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Integrating Critical Literacy into Communicative Language Teaching for EFL Learners at a Private Language Center

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the integration of critical literacy into communicative language teaching (CLT) for upper-intermediate EFL learners at a private language center. The research aimed to investigate how critical literacy activities influence learners' engagement, critical thinking, reflective skills, and communication in the classroom. Twenty teenage female learners and five teachers participated in the study. A qualitative research design was adopted, including classroom observations, teacher interviews, and learner reflection texts. Data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns related to critical literacy development. The findings revealed that learners demonstrated increased awareness of textual features, questioned assumptions, analyzed multiple perspectives, and connected content to personal experiences. There were improvements in reasoning, justification of ideas, collaboration, and communication confidence. Peer discussion and teacher guidance supported learners' reflective thinking and collaborative problem-solving, allowing learners to evaluate texts critically and articulate their understanding effectively. The study also found that integrating critical literacy encouraged metacognitive skills, including self-monitoring of understanding and deliberate planning of responses. Overall, the results indicate that critical literacy enhances both language proficiency and higher-order thinking, providing learners with tools to engage thoughtfully with texts, peers, and real-world contexts.

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1.Introduction

Communicative Language Teaching has become the dominant approach in many EFL classrooms, particularly in private language centers where spoken ability and everyday communication are emphasized. This approach is widely adopted because it gives learners regular opportunities to speak, listen, and interact in English in meaningful contexts. Research consistently highlights its positive impact on fluency, learner confidence, and classroom participation (Qasserras, 2023; Hien, 2021; Phoeun & Sengsri, 2021; Tiu et al., 2023; Crookes & Ziegler, 2021). However, classroom practice in private institutes often reflects a limited version of CLT. Lessons frequently emphasize scripted role-plays, formulaic exchanges, and exam preparation. Texts are rarely questioned, and classroom talk often stops at surface meaning. Learners use English actively, yet they seldom examine why texts present certain ideas or whose voices are absent. Studies on CLT identify this gap between communicative practice and deeper meaning-making and suggest that communication alone does not automatically lead to socially aware language use (Qasserras, 2023; Hien, 2021; Yuan et al., 2022; Crookes & Ziegler, 2021; Lee et al., 2023).

Critical literacy offers an alternative view of language learning that treats reading, speaking, and interaction as social practices. It encourages learners to question texts, notice implicit assumptions, and reflect on issues of voice, power, and representation. This perspective has strong roots in critical pedagogy and has gained attention in EFL research across different contexts (Weng, 2023; Afrilyasanti et al., 2025; Whiteside, 2023; Al Roomy, 2022; Yulian, 2021). Rather than focusing only on comprehension, learners are encouraged to ask who is represented, who is excluded, and what ideas are normalized in texts. Research shows that this approach supports deeper thinking and more purposeful classroom discussion (Moghadam et al., 2023; Bağ & Gürsoy, 2021; Sari & Prasetyo, 2021; Al-Shaye, 2021; Kaowiwattanakul, 2021). In EFL classrooms, critical literacy does not replace language teaching. Instead, it provides learners with meaningful reasons to use English for opinion, explanation, and reflection. This feature makes it especially compatible with communicative classrooms where interaction already plays a central role (Weng, 2023; Crookes & Ziegler, 2021; Afrilyasanti et al., 2025; Whiteside, 2023; Yuan et al., 2022).

Despite this compatibility, critical literacy remains uncommon in private language centers. These institutions often operate under time constraints and commercial expectations. Learners and parents usually expect rapid improvement in speaking skills and visible

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progress. Teachers often follow fixed textbooks and tight schedules, which leave limited space for extended discussion or reflection (Qasserras, 2023; Banaruee et al., 2023; Hien, 2021; Indah et al., 2022; Nurhidayat et al., 2024). As a result, reading tasks emphasize correct answers rather than interpretation, and speaking tasks prioritize speed and accuracy over reasoning. Research on EFL textbooks shows that many materials avoid complex social topics and present simplified cultural images (Banaruee et al., 2023; Kaowiwattanakul, 2021; Lee et al., 2023; Belda-Medina, 2022; Whiteside, 2023). This situation widens the gap between learners' exposure to global media outside class and the limited scope of classroom interaction. Critical literacy offers a way to narrow this gap by enabling guided discussion of familiar topics while maintaining a focus on language practice (Afrilyasanti et al., 2025; Weng, 2023; Al Roomy, 2022; Sari & Prasetyo, 2021; Yulian, 2021).

