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The Role of Critical Literacy in Enhancing EFL Reading Skills: A Case Study of Fourth-Year Graduating EFL Learners at ENS Constantine

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ABSTRACT: *In the 21st-century English as a Foreign Language (EFL) educational context, learners increasingly encounter biased ideologies and misinformation in texts, necessitating pedagogical approaches that go beyond basic comprehension. Critical literacy (CL) offers a framework to engage with texts analytically and critically. This study examines the role of CL in enhancing the reading skills of fourth-year graduating EFL students at the École Normale Supérieure Assia Djebar in Constantine, Algeria. Employing a mixed-methods research design, data were collected through an online questionnaire administered to 30 final-year EFL students. The aim is to assess students' perceptions and competencies in applying critical literacy strategies during reading tasks. Findings indicate that critical literacy significantly contributes to the development of advanced reading skills by promoting deeper, more reflective comprehension. Students demonstrated improved ability to critically analyze texts, question underlying assumptions, and deconstruct embedded narratives. The study concludes that integrating critical literacy into EFL curricula is crucial for developing proficient readers capable of evaluating, challenging, and responding to the messages conveyed in written discourse.*

KEYWORDS: Critical Literacy, Reading skills, Scaffolding, EFL learners, Students' Perceptions

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Introduction

Global ideological conflicts emerge as a prevalent feature of the post-modern era. It induces the adoption of alienation and empowerment as a core duality, selectively incorporated when needed. This, undoubtedly, casts a shadow over all aspects of life, including education. Thus, contemporary EFL educational landscape prerequisites a perpetual enhancement and refinement of learning frameworks. This is primarily to equip learners with pertinent skills to deal with confronted challenges. In fact, one of the major established concepts that serves such a purpose is critical literacy. It is marked by shifting focus from apprehending literal meaning to grasping embedded sense (Shor & Freire, 1987). Moreover, it advocates for a learner-centered approach, enabling learners to reflect and actively engage with their learning environment. Consequently, deconstructing and reconstructing meaning are coined with language skills, namely, reading. The latter is a prominent receptive skill that deals with linguistic input from various angles.

Despite the multitude of literature examining the interaction between critical literacy and reading skill from a variety of standpoints, the exploration of such dialectic relations is relatively limited in the Algerian EFL context. Learners at the tertiary level receiving teacher education instruction are an even less studied population. Subsequently, the purpose of this study is to examine this research gap to provide further insights on the role of critical literacy in improving EFL reading skills. This is mainly conducted through an investigation about students' perceptions, habits and competencies. The research sample represents fourth-year graduating EFL learners at École Normale Supérieure Assia Djebar, Constantine (ENSC). To address the research objectives, the following questions are formulated:

- To what extent do fourth-year EFL graduating learners practice reading?
- Is the research sample aware of possible bias and misinformation in written materials?
- Is critical literacy implemented during EFL reading?
- How can critical literacy foster EFL reading?

1. Literature Review

1.1 Theoretical Framework of Critical Literacy

Critical Literacy is an educational framework primarily grounded in the eminent insights of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire during the second half of the twentieth century (Morrell, 2008; Steiner et al., 2005). This educational framework depicts a convergence between breakthrough theoretical foundations and pedagogical practices. In the same vein, Luke (2024) maintains that the translated seminal work Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) constitutes one of the cornerstones of the critical literacy rationale. Arguably, it is originally influenced by a number of interdisciplinary schools of thought.

Subsequently, literacy is not merely about reading words. It is accompanied by reading the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). This emphasizes the paramount importance of applying a pragmatic stance where language in context is central in decoding meaning. Therefore, Freirian literacy transcends the surface level of syntactic structures to reach a deeper level of analytical and deductive reasoning. Along the same lines of thought, Giroux (1983) explains that critical literacy encompasses a bilateral objective where meaning of written materials and implied ideologies simultaneously portray a core concern for the reader to navigate. This suggests the premise of embedded biases and subjective orientations which could be implicitly or explicitly imposed.

Critical literacy has a substantial role in paving the way to discern the functions of language and its influence as a powerful system beyond its communicative purposes (Jones, 2006). This reflects the binary feature of language which operates as a medium of instruction and a parameter to endorse societal narratives in parallel.

