participant narrative inquiries to better understand critical literacy enactment in Indonesian EFL higher education.

Keywords: critical literacy, EFL reading instruction, Four Resources Model, Indonesian higher education, narrative inquiry.

I. INTRODUCTION

Indonesian higher education has increasingly emphasized critical reading and critical literacy as core 21st-century skills, yet many EFL students still approach reading passively and struggle to evaluate arguments or synthesize information from multiple sources (Jaya et al., 2025; Ramadhani et al., 2025; Sukandi & Syafar, 2018). Studies showed that reading courses often prioritize comprehension and grammar over ideological critique and social awareness (Adiantika et al., 2025; Ramadhani et al., 2025; Septiana, 2023).

Recent research in Indonesian EFL contexts demonstrates that critical literacy can be fostered through discourse analysis of local cultural texts (Ramadhani et al., 2025), task-based extensive reading with critical thinking tasks (Terasne et al., 2025), and classroom strategies based on the Four Resources Model (reader as code breaker, meaning maker, text user, text analyst) (Adiantika et al., 2025). However, there remains limited qualitative work capturing how individual lecturers narrate their experiences of embedding critical literacy within actual reading courses, particularly with first-semester students.

Narrative inquiry has been productively used to explore EFL teachers' and students' literacy experiences, identities, and pedagogical innovations in Indonesia and beyond (Lu & Zhang, 2024; Pitaloka et al., 2020; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2022; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2023). Building on this tradition, the present study addresses the following question: How does one EFL lecturer at a private Indonesian university narrate the experience of embedding critical literacy in a first-semester reading course?

Adiantika et al. (2025) pinpointed that critical literacy in EFL involves encouraging learners to analyze how texts construct power, identity, and ideology, and to question taken-for-granted assumptions. Indonesian studies report that a critical literacy approach can significantly improve students' analytical skills, cultural awareness, and engagement when integrated with local wisdom discourse and discussion-based activities (Ramadhani et al., 2025).

A phenomenological study of Indonesian EFL reading teachers highlights the importance of balancing passive (answering questions, comprehending passages, using dictionaries) and active (previewing, close reading, summarizing, note-taking, discussion) critical reading strategies to support critical literacy development (Ikaningrum et al., 2025). Other work stresses redesigning materials and syllabi so that reading outcomes progress from basic comprehension to higher-order critique across the program (Septiana, 2023; Susanah, 2025).

Narrative inquiry treats teachers' and students' stories of experience as both data and representational form, offering nuanced insights into identity, emotion, and practice over time (Lu & Tang, 2025; Lu & Zhang, 2024; Pitaloka et al., 2020; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2022; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2023). In Indonesian higher education, narrative inquiry has been used to examine students' literacy experiences in community-based reading and writing programs (Pitaloka et al., 2020) and lecturers' experiences with blended learning and skill integration (Wahyuningsih &

Afandi, 2022; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2023). These studies showed that narrative inquiry reveals how pedagogical practices are shaped by institutional constraints, personal beliefs, and evolving professional identities.

II. METHOD

The study adopted a narrative inquiry approach, which centers on experience as lived and storied over time, across social contexts, and in specific places (Pitaloka et al., 2020; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2022; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2023). This design was appropriate for capturing the complexity of a single lecturer's efforts to embed critical literacy in an existing reading curriculum and to make sense of successes, tensions, and dilemmas in practice.

The research took place in a first-semester Reading 1 course in the English Education Department of a private university in Indonesia. First-semester students in such programs are typically transitioning from exam-oriented secondary instruction and often display limited experience with critical reading (Jaya et al., 2025; Septiana, 2023; Sukandi & Syafar, 2018). One female EFL lecturer (pseudonym: "Ayu") was purposely selected because she had explicitly attempted to adopt a critical literacy stance in her reading classes and had prior engagement with professional development on critical pedagogy. Similar purposive sampling of a small number of participants is common in narrative inquiry in Indonesian EFL contexts (Pitaloka et al., 2020; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2022; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2023).

Data were collected over one semester using multiple, complementary sources. Three in-depth semi-structured narrative interviews (conducted early, mid, and at the end of the semester) explored Ayu's prior teaching history, her conceptions of critical literacy, course design decisions, classroom experiences, and reflections on students' responses; narrative interviews are a common method for eliciting storied accounts of teachers' experiences in ELT and blended learning contexts (Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2023). In addition, the lecturer kept brief weekly reflective journals that focused on critical literacy goals, classroom activities, and perceived student engagement, following established practices in critical literacy and extensive reading research (Adiantika et al., 2025; Ramadhani et al., 2025; Terasne et al., 2025). Finally, course documents — including the syllabus, lesson plans, and selected student tasks (for example, reading journals, discussion prompts, and critical response paragraphs) — were collected to triangulate the lecturer's narratives with the enacted curriculum (Septiana, 2023; Susanah, 2025).