Empirical research supports the value of critical approaches for EFL learners. Studies report improvements in reading understanding, classroom interaction, and learner confidence when teachers use questioning, discussion, and reflective tasks (Moghadam et al., 2023; Al Roomy, 2022; Bağ & Gürsoy, 2021; Sari & Prasetyo, 2021; Kaowiwattanakul, 2021). One major line of inquiry has focused on critical language awareness and discourse-oriented approaches to literacy, emphasizing how English language education can function as a site for ideological negotiation and social critique (Aghaei, Lie, & Noor, 2012; Aghaei, Lie, & Noor, 2015). These studies foreground the role of literacy practices in shaping learners' cultural identities and critical consciousness within Iranian classrooms. A second body of work has examined textbook representation and critical discourse analysis, highlighting how power relations, ideology, and social categories are discursively constructed in EFL instructional materials. Using Foucauldian and post-structural frameworks, researchers have demonstrated how issues such as ageism, marginalization, and identity are framed in Iranian EFL textbooks (Aghaei, Danyali, & Rajabi, 2025; Aghaei, 2024).

Learners not only understand texts more clearly but also express opinions with greater clarity and control over language choice. Digital tools and media texts further strengthen this process when they are used with guided discussion and reflection (Al-Shaye, 2021; Belda-Medina, 2022; Iskandar et al., 2022; Songsiengchai et al., 2023; Poudel, 2022). This evidence is particularly relevant for private language centers where learners frequently engage with English through online platforms. Critical literacy allows learners to talk about such content rather than consume it passively. It also aligns well with communicative activities such as

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discussion, debate, and role play which are common in CLT classrooms (Crookes & Ziegler, 2021; Phoeun & Sengsri, 2021; Tiu et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2023; Qasserras, 2023).

Another important reason for integration relates to learner needs beyond everyday conversation. Many EFL learners attend private language centers to prepare for academic study, professional work, or migration. These goals require skills such as evaluating information, interpreting complex texts, and expressing positions clearly in English (Indah et al., 2022; Yuan et al., 2022; Whiteside, 2023; Nurhidayat et al., 2024; Iskandar et al., 2022). While CLT supports interaction, it does not always prepare learners for these demands.

Critical literacy adds this missing layer by making thinking visible through language use. Research on teacher perspectives shows increasing recognition of this need, even though classroom implementation remains uneven (Yuan et al., 2022; Weng, 2023; Afrilyasanti et al., 2025; Crookes & Ziegler, 2021; Qasserras, 2023). For private language centers, this integration can raise educational value without disrupting lesson structure, as communicative tasks remain central while discussion becomes more meaningful. Previous research on critical literacy and critical pedagogy in the Iranian EFL context has addressed several interrelated strands.

2. Literature Review

Research on communicative language teaching shows that CLT has become a standard approach in EFL classrooms across different contexts. The main strength of CLT lies in its focus on interaction and real-life communication. Learners use language for speaking, listening, and exchange of meaning rather than memorization of grammar rules. Studies report that CLT supports learner confidence and oral ability in both academic and private language settings (Qasserras, 2023; Hien, 2021; Phoeun & Sengsri, 2021; Tiu et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2023). However, several scholars point out that CLT often stays at a surface level of communication. Classroom tasks may encourage speaking, yet they rarely require learners to question ideas or examine text meaning beyond accuracy and fluency (Qasserras, 2023; Crookes & Ziegler, 2021; Yuan et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2023; Banaruee et al., 2023). This limitation becomes more visible in private language centers where lessons follow commercial textbooks and fixed routines. As a result, learners speak more but think less about why texts present certain ideas. This pattern suggests that communication alone does not guarantee meaningful language use or deeper understanding (Hien, 2021; Phoeun & Sengsri, 2021; Tiu et al., 2023; Qasserras, 2023; Crookes & Ziegler, 2021).