Janks (2010) further explains that language induces a number of social dichotomies including integration and marginalization, oppression and resistance, empowerment and disempowerment. These dichotomies could be examined, debriefed and evaluated through the implementation of critical literacy.

In the educational setting, Freire criticizes the traditional approach of teaching known as teacher-centered approach and refuses what he refers to as the banking concept (Bybee, 2020). Because it intrinsically relies on the teacher's scaffolding and neglects learners' role in yielding a reflective educational process. According to Kalsoom et al. (2020), students in such a learning environment are inactive recipients of knowledge with no significant contribution in shaping or creating independent personal perspectives. However, the teacher restrictively represents the authoritative power that implements, imposes and adjusts both curriculum and information.

This concept, rigid in nature, does not take into consideration critical reflective human faculties which learners could portray in the classroom. Thus, it prevents them from perpetuating an inquisitive mindset. Consequently, Freire (1970, 2005) expounds on an adaptive calibration through the integration of problem posing education that is attuned with learners' realistic constraints. The proposed alternative paradigm relies on contextuality, dialogic practices and resisting the status quo (Giroux, 1997; Naiditch, 2010; Shih, 2018).

1.2 Exploring the Tenets of Reading Skill

Reading is a dynamic mechanism that aims to establish accurate meaning relying on three prominent mental faculties that mirror decoding, comprehension, and in depth analysis (Rayener & Pollatsek, 1989). Decoding necessarily implies the recognition of different letters and symbols. Comprehension reflects a holistic interpretation of ideas. However, in depth analysis entails a thorough and thoughtful explanation. Perfetti (1985) describes reading as an intricate cognitive skill which combines visual processing, background knowledge and metalinguistic awareness. Therefore, reading is cyclical in nature. However, Duke et al. (2021) and Flavell (1979) argue that reading is a metacognitive process where textual meaning is extrapolated and scrutinized based on two indispensable factors: deliberate thinking and introspective evaluation.

Numerous patterns classify reading; each pattern serves a distinct objective. Extensive reading accentuates the importance of comprehension in general rather than emphasizing on details. On the contrary, intensive reading focuses on detailed scrutiny by developing deep analysis (Day & Bamford, 1998; Day, 2002; Grabe & Stoller, 2019). Additionally, another dual type is silent and oral reading. According to wolf (2007), silent reading allows readers to produce an interactive engagement with texts based on a personalized pace. Thus, it nurtures analytical skills. While, oral reading improves fluency by consolidating phonological processing and regulating feedback (Rasinki, 2010). In fact, LaBerge and Samuels (1974) explain that recurrent oral linguistic decoding has an array of advantages. It develops automaticity which refers to the cognitive competence of distinguishing lexical units immediately and automatically. Also, it mitigates cognitive load that leads to allocating mental resources for advanced comprehension.

A modern perspective compares digital reading and print reading. Mangen et al. (2019) denote that print reading connotes the experiential activity of engaging with a tangible fixed text on paper. It is characterized by haptic interaction, spatial consistency and sequential progression which enhance deeper comprehension and word retention. Conversely, Liu (2005) presents digital reading as the mechanism that embodies an electronic interaction with written materials digitally displayed. It usually involves discontinuous navigation and cognitive overload. Yet, it promotes readers' motivation owing to the accessibility and availability of a diverse range of reading materials (Bouguebs, 2020).

Al Roomy (2022) further presents another type of reading known as critical reading. It is characterized as a higher level of reading and thinking that includes analyzing ideas, amalgamating concepts and providing evaluation. Wallace & Wray (2011) explain that reading critically reflects a rhetorical process. It investigates

the writer's persuasive style, possible assumptions and implications. Therefore, critical reading underpins reflective dimension and imposes reading with purpose.

Reading Comprehension is a cognitive process that relies on a synchronic extraction and construction of sense through interacting with lexical units. It is structured based on a triad of factors: the written passage, the reader and the act of reading (Snow, 2002). To achieve accurate comprehension and meaningful retrieving of ideas while reading, a multifaceted setting should be provided. The reader ideally is supposed to be acquainted with the necessary skills to decode, detect and analyze.