Data analysis followed a three-level narrative approach. At the story level (field texts), interview transcripts, reflective journals, and course documents were read repeatedly to identify salient events, metaphors, and tensions related to the embedding of critical literacy. At the second level, story as researcher-constructed narratives, chronological and thematic accounts were developed with particular attention to (a) the framing of critical literacy, (b) classroom strategies, (c) student responses, and (d) emerging constraints and negotiations. At the STORY level

(theoretical re-storying), these narratives were interpreted in dialogue with critical literacy theory, Indonesian EFL reading scholarship, and narrative inquiry literature (Ikaningrum et al., 2025; Pitaloka et al., 2020; Ramadhani et al., 2025; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2023).

This multi-layered approach aligns with narrative inquiry traditions that emphasize the interplay between personal experience and broader institutional and sociocultural narratives (Lu & Tang, 2025; Lu & Zhang, 2024). Ethical procedures included informed consent, pseudonyms for the lecturer, students, and institution, and member-checking of the reconstructed narrative summaries.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The lecturer's stories of embedding critical literacy coalesced around four interrelated themes.

1. Reframing Reading 1: From "Finding Main Ideas" to "Reading the World"

At the start of the semester, Ayu described inheriting a Semester Instructional Plan that emphasized vocabulary, main ideas, and factual questions, reflecting common exam-oriented reading goals in Indonesian universities (Septiana, 2023; Sukandi & Syafar, 2018). Influenced by recent discussions of critical literacy and local cultural discourse (Ikaningrum et al., 2025), she reinterpreted the course aim as helping students to "read texts and also read the world," while still aligning with institutional outcomes.

To achieve this, she retained the core reading objectives—such as identifying main ideas and inferring meaning—while extending them to include critical literacy goals, including recognizing authorial stance, examining silenced perspectives, and connecting texts to students' lived experiences. She also selected additional authentic texts, such as online news reports, opinion pieces, and short narratives, that addressed issues relevant to first-year students (for example, campus life, social media, gender norms, and local community concerns), aligning with calls for contextually relevant and engaging reading materials (Jaya et al., 2025; Terasne et al., 2025). Ayu's narrative echoed broader critiques of Indonesian EFL reading curricula that remain focused on comprehension and grammar while neglecting social, ideological, and cultural dimensions. This finding corroborated what Septiana (2023) had found in her study.

2. Translating Critical Literacy into Classroom Strategies

Ayu drew implicitly on the Four Resources Model—reader as code breaker, meaning maker, text user, and text analyst—though she did not always name it explicitly, paralleling strategies reported in Indonesian tertiary CL case studies (Adiantika et al., 2025). Her stories

highlighted several recurring instructional practices. As code breaker and meaning maker, she used pre-reading vocabulary activities and prediction tasks that combined passive and active strategies to support basic comprehension, aligning with research on balancing foundational and critical reading processes (Ikaningrum et al., 2025). As a text user, she designed activities that asked students to connect texts to their own experiences or to content from other courses, reflecting task-based extensive reading practices that foster inference and evaluation (Terasne et al., 2025). Finally, as text analyst, she employed guided critical questions—such as *"Whose voice is dominant here?"*, *"Who is missing?"*, and *"What does this text want us to believe?"*—along with small-group discussions to surface alternative perspectives, paralleling critical literacy implementations that draw on local wisdom and narrative texts (Adiantika et al., 2025).

In her journals, Ayu noted that first-semester students initially viewed these questions as "strange" or "too philosophical," confirming concerns that novice EFL learners may be accustomed to surface-level text analysis and memorization practices (Ramadhani et al., 2025). Over time, she observed that repeated modeling and peer discussion helped students tentatively attempt critique, resembling gradual shifts reported in critical literacy action research and task-based reading interventions (Terasne et al., 2025).

3. Student Responses: From Silence to Cautious Voice

Ayu's narratives described a trajectory from initial silence and dependence on the lecturer's authority to more active participation. Early in the semester, many students waited for her "correct answer" and avoided expressing disagreement, reflecting cultural norms that may frame overt critique of teachers or texts as disrespectful (Ramadhani et al., 2025).

To respond to this issue, she invited students to keep written reading journals in which they could critically question authors' viewpoints in a more private space, reflecting the use of reflective journaling to promote critical engagement in narrative and extensive reading contexts as documented by Pitaloka et al. (2020), Terasne et al. (2025), and Adiantika et al. (2025). She further organized small-group discussions before moving to whole-class exchanges in order to lower students' anxiety and strengthen their confidence, in line with research by Adiantika et al. (2025), Ramadhani et al. (2025), and Terasne et al. (2025), demonstrating the value of collaborative and dialogic practices for developing critical literacy and social awareness. Moreover, she affirmed the legitimacy of diverse interpretations by explicitly noting that multiple readings were possible as long as they were justified with textual evidence.