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Critical literacy offers a different way to view language learning. It treats reading and speaking as social practices rather than neutral skills. Learners are encouraged to ask questions about voice, purpose, and perspective in texts. Research emphasizes that critical literacy helps learners move beyond literal meaning and develop reflective thinking (Weng, 2023; Afrilyasanti et al., 2025; Whiteside, 2023; Al Roomy, 2022; Yulian, 2021). In EFL settings, this approach supports learners who need English not only for conversation but also for interpretation and evaluation. Studies show that learners who engage in critical reading demonstrate better understanding and more thoughtful responses (Moghadam et al., 2023; Al Roomy, 2022; Bağ & Gürsoy, 2021; Sari & Prasetyo, 2021; Kaowiwattanakul, 2021). Critical literacy does not reduce language practice. Instead, it creates reasons for learners to speak and write with purpose. This feature makes it compatible with communicative classrooms where discussion and exchange already exist (Weng, 2023; Crookes & Ziegler, 2021; Afrilyasanti et al., 2025; Whiteside, 2023; Yuan et al., 2022).

Several studies focus on classroom practices that support critical literacy development. Research highlights the role of questioning, dialogue, and learner reflection. Teachers guide learners to examine text content rather than accept it as neutral information. This practice leads to more active participation and clearer expression of ideas (Afrilyasanti et al., 2025; Weng, 2023; Moghadam et al., 2023; Sari & Prasetyo, 2021; Yulian, 2021). In EFL reading courses, learners who engage in reflective discussion show improved reasoning and clearer argument expression (Al Roomy, 2022; Kaowiwattanakul, 2021; Bağ & Gürsoy, 2021; Sari & Prasetyo, 2021; Yulian, 2021). Digital tools also support this process when teachers guide discussion around content rather than tools alone. Studies on digital storytelling and online texts show positive effects on learner reflection and engagement (Al-Shaye, 2021; Belda-Medina, 2022; Iskandar et al., 2022; Songsiengchai et al., 2023; Poudel, 2022). These findings suggest that critical literacy grows through interaction and reflection rather than through direct instruction.

Another strand of research examines the link between critical literacy and classroom climate. Studies report that learners feel more engaged when their opinions are valued and discussed. This sense of involvement supports participation and peer interaction (Moghadam et al., 2023; Bağ & Gürsoy, 2021; Whiteside, 2023; Indah et al., 2022; Yuan et al., 2022). Learners become more willing to speak when they feel that their ideas matter. In communicative classrooms, this shift leads to richer discussion and more balanced

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participation (Crookes & Ziegler, 2021; Tiu et al., 2023; Phoeun & Sengsri, 2021; Lee et al., 2023; Qasserras, 2023). Research also shows that learners develop awareness of multiple viewpoints through guided discussion. This awareness supports respectful disagreement and cooperative talk (Weng, 2023; Afrilyasanti et al., 2025; Whiteside, 2023; Moghadam et al., 2023; Yuan et al., 2022). Such outcomes are especially relevant for teenage learners who are still shaping their academic and social identities.

Textbooks and curriculum design also influence critical literacy opportunities. Studies show that many EFL textbooks simplify cultural content and avoid controversial topics. This approach limits learners' exposure to diverse viewpoints (Banaruee et al., 2023; Kaowiwattanakul, 2021; Lee et al., 2023; Belda-Medina, 2022; Whiteside, 2023). Teachers in private language centers often rely heavily on these materials due to time pressure and learner expectations. Research suggests that without teacher mediation, textbooks rarely support critical engagement (Qasserras, 2023; Hien, 2021; Banaruee et al., 2023; Indah et al., 2022; Nurhidayat et al., 2024). However, studies also show that teachers can adapt materials through discussion prompts and reflective tasks. Such adaptations allow learners to question content while still meeting communicative goals (Weng, 2023; Afrilyasanti et al., 2025; Crookes & Ziegler, 2021; Al Roomy, 2022; Sari & Prasetyo, 2021).

Despite growing interest in critical literacy, gaps remain in research related to private language centers. Most studies focus on universities or public schools. Few examine how critical literacy works within communicative programs that emphasize speaking and fluency (Qasserras, 2023; Weng, 2023; Yuan et al., 2022; Afrilyasanti et al., 2025; Moghadam et al., 2023). Research also pays limited attention to teenage learners in non-academic settings. These learners often attend language centers for practical reasons, yet they engage with complex media outside the classroom (Indah et al., 2022; Songsiengchai et al., 2023; Poudel, 2022; Nurhidayat et al., 2024; Iskandar et al., 2022). This gap suggests the need for studies that explore how critical literacy can be integrated into CLT without disrupting classroom routines. Understanding learner and teacher experiences in such contexts can provide practical insight for language centers seeking deeper learning outcomes (Weng, 2023; Crookes & Ziegler, 2021; Afrilyasanti et al., 2025; Qasserras, 2023; Yuan et al., 2022).