A myriad of approaches elucidate various modalities of achieving comprehension during reading. Ehri (2020) explains that the initial phase to comprehend a passage is phonological awareness accompanied by grapheme-phoneme mapping. Hence, meaning is yielded gradually starting with identifying letters and matching sounds to reach word recognition and meaning interpretation. This emphasizes a bottom-up pathway for the reading process. However, Nikolova (2025) argues that predictive processing is a key aspect in fulfilling comprehension. The brain reduces errors through adjustments of word's anticipation relying on lexical-semantic clues. So, the reader predicts meaning by the adoption of a holistic comprehension view. In addition, Yang et al. (2019) point out that learners derive meaning effectively when they associate socio-cultural schemas. This demonstrates the impact of existing cultural framework and prior knowledge on generating comprehension in a top-down reading approach. In addition, Dechant (2009) and Stanovich (1980) advocate the significance of integrating the concepts of both approaches, bottom-up and top-down. This generates a more flexible and balanced approach known as interactive reading. The latter implements decoding, predicting and prior knowledge simultaneously and recursively.

2. Methodology

A study approach alludes to a comprehensive scheme which relates selected methodological instruments and analysis with the questions and objectives outlined in a given research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, 2023). The ultimate purpose is answering questions and clarifying ambiguities in a systematic modality. This study adopts a mixed-methods approach through the integration of both quantitative and qualitative data to reinforce the validity and reliability of results. Its prominent aim is providing a wide range of insights about the role of critical literacy in enhancing EFL learners' reading skill.

2.1 Research Description

This research employs a mixed-methods research design. Statistical and descriptive datasets are collected for examination and analysis to formulate a rigorous comprehension of the findings. Depending on the nature of this study and the available resources, the most suitable research tool to gather a satisfactory set of data is through using a survey. It is a structured questionnaire that includes closed-ended questions and open-ended questions at once to cover all aspects of the research inquiries. The research sample is represented by 30 EFL learners. They are approximately half of the research population of graduating pre-service teachers enrolled at the English Department, École Normale Supérieure Assia Djebar of Constantine, Algeria. These EFL learners currently receive an educational training of four years to pursue a career as middle-school teachers of English language.

2.2 Data Collection

In order to conduct this research, an online questionnaire was designed through Google Forms and administered online via email to the aforementioned sample. The classical mode of paper-based questionnaire was abolished in this study and replaced by online inquiry to enhance accessibility and reduce social desirability bias.

Thus, the ultimate objective is attained by gathering a sufficient amount of data that mirror habits, attitudes and practices. This reflects the multifaceted role of critical literacy in enhancing reading skill among EFL

learners. The questionnaire tackles multiple questions classified as closed-ended questions and open-ended questions. The latter are used to collect quantifiable data by incorporating ethnographic questions, likert scale questions, dichotomous questions and multiple choice questions. The former are used to gather thematic data. This prevents limiting respondents' answers to obtain detailed viewpoints and in-depth perceptions. The collected data are treated with strict anonymity and confidentiality. Quantitative data are analyzed using statistical measures such as percentages and charts, whereas qualitative data are examined through thematic analysis.

3. Results

3.1 Students' Profile and Linguistic Proficiency

Thirty EFL learners' demographic information and proficiency levels are displayed through the use of percentages according to the following:

	Items	**Percentages %**
Gender	Female Male	92.5 7.5
Age	20-22 23-25 >25	87.5 10 2.5
English Level	Beginner A1 Elementary A2 Intermediate B1 Upper intermediate B2 Advanced C1 Full proficiency C2	0 0 36.6 56.6 6.6 0

Table 1. EFL Students' Profile

Table 1 depicts a majority of female presence 92.5% and minority of male students by 7.5%. They represent a typical Algerian foreign language learning classroom. Females express greater interest in learning English as a major in higher education more than males. Moreover, the age gap between respondents seems irrelevant since most of them 87.5% fall in the age group of 20-22 years old, 10% for the age bracket of 23-25, and only 2.5% more than 25 years old. This indicates a homogenous group where most of its members share the same characteristics and interests.

Furthermore, the language proficiency levels are examined relying on The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR). The results mirror the representative percentages as follows: 56.6% for upper intermediate B2, 36.6% for intermediate B1 and 6.6% for advanced C1. However, the remaining linguistic levels are 0% .It suggests that most participants obtain a good command of language. This might reflect upon their ability to grasp the notions of abstract concepts like critical literacy in a foreign language environment.