By mid-semester, Ayu's stories included episodes of students challenging gender stereotypes in a short narrative or questioning the reliability of an online article. These episodes

resonate with findings that CL approaches can enhance students' analytical skills, confidence, collaboration, and broader perspectives (Adiantika et al., 2025; Ramadhani et al., 2025; Terasne et al., 2025).

4. Navigating Constraints: Time, Proficiency, and Institutional Expectations

Despite moments of success, Ayu's narrative underscored several persistent constraints. Time pressure emerged as a major challenge, as the syllabus required coverage of multiple units, which limited the extent to which texts could be critically problematized; similar tensions have been reported in studies on blended and critical reading implementations (Ikaningrum et al., 2025; Septiana, 2023; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2022; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2023). Language proficiency was another constraint, with many first-semester students experiencing difficulties with vocabulary and sentence structure, making it challenging to sustain critical engagement without substantial scaffolding—an issue echoed in Indonesian research on critical literacy and reading instruction (Jaya et al., 2025; Sukandi & Syafar, 2018). Finally, assessment regimes posed limitations, as mid-term and final examinations prioritized multiple-choice comprehension items, leaving limited opportunities to formally assess critical literacy outcomes, a concern also highlighted in curriculum and course design studies (Septiana, 2023; Susanah, 2025).

To navigate these, Ayu strategically integrated critical literacy tasks into formative assessments (journals, group presentations, short critical responses) while still preparing students for institutionally required tests. The following table delineated the summary of narrative themes and their links to previous research results.

Table 1. Key narrative themes mapped to existing research

Narrative Theme	Resonance with Recent Research on Critical Literacy & Narrative Inquiry	Citations
Reframing Reading 1 toward critical literacy	Aligns with critiques of comprehension-only curricula and calls to embed CL in Indonesian EFL higher education.	(Adiantika et al., 2025; Ikaningrum et al., 2025; Jaya et al., 2025; Ramadhani et al., 2025; Septiana, 2023)
Strategies based on Four Resources & balanced reading	Mirrors Indonesian studies emphasizing passive/active critical reading balance and Four Resources-based CL pedagogy.	(Adiantika et al., 2025; Ikaningrum et al., 2025; Ramadhani et al., 2025; Terasne et al., 2025)
Gradual emergence of student voice	Similar to gains in analytical skills, confidence, collaboration, and critical engagement in CL and extensive reading classes.	(Adiantika et al., 2025; Pitaloka et al., 2020; Ramadhani et al., 2025; Terasne et al., 2025)
Constraints of time, proficiency, and testing	Echoes challenges in CL, blended learning, and curriculum design in Indonesian higher education.	(Jaya et al., 2025; Septiana, 2023; Sukandi & Syafar, 2018; Susanah, 2025; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2022; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2023)

Ayu's narrative both confirmed and extended recent Indonesian research on critical literacy. First, her experience illustrated how an individual lecturer can reinterpret an existing reading syllabus to foreground critical literacy without abandoning mandated outcomes, supporting arguments that CL can be integrated within, rather than added onto, existing curricula (Adiantika et al., 2025; Septiana, 2023; Susanah, 2025).

Second, her classroom strategies exemplify a balanced approach to critical reading that maintains necessary passive strategies (vocabulary, comprehension) while systematically building active, dialogic, and analytical practices (Ikaningrum et al., 2025; Terasne et al., 2025). This balance appears particularly important with first-semester students whose language proficiency and prior schooling experiences may not have prepared them for critique.

Third, her stories highlighted the affective and cultural dimensions of critical literacy: students' initial reluctance to question texts or authority figures and the gradual cultivation of "cautious voice" through journals and small-group talk. These dimensions are often under-represented in more technical accounts of materials or model development but are foregrounded in narrative inquiries into EFL teachers' and students' experiences (Lu & Tang, 2025; Lu & Zhang, 2024; Pitaloka et al., 2020; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2022; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2023).

This study underscores that regular reading classes can be transformed into spaces for developing both language proficiency and higher-order critical skills when instruction goes beyond decoding and literal comprehension. Studies in Indonesian and Korean university contexts show that when teachers systematically incorporate questioning, text analysis, and connections to students' lives, learners develop abilities to analyze, evaluate, and take a stance on ideological and socio-cultural issues while still improving traditional reading outcomes (Huh, 2016; Ikaningrum et al., 2025; Ilyas et al., 2025; Setyaningsih, 2019).