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to examine how critical literacy practices appear inside communicative language teaching in a private language center.

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Qualitative research fits studies which focus on classroom interaction, teacher reasoning, and learner response rather than numerical comparison. It allows close attention to how participants describe experience and how meaning develops through talk and reflection. This approach prioritizes naturalistic classroom contexts and everyday teaching practice rather than controlled conditions. The aim of the study was to understand how teachers introduced critical questions and how learners reacted during communicative tasks. A qualitative approach makes it possible to capture change during lessons and shifts in teacher guidance as interaction unfolds. This orientation supports description and interpretation rather than measurement and aligns with applied classroom research traditions (Guest et al., 2013).

The participants included twenty teenage EFL female learners at upper intermediate level and five EFL female teachers working at the same private language center. The learners were between fifteen and eighteen years old and attended classes for general English development. This level allowed learners to express opinions and explain views in English, which is important when data rely on spoken and written language. The teachers had between three and twelve years of teaching experience and regularly used communicative activities such as pair work and group discussion. None had received formal training in critical literacy. Purposeful selection allowed the study to focus on participants who could share detailed classroom experience and reflection. This form of sampling supports depth and relevance in qualitative inquiry rather than representativeness (Khoa et al., 2023).

Data collection followed a qualitative approach and focused on gathering rich classroom-based evidence from multiple sources. The study relied on classroom observation, semi-structured teacher interviews, and learner reflection texts. These methods allowed close attention to what happened during lessons and how participants understood their experience. Data collection took place over a six-week period during regular classes so that teaching routines remained unchanged. This approach supports the collection of natural data that reflect everyday practice rather than staged activity. Using more than one source allowed comparison across perspectives and helped build a fuller picture of classroom interaction and response (Kelly, 2023).

Classroom observation formed the main source of data. The researcher observed each group several times during communicative lessons where teachers introduced short critical questions into reading and speaking tasks. Observation focused on patterns of talk, turn-taking, teacher prompts, and learner participation. Notes captured examples of learner

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responses, types of questions asked, and changes in classroom interaction. No audio or video recording was used to reduce classroom disruption and maintain a familiar learning environment. Written field notes allowed immediate reflection after each lesson. Observation is widely used in qualitative classroom research because it documents behavior as it occurs and provides context for later interpretation (Guest et al., 2013).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all five teachers after the observation phase. Interviews followed a flexible guide that allowed teachers to describe their experience in their own words while addressing key topics. These topics included comfort with critical questions, perceived learner reaction, and impact on lesson flow. Each interview lasted between thirty and forty minutes and took place in a quiet setting at the language center. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. This method allowed deeper insight into teacher thinking, which could not be fully observed during lessons. Interviews support qualitative inquiry by linking observed behavior to participant explanation and reflection (Ridder, 2014).

Learner reflection texts provided an additional source of data. After selected lessons, learners wrote short reflections in simple English about what they discussed and how they felt about the tasks. Prompts were clear and limited in scope so that language level did not restrict expression. Reflections focused on opinion, interest, and perceived difficulty rather than formal evaluation. These texts offered learner perspectives that might not appear during classroom talk. Written reflection helps include the learner voice and supports comparison with teacher views and observation data. This form of data adds depth to classroom research by showing how learners interpret their own participation (Khoa et al., 2023).

Data analysis followed a thematic qualitative approach with systematic triangulation across all data sources. Observation notes, interview transcripts, and learner reflections were read several times to identify shared ideas and repeated patterns. The analysis focused on how teachers guided discussion, how learners used language, and how communicative goals remained present during lessons. Comparing different sources helped check consistency across teacher talk, learner writing, and classroom behavior. This process increased trust in the findings and reduced reliance on a single form of evidence. The analytic process stayed descriptive and grounded in the data rather than abstract categories (Ridder, 2014).

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4. Findings

4.1. Critical Awareness of Texts

Learners demonstrated increasing awareness of texts and authors' intentions during lessons. Observation revealed that students could identify main ideas, notice missing viewpoints, and recognize potential biases in written materials. For example, students often paused to discuss why certain ideas were emphasized or ignored and compared the content with their own understanding. Teacher Avan explained, "Sara noticed that the author only presented men's opinions, and it led to a discussion with others." Reflection texts confirmed that learners were able to distinguish between their own perspective and the perspective presented in the text. Observation notes indicated that learners supported each other in identifying key points and clarifying unclear ideas, asking questions to deepen understanding. Teachers reported that repeated exposure to such questions encouraged learners to pay closer attention to language and meaning, helping them become more attentive and critical readers. This awareness was not limited to literal comprehension; learners began to interpret underlying assumptions, which suggests that critical literacy promotes analytical reading skills and a more nuanced approach to texts in EFL classrooms.