3.2 Examining EFL learners' Reading Habits

As illustrated in Figure1, most participants 80% predominately always read and a minority of 20% reads sometimes. It reflects an orientation of the research participants towards practicing and developing their reading skill on a regular basis. This leads to cultivating a number of competencies like cultural awareness, vocabulary acquisition, reflective thinking and critical reading mindset.

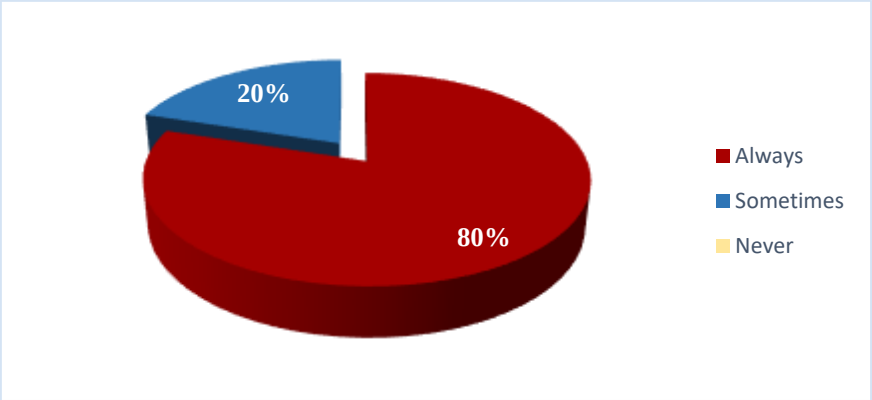

Figure 1. Reading Frequency

The multiple-response question (MRQ), whose data are represented in Table 2, intends to examine EFL learners' reading preferences. It initiates with preferred reading materials like books, articles and social media. The corresponding percentages are 56.7%, 20% and 63.3%, respectively. The discrepancy between the primary choice, social media, and the secondary one, books, is relatively minor. Yet, both choices exhibit a polarity of writing style and reading requirements. This suggests that most participants experience a rich exposure to a variety of reading content that addresses different narratives, values and ideologies. However, reading articles is the least selected option. It could be attributed to the nature of learning that is oriented towards pedagogical training and forming future teachers more than scientific research.

Moreover, the question concludes with discovering the used reading techniques and methods as follows: Skimming 60%, Scanning 74%, Intensive reading 67%, Extensive reading 58%. Since the variation is marginal among preferences of reading methods and techniques, a significant interpretation is unveiled. It reveals that the overall proportion of the graduating EFL learners, in question, incorporates a variety of reading methods and adjusts them as needed.

	Items	**Percentages %**
Reading Materials	Books Articles Social media	56.7 20 63.3
Reading Patterns	Skimming Scanning Intensive reading Extensive reading	60 74 67 58

Table 2. Reading Preferences

3.3 Exploring Reading Comprehension Activities

Based on the findings demonstrated in Figure 2, the study members incorporate a wide range of activities to achieve comprehension. To begin with, group discussions take the lead with 53.3%. It indicates exchanging of ideas from different angles, discovering new perspectives in the text through peer scaffolding, fostering analytical and critical skill, detecting possible bias and hidden messages. Meaning, thus, is tackled from a variety of dimensions. Next, reading comprehension questions come second with 36.67%. This signals a great focus on detailed explanation and in-depth analysis of ideas portrayed in the text. Reading comprehension questions are embedded in various types, including but not limited to inferential questions, literal questions, evaluative questions and tone questions. The characteristics of these questions and the requirements of answering them promote the implementation of critical views. Finally, close reading is positioned last with 20%. Although the percentage is significant, it is the least selected category. It might be justified by the prerequisites of establishing a close reading activity which usually require relatively longer timeframes. The latter are restricted in a classroom setting when conducting a lesson, an exam, or an assignment. Besides, the curriculum implementation itself is subject to time constraints. Consequently, close reading is not an available option to endorse on a daily basis in classrooms. However, the informants most likely practice close reading outside the classroom as well independently and explicitly.