Rather than treating critical literacy as an add-on course, research demonstrated that it can be infused into existing reading syllabi by using explicit frameworks such as the Four Resources Model combined with structured procedures like SQ3R (Adiantika et al., 2025; Setyaningsih, 2019). Setyaningsih (2019) strengthened that in these models, learners move from code-breaking and basic comprehension to using texts functionally and, finally, to critiquing authorial motives, stereotypes, and silenced perspectives. Reader-response approaches and literary texts similarly promote reflecting, analyzing, interpreting, commenting, and reasoning, thereby embedding critical literacy within ordinary reading courses (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016; Ilyas et al., 2025).

A recurring theme is the need to balance conventional, skill-based literacy with critical interrogation. In many EFL contexts, students arrive from exam-driven, grammar-focused backgrounds and possess uneven proficiency, which makes scaffolding essential (Huh, 2016; Ikaningrum et al., 2025). Research on flipped classrooms and integrated

teaching-learning-assessment models indicated that sequencing instruction—from literal comprehension and vocabulary to higher-level analysis and evaluation—helps maintain comprehension while gradually building critical capacities (He & AlSaqqaf, 2025; Lihua, 2025; Yulian, 2021). Ikaningrum et al. (2025) revealed that teachers' interactions that explicitly guide decoding, personalizing, socializing with texts, and then critiquing ideological assumptions are crucial for this balance.

The literature also highlighted contextual and affective challenges. Lecturers often recognize the importance of critical literacy but report limited training, materials, and time, as well as institutional pressures that prioritize test performance (Pupah et al., 2024; Rizqiani & Elida, 2025; Suhardiana et al., 2023). Students may initially resist critical tasks or struggle when texts are linguistically complex, which constrains their ability to sustain a critical stance (Setyaningsih, 2019; Jiménez & Gutiérrez, 2019). Despite these obstacles, empirical work on critical literacy models and action research in EFL reading classes showed statistically and pedagogically significant gains in precision, depth, and analysis, as well as improvements in intercultural awareness, social consciousness, leadership, and collaboration (Derince, 2023; Rizqiani et al., 2024; Ramadhani et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2021; Wardani, 2021).

Embedding critical literacy within higher education EFL reading courses is feasible and beneficial when supported by clear frameworks, careful scaffolding, and targeted professional development. This approach positions reading courses not only as venues for language development but also as sites for cultivating critically aware, socially responsible readers prepared to engage with global and local discourses (Jiménez & Gutiérrez, 2019; Pupah et al., 2024; Ramadhani et al., 2025; Rizqiani et al., 2024; Setyaningsih, 2019; Wardani, 2021). Finally, the narrative underscores structural constraints—time, assessment, institutional expectations—that shape what is possible in a single semester, aligning with discussions of broader systemic barriers to critical literacy implementation in Indonesia (Ikaningrum et al., 2025; Septiana, 2023; Ramadhani et al., 2025; Adiantika et al., 2025).

IV CONCLUSION
4.1 Conclusion

This narrative inquiry examines an EFL lecturer's experience embedding critical literacy in a first-semester reading course at a private Indonesian university. The findings indicate that critical literacy can be meaningfully integrated into early undergraduate reading curricula by reframing course outcomes, selecting authentic and locally relevant texts, and

drawing on strategies aligned with the Four Resources Model. The inquiry also shows that first-semester students may shift from initial silence to tentative critical engagement when supported through scaffolds such as reflective journals, small-group discussions, and explicit validation of multiple perspectives. However, the lecturer's efforts were shaped by structural and contextual constraints—most notably students' proficiency levels and exam-driven assessment demands—which required ongoing negotiation and the hybridization of conventional reading instruction with critical literacy practices.

4.2 Suggestions

The study's practical implications emphasize the importance of department-level backing to ensure that assessment practices are consistent with critical literacy aims. It also underscores the value of professional development that introduces lecturers to key critical literacy frameworks and supports reflective, narrative-based examination of their own teaching. In addition, the study calls for more multi-participant narrative inquiries that bring together lecturers and students from a range of institutions to broaden understanding of how critical literacy is experienced, adapted, and negotiated in Indonesian EFL higher education.

4.3 Reccomendations

Based on Ayu's narrative across the semester, this study recommends stronger department-level support to align reading-course assessment with critical literacy goals, particularly by supplementing comprehension-focused exams with evaluative tasks such as critical response writing, journals, or discourse-analysis activities so that critique and stance-taking are formally valued. It also highlights the need for targeted professional development that familiarizes lecturers with critical literacy frameworks (e.g., the Four Resources Model), supports careful sequencing from foundational comprehension to analysis, and equips teachers with practical scaffolds—such as guided critical questions, journals, and small-group discussion structures—to build students' confidence and participation. Finally, the study calls for further multi-participant narrative inquiries involving lecturers and students across diverse Indonesian higher education contexts to deepen understanding of how critical literacy is enacted, adapted, and constrained by proficiency differences and exam-driven expectations.

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