Students also began connecting the text content to real-life situations and local contexts. Observation indicated that learners frequently drew parallels between the text and their personal experiences, as well as issues familiar in Sanandaj. Teacher Shilan noted, "Zerin asked how the story relates to our daily life in Sanandaj, and others started giving examples from home." Learner reflections confirmed that they considered the relevance of the text to their own lives and were able to identify when the author's message did not fully represent diverse experiences. Observation further indicated that learners often asked peers to clarify points, showing that collaborative discussion helped deepen their understanding. Teachers reported that these discussions fostered critical engagement with the text rather than mere memorization or surface comprehension. Through these exercises, learners developed skills in recognizing context, evaluating author intentions, and connecting information to their own knowledge and experiences, which are central aspects of critical literacy.

Learners' ability to notice inconsistencies and gaps in information also improved over time. It was found that students began questioning logic, evaluating what was included or omitted, and predicting potential consequences of the text's content. Teacher Narin explained, "Rana pointed out missing viewpoints in the article, and the class discussed what might have

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been left out intentionally." Reflection texts indicated that learners considered why authors made certain choices and how omissions or biases could influence understanding. Observation notes recorded learners making comparisons with other texts and generating hypotheses about the author's purpose. Teachers reported that this skill in identifying gaps and inconsistencies helped learners approach reading with more critical attention. Furthermore, learners were able to anticipate alternative interpretations and consider the implications of different viewpoints, demonstrating that the development of critical awareness allowed students to move beyond literal comprehension to analytical evaluation. This shows that critical literacy fosters both a deep understanding of content and thoughtful reflection on its meaning and limitations.

4.2. Questioning and Analyzing Perspectives

Learners actively engaged in questioning the ideas presented in texts and analyzing the perspectives of authors. It was observed that students frequently asked "why" and "how" questions about the content, challenging both explicit statements and underlying assumptions. Teacher Tara stated, "Even shy students like Negin were raising questions about why the author emphasized certain opinions." Reflection texts confirmed that learners had begun to notice social and cultural assumptions and were able to compare them with their own understanding. Observation notes revealed that learners often debated differing interpretations with peers, supporting one another in clarifying meaning and reasoning. Teachers reported that these questioning behaviors encouraged students to think critically rather than rely on memorized answers. Learners' ability to interrogate ideas and evaluate perspectives highlighted the development of analytical skills, showing that critical literacy allows students to consider more than just surface meaning while engaging in discussion and communication in the EFL classroom.

Students also developed skills in analyzing social and cultural contexts within texts. Observation indicated that learners could identify the author's assumptions and potential biases embedded in the material. Teacher Ava reported, "Dilan asked why the article represented only one group, and it sparked a conversation on fairness." Reflection texts revealed that students were aware of the difference between the author's perspective and their own experiences, and they could articulate why certain viewpoints were emphasized. It became clear that learners actively challenged peers' opinions respectfully and asked questions to explore alternative viewpoints. Teachers noted that this process strengthened

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reasoning skills, as students were required to support their arguments with evidence from the text. By connecting textual content to broader social and cultural contexts, learners were developing critical thinking abilities essential for informed interpretation and dialogue.

Peer discussion played a significant role in deepening learners' analysis of perspectives. Observation revealed that learners explained their reasoning to classmates and compared their interpretations, creating a collaborative environment for understanding multiple viewpoints. Teacher Shilan said, "Zerin was explaining her point to Lilan, and they both considered different sides of the story." Reflection texts confirmed that learners valued listening to peers and adapting their own ideas based on new insights. Observation notes also clearly demonstrate that students negotiated meaning and reconciled differences during discussion, fostering a cooperative learning environment. Teachers reported that the shift from simple responses to reasoned debate demonstrated learners' growing comfort with evaluating ideas critically. This indicates that critical literacy not only develops analytical skills but also enhances collaborative thinking, as learners engage in meaningful discussions that require explanation, justification, and consideration of diverse perspectives.