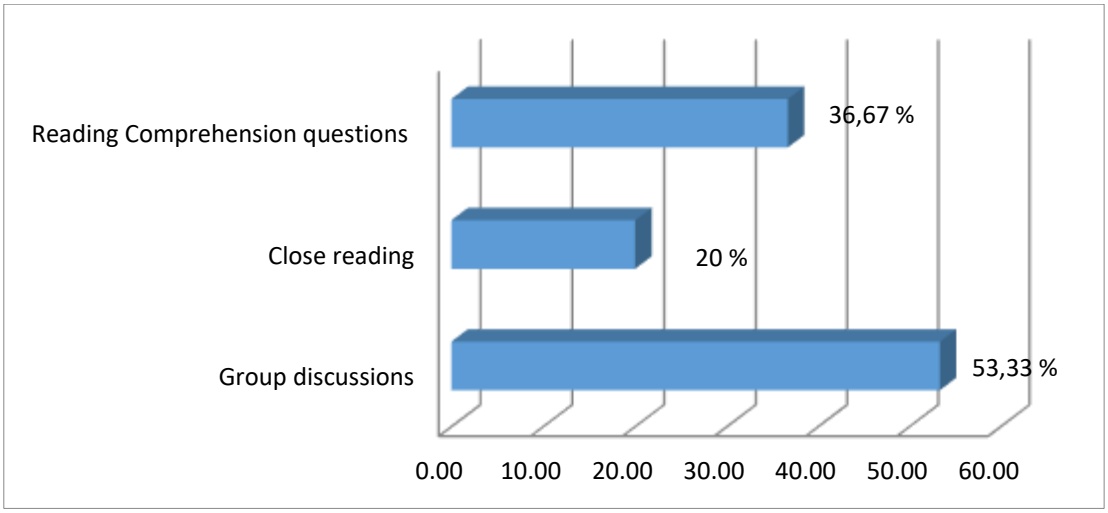

Figure 2. Reading Comprehension Activities

3.3.1 Participants' Elaboration

A further explanatory question, an optional one, is provided to the previous main question. This is to assist EFL learners in providing feedback and information regarding additional reading comprehension activities. Consequently, a number of activities related to reading are mentioned by the respondents. These activities are thematically classified into two categories. First, mechanical activities embody skimming, highlighting major ideas, text jigsaw, and gist questions. They highlight dealing with overt reading comprehension that focuses on direct interpretation of meaning without subsequent analysis. Second, analytical activities include critical reading, debates, Socratic seminar, scanning and note making. This implies enhancing reflective skills, inferential reasoning, bias awareness, dialogic learning and a nuanced comprehension beyond literal meaning. The thematic revelations denote that EFL learners are fully aware that a text might include inferred meaning, ideological undertones and non-neutral positions. Therefore, they merge,

whenever required, a broad spectrum of activities that examine all aspects of a text. This is essentially to attain a thorough comprehension.

3.4 Discovering Practices in Detecting Texts' Nuances

Figure 3 illustrates the various practices of the research's participants to uncover different nuances and biases that might be included in written materials. The designated options are sorted in descending order as follows: The main ideas 63.3%, the purpose of the text 50%, details 43.3%, language use 36.7%, context and relevance 26.7%, text structure 10% and coherence 6.7%. The results highlight that most respondents actually combine between clues that treat comprehension at both micro level and macro level. This contributes significantly in shaping a holistic reading comprehension. Therefore, the interplay between connotation and denotation in a balanced mode is imperative to shape critical reading lens. However, coherence seems to be the least frequent clue employed by EFL learners. It indicates an alarming underestimation or even ignorance about the significance of the ideas' logical sequencing. The latter is one of the major factors in detecting hidden messages between the lines.