4.3. Reflective Thinking and Metacognition

Learners demonstrated growing reflection on their own thinking and understanding during critical literacy activities. Observation confirms that students paused before answering, reconsidered responses, and often rephrased statements to make ideas clearer. Teacher Narin said, "Some students, like Dilan, started saying 'I need to think before I answer,' which shows they were reflecting on their response." Reflection texts confirmed that learners were actively evaluating their own understanding and noticing assumptions in texts. Observation notes revealed that students were monitoring both the content of their answers and the language they used to communicate. Teachers reported that this reflective behavior allowed learners to plan responses more carefully, leading to more meaningful contributions in classroom discussion. Over time, learners demonstrated awareness of how reflection could improve both comprehension and communication, indicating that metacognitive skills are strengthened through critical literacy integration.

Learners also became more adept at noticing gaps in knowledge or missing perspectives in the texts they studied. Observation revealed that students identified incomplete or biased information and asked questions to explore why certain viewpoints were omitted. Teacher Shilan explained, "Rana realized some opinions were missing, and she asked the class to think

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why they might have been left out." Reflection texts indicated that learners recognized the importance of questioning assumptions and evaluating content critically rather than accepting it at face value. Observation notes recorded learners comparing personal perspectives with those of peers, which encouraged discussion and the consideration of alternative interpretations. Teachers noted that this metacognitive awareness led learners to become more independent and deliberate thinkers. These behaviors demonstrate that critical literacy supports students in monitoring their thought processes and engaging in purposeful, analytical reading and discussion.

Reflection further strengthened learners' problem-solving and reasoning skills. Evidence revealed that learners proposed alternative interpretations and offered solutions when discussing texts, which required evaluating evidence and justifying choices. Teacher Ava stated, "Sara suggested a different ending to the story, and the class discussed why it could make sense." Reflection texts revealed that learners recognized multiple ways to approach a single issue, showing flexibility in thought. Observation indicated that learners connected reflection with active participation, planning how to present ideas clearly, and responding thoughtfully to peers. Teachers reported that this skill helped learners evaluate texts, consider multiple possibilities, and express reasoning more effectively. By engaging in reflection and metacognitive thinking, students developed the capacity to think independently, plan their responses carefully, and approach texts and discussions with a critical, analytical mindset.

4.4. Empowered Communication and Collaboration

Critical literacy activities encouraged more balanced participation and empowered learners to communicate confidently. The data revealed that even students who were usually quiet contributed more when tasks focused on expressing opinions rather than providing correct answers. Teacher Tara said, "Shy students like Negin joined in because the questions were about what they thought, not what was correct." Reflection texts confirmed that learners valued the opportunity to share ideas and listen to peers, which increased engagement and motivation. Observation notes revealed that learners supported each other by clarifying meaning and offering examples. Teachers reported that this collaboration strengthened both speaking confidence and interaction skills. The findings suggest that critical literacy enables learners to take ownership of their learning and promotes active involvement in classroom discussions, fostering a sense of empowerment and responsibility for communication.

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Collaboration improved as learners engaged in joint reasoning and problem-solving. Observation revealed that students explained ideas to classmates, compared viewpoints, and negotiated understanding during discussion. Teacher Shilan commented, "Zerin was explaining her opinion to Lilan, and they both reflected on the reasons behind the text's message." Reflection texts indicated that learners appreciated hearing peers' perspectives and adapting their own ideas when necessary. Observation also showed that learners assisted each other with vocabulary, sentence structure, and justification of opinions. Teachers noted that collaborative discussion encouraged learners to reason critically while using language for meaningful purposes. This process demonstrated that critical literacy strengthens cooperative skills, helping students develop both communication and higher-order thinking through peer interaction.

Teachers adapted their facilitation to support empowered communication and collaborative learning. The results suggested that teachers provided prompts and guidance while allowing learners to lead discussions and explore ideas independently. Teacher Ava explained, "At first, I worried adding questions would slow the class, but learners responded with detailed answers and supported each other." Reflection texts indicated that learners felt respected and valued when teachers encouraged reasoning rather than judging responses. Observation also revealed that students engaged in extended dialogue, offering explanations and justifying opinions more fully than in previous lessons. Teachers reported that integrating critical literacy improved both the quality of interactions and learners' confidence in speaking. Overall, learners were able to communicate effectively, collaborate with peers, and actively participate in discussions, showing that critical literacy fosters empowered learning environments.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study support earlier research that questions the depth of learning which communicative language teaching alone can provide. Learners in this study revealed strong speaking ability before the intervention, yet their early classroom talk focused on surface meaning and short answers. This pattern aligns with prior CLT research, which notes that frequent interaction does not always lead to reflective language use (Qasserras, 2023; Hien, 2021). When critical literacy tasks were introduced, learners began to explain opinions, justify ideas, and respond to peers with clearer reasoning. This change aligns with studies that argue communication gains value when learners engage with meaning and perspective rather

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than accuracy alone (Crookes & Ziegler, 2021; Yuan et al., 2022). The findings suggest that critical literacy does not compete with CLT goals. Instead, it strengthens communicative practice by giving learners reasons to speak with purpose. This supports earlier claims that CLT benefits from pedagogical approaches that address meaning, identity, and interpretation rather than mechanical interaction (Qasserras, 2023; Lee et al., 2023).

The development of critical reading skills observed in this study closely reflects patterns reported in previous EFL research. Learners moved from locating information to questioning assumptions and evaluating viewpoints. This shift mirrors findings that critical literacy improves reading depth and learner awareness (Al Roomy, 2022; Yulian, 2021). A notable development was their greater control over explanation and reasoning when discussing texts, which supports research that links critical literacy with clearer expression and stronger comprehension (Moghadam et al., 2023; Kaowiwattanakul, 2021). These outcomes reinforce the argument that reading should not remain a silent activity in communicative classrooms. When learners discuss texts critically, reading becomes a shared meaning process. This aligns with earlier studies that emphasize discussion and reflection as key tools for developing critical literacy in EFL settings (Weng, 2023; Afrilyasanti et al., 2025). The findings, therefore, extend existing research by showing how these processes function in a private language center rather than an academic institution.

Classroom interaction also changed in ways that reflect earlier literature on learner engagement and classroom climate. Learners reported feeling more confident when their opinions were acknowledged and discussed. This supports studies which link critical approaches to higher learner involvement and improved peer interaction (Moghadam et al., 2023; Bağ & Gürsoy, 2021). The findings show that discussion-based tasks encouraged learners to listen to peers rather than wait for teacher confirmation. This shift reflects earlier observations that communicative classrooms benefit when authority over meaning is shared (Crookes & Ziegler, 2021; Whiteside, 2023). Learners also demonstrated greater tolerance for disagreement, which aligns with research that highlights the social value of critical literacy practices (Weng, 2023; Yuan et al., 2022). These outcomes suggest that critical literacy contributes to a supportive classroom environment where communication becomes collaborative rather than competitive.

The role of the teacher in guiding discussion emerged as a central factor in the findings. Teachers did not provide correct answers but asked questions that encouraged explanation and

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reflection. This approach reflects earlier research which stresses the importance of teacher mediation in critical literacy development (Weng, 2023; Afrilyasanti et al., 2025). Without such guidance, discussion risks remaining superficial. The findings confirm concerns that textbooks alone rarely promote critical engagement (Banaruee et al., 2023; Kaowiwattanakul, 2021). Instead, teacher prompts helped learners question content and connect texts to personal experience. This supports prior work that emphasizes instructional design rather than material choice as the key to critical literacy integration (Sari & Prasetyo, 2021; Al Roomy, 2022). The study shows that even fixed textbooks can support critical engagement when teachers adapt tasks through discussion.

Digital texts and media also played an important role in learner engagement. Learners responded strongly to topics drawn from online content and social media. This finding aligns with research that highlights the relevance of digital literacy for contemporary EFL learners (Iskandar et al., 2022; Songsiengchai et al., 2023). When these texts were discussed critically, learners moved beyond personal opinion toward explanation and justification. This reflects studies that link digital storytelling and media analysis with deeper thinking and learner reflection (Al-Shaye, 2021; Belda-Medina, 2022). The findings suggest that critical literacy offers a framework for guiding discussion around familiar content rather than avoiding it. This approach aligns with research that stresses the need to address learners' real-world exposure to English media (Poudel, 2022; Indah et al., 2022).

The teenage focus of this study adds an important dimension to existing research. Much prior work examines university students, while this study shows that younger learners also benefit from critical literacy practices. Participants demonstrated strong engagement and thoughtful responses when tasks matched their interests. This supports earlier claims that critical thinking development is not limited to advanced academic contexts (Bağ & Gürsoy, 2021; Moghadam et al., 2023). The findings challenge assumptions that teenage learners in private language centers prefer simple conversation practice. Instead, they suggest that learners welcome meaningful discussion when supported by clear structure. This aligns with studies that emphasize learner capability rather than age as the key factor in critical engagement (Yuan et al., 2022; Afrilyasanti et al., 2025).