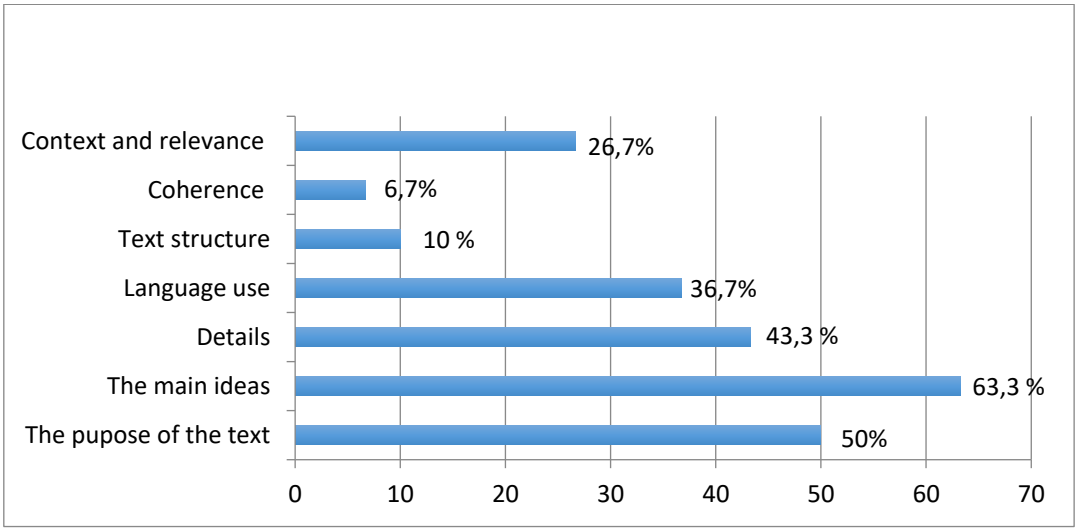

Figure 3. Nuances' Detection Clues

3.4.1 Participants' Exemplifications

The respondents expound on extended methods and clues to detect nuances. The replies are organized and characterized in two categories. First, linguistic clues tackle semantic and lexical strategies. Second, technical clues treat procedural plans. Both categories are represented as follows:

Clues Categories	Respondents' Answers
Linguistic Clues	• Analyzing word choice: synonyms, antonyms, figurative language, symbolism, vocabulary • Delving into the text structure • Examining the tone and writing style
Technical Clues	• Checking Online • Requesting teacher scaffolding / peer scaffolding • Participating in debates and discussions • Investigating the author's background • Using repetitive reading to grasp all details • Relying on different types and strategies of reading

Table 3. Clues Exemplifications

The thematic analysis, corroborated in Table 3, triggers various insights about the level of criticality adopted by the respondents. In fact, the variety of the employed clues reinforces critical engagement. In addition, the interplay between linguistic clues and technical clues illustrates a catalyst for EFL learners. This is to promote rhetorical analysis, a key factor in uncovering nuances. Moreover, it reduces the impact of semantic opacity, which leads to grasping meaning and minimizing miscomprehension.

3.5 Examining the Implementation of Critical Literacy

As can be observed in Figure 4, a substantial proportion of the research sample claims the implementation of critical literacy by 97%. This is a good indicator that highlights embracing the importance of critical literacy in enhancing language skills, particularly reading. Additionally, it signals the endorsement of such an approach in their learning journey. Nevertheless, a marginal minority of 3% does not practice critical literacy. This may stem from a language barrier, a misinterpretation of the principles of critical literacy, or a preference for traditional notions of literacy.

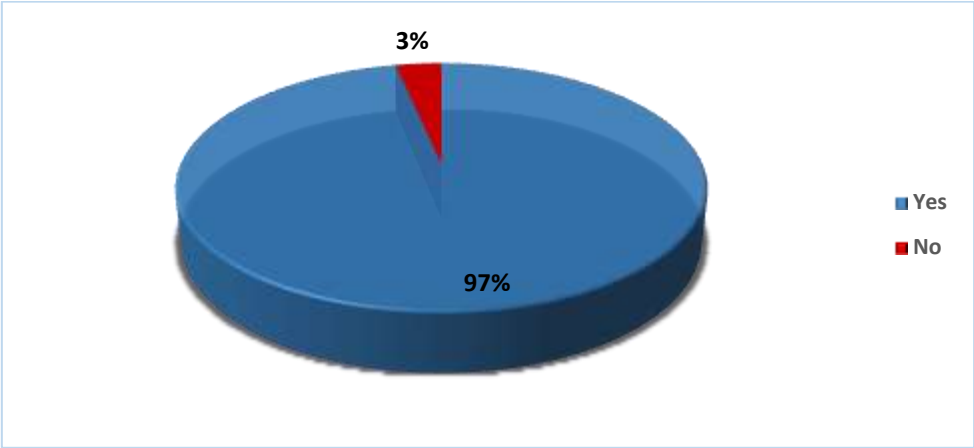

Figure 4. Critical Literacy's Implementation

3.5.1 Participants' Explanations

In an open-ended question, participants express their viewpoints about the influence of critical literacy on meaning construction. They are thematically categorized in two categories in Table 4 as follows:

Categories	Participants' Viewpoints
The Focus on the Text	• Reading between the lines • Analyzing both minor and major details • Discovering perspectives from different angles • Identifying bias and dominant narratives
The Focus on the Reader	• Fostering Critical skills • Promoting readers 'autonomy and active engagement with the text • Enhancing the distinction between facts and embedded opinions

Table 4 . Participants' Viewpoints

The research sample's standpoints reflect a profound influence of critical literacy on building meaning. This is primarily through the interplay of two major factors: the written material itself and the reader' skills. That is to say, the adoption of critical literacy enhances apprehending meaning through a plethora of activities that cover lexicology, semantics and semiotics. This leads to fostering the reader's mental competencies and cultivating a reflective mindset in parallel.

4. Discussion

This study explores the role of critical literacy in enhancing EFL learners' reading skills. The target research sample is EFL learners who are pre-service teachers, concomitantly. In a homogeneous research community in terms of gender, age, and linguistic skills, a number of insights are disclosed.

The findings align amply with the existing literature. The majority of participants read systematically and encounter a variety of resources involving books, articles and passages displayed on social media. The latter is slightly preferred. It suggests that the frequency of reading among EFL learners is stimulated through providing engaging and appropriately leveled written materials (Krashen 2004, 2011). This highlights an indispensable necessity to enhance the implementation of reading in the EFL Algerian context.

Reading comprehension is one of the core objectives in the reading process. EFL learners tend to implement an adaptive approach that integrates a number of reading techniques (Brown, 2007; Hedge, 2000; Milliner, 2021). Similarly, the respondents incorporate interchangeably numerous reading patterns like intensive reading, extensive reading, skimming and scanning. These patterns are diverse to flexibly tackle every dimension in the reading material. In addition, a number of reading activities are employed, such as group discussions, reading comprehension questions, close reading, and further supplementary activities. This suggests that the respondents are equipped with the necessary skills to treat a text analytically and construct meaning adequately.

Nuance in a given discourse is a fundamental problematic phenomenon that needs to be treated delicately. It could empower or marginalize both individuals and communities based on conflict of interest. Consequently, the research sample adopts a wide range of clues to investigate bias and detect any possible misinformation, such as linguistic clues and technical clues. This suggests that EFL learners demonstrate a considerable degree of criticality and an awareness of embedded nuances, biases, and underlying assumptions.

The respondents confirm putting into practice critical literacy during reading which enhances critical engagement. This is primarily due to its favorable characteristics that promote reading skill in several

aspects: constructing meaning adequately through reflective thinking and critical analysis, enriching vocabulary repertoire thanks to the exposure of various corpora, consolidating reading comprehension and meaning making (Luke & Freebody, 1999), promoting readers' agency, embracing multiple perspectives (Lewison et al., 2002). These aspects enrich the quality of reading and develop it from surface level to in-depth comprehension.

In light of the analysis of the data and the discussion, the research objectives are achieved. In addition, all the research questions are answered and clarified with appropriate explanations.

5.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Critical literacy is established as one of the fundamental learning approaches facing ideological challenges in the EFL setting. This is attributable mainly to its multidimensional influence on linguistic skills and reflective thinking. Correspondingly, the study illuminates the role of critical literacy in enhancing reading skills among EFL learners who represent a research community of pre-service teachers. The findings, resonating with previous studies, indicate a pivotal role of critical literacy in improving reading skills for EFL learners relying on an array of activities and procedures. The latter could function as a paradigm to grasp embedded meaning in reading materials. This, ultimately, leads to achieving a holistic comprehension.

The study urges policymakers to promote critical literacy through constant updating of national EFL curricula. Additionally, the creation of formal yet engaging reading local communities is a pressing need that should be taken into account. It reinforces dialogic exchange among students in a friendly and supportive learning environment. Furthermore, future researchers are recommended to handle a larger sample size to suitably generalize the findings. It could be carried out by targeting participants enrolled in different training schools nationwide. A further recommendation, which could open other research horizons, is conducting a critical comparative study between EFL learners enrolled at universities and pre-service teachers enrolled at teacher training schools (ENS).

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