The private language center context is central to the interpretation of these findings. Unlike schools or universities, private centers often face time pressure and performance expectations. The success of critical literacy tasks in this study supports research that argues

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for flexible integration rather than full curriculum reform (Qasserras, 2023; Weng, 2023). Learners continued to practice speaking, yet with greater depth. This shows that critical literacy can work within communicative programs without reducing fluency practice. The findings therefore respond directly to gaps identified in earlier research on CLT in non-academic settings (Qasserras, 2023; Lee et al., 2023).

Teacher perspectives in this study also align with earlier research on professional development needs. Teachers reported increased awareness of learner thinking after using critical tasks. This echoes studies that highlight teacher growth through reflective practice (Yuan et al., 2022; Nurhidayat et al., 2024). The findings suggest that critical literacy supports not only learners but also teacher decision-making. Teachers became more attentive to learner responses rather than task completion. This aligns with research that frames critical pedagogy as a reciprocal learning process (Crookes & Ziegler, 2021; Whiteside, 2023).

Overall, the discussion confirms that integrating critical literacy into CLT addresses known limitations of communicative practice. The findings support existing literature while extending it to a private language center with teenage learners. The study reinforces calls for pedagogical approaches that connect language use with meaning, reflection, and interaction (Weng, 2023; Afrilyasanti et al., 2025). It also demonstrates that such integration is feasible without disrupting institutional expectations. This alignment strengthens the argument for critical literacy as a practical enhancement rather than an abstract ideal (Qasserras, 2023; Crookes & Ziegler, 2021).

6. Conclusion & Implications

This study examined the integration of critical literacy into communicative language teaching for EFL learners at a private language center. The findings show that critical literacy activities enhanced learners' engagement, critical thinking, and reflective skills. Learners became more aware of textual features, questioned assumptions, analyzed perspectives, and connected content to personal experiences. They also demonstrated improved ability to justify ideas, support peers, and participate actively in discussions. Teachers observed that learners developed confidence in speaking and greater independence in interpreting texts. Overall, the study highlights that combining critical literacy with communicative approaches fosters both language development and higher-order thinking, allowing learners to engage more meaningfully with texts and peers.

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The study also emphasizes that critical literacy promotes metacognitive skills and collaborative learning. Learners reflected on their reasoning, identified gaps in knowledge, and evaluated alternative viewpoints, showing deeper analytical abilities. Peer discussion and teacher facilitation supported meaningful interaction, cooperative problem-solving, and empowered communication. These findings indicate that integrating critical literacy into EFL classrooms not only improves language skills but also nurtures cognitive, social, and reflective abilities. In essence, critical literacy helps learners become thoughtful, engaged, and capable users of language in both academic and real-world contexts.

The findings suggest practical implications for EFL teaching in private language centers. Teachers should design activities that encourage questioning, analysis, and reflection rather than only focusing on memorization or correct answers. Facilitating discussions that allow learners to compare perspectives, justify opinions, and evaluate texts can strengthen both language and critical thinking skills. Teachers may also incorporate local or culturally relevant materials to make texts more meaningful, which can enhance engagement and support learners in connecting content to their own experiences. Structured tasks, guided questioning, and reflective exercises can help learners develop awareness of their thinking while using English.

The study also has implications for curriculum development and teacher training. EFL programs should integrate critical literacy principles into lesson design, assessment, and classroom practices. Teacher training should focus on strategies to foster analytical thinking, reflection, and collaborative communication while maintaining a supportive and inclusive classroom environment. Encouraging teachers to model questioning, provide scaffolding for discussion, and support peer interaction can maximize the impact of critical literacy on language learning. Additionally, incorporating reflective exercises and discussion-based tasks can help learners internalize critical thinking skills, ensuring that the benefits of critical literacy extend beyond individual lessons to long-term language development and active participation in learning communities.

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Declaration

I declare that this manuscript is original and has not been submitted to any other journal for publication

Transparency Statements

I affirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available. Any additional data can be obtained from the author upon reasonable request.

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Ethical Consideration

This manuscript adheres to the ethical guidelines provided by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) for ensuring integrity and transparency in the research publication process.

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