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Integrating Critical Discourse Analysis into Media Literacy Pedagogy in an Undergraduate EFL Program

Linguistics Society of Iran

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the integration of critical media literacy in an undergraduate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom and explores how students and instructors experience discourse-based engagement with media texts. The study involved 20 male and female EFL undergraduate students and five EFL instructors who participated in a focus group interview. Data were collected over one academic term through classroom observations, student-written reflections, and instructor focus group discussions. Classroom activities focused on analyzing and producing media texts using discourse and multimodal analysis to support critical reading, discussion, and reflection. The findings indicate that students developed a stronger awareness of how meaning is constructed in media texts, including attention to word choice, visuals, framing, and selective representation. Students also showed growth in critical questioning, moving from surface-level comprehension toward analytical inquiry about purpose, audience, and credibility. Engagement increased through the use of multimodal texts, which connected classroom learning with students' everyday media experiences and supported participation across varying language proficiency levels. Classroom interaction shifted toward more collaborative and dialogic patterns, with students taking greater responsibility for meaning-making. Instructors reported both challenges and benefits, emphasizing the importance of careful planning and facilitation. Overall, the study demonstrates that integrating critical media literacy into EFL instruction supports critical thinking, learner agency, and meaningful language use in higher education contexts.

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1. Introduction

English as a Foreign Language classrooms now work inside a media space where students meet English through news feeds, short videos, comments, memes, and AI tools every day. Language learning no longer stays with textbooks or fixed tasks. Learners read, write, and respond to texts that carry opinions, power, and hidden interests. Because of this, many scholars argue that EFL teaching must help students question messages, not only understand grammar or vocabulary (Pederson, 2023; Hamdi, 2023; Afrilyasanti et al., 2024; Dzogovic et al., 2025; Zhang, 2023). Critical media literacy offers a way to guide learners to notice how language works in media texts and how meanings are shaped. Studies show that EFL learners who engage with media texts become more active and reflective readers (Afrilyasanti et al., 2023; Budiyanto & Ridho, 2024; Buchatska et al., 2024). Media literacy is also linked to information literacy, especially when students face misleading or biased online content (Azi et al., 2024; Dandar & Lacey, 2021). These changes push EFL education to move beyond surface comprehension and toward deeper engagement with meaning and context.

Critical discourse analysis has been widely discussed as a useful approach for this purpose. CDA helps learners look at how language reflects social values, assumptions, and relations (Hamdi, 2022; Najarzadegan, 2022; Zhang, 2023; Zhang, 2024; Evagorou-Vassiliou, 2024). In EFL contexts, CDA has been shown to support reading comprehension and critical thinking across proficiency levels (Najarzadegan, 2022; Zhang, 2023; Hamdi, 2023). It also supports learners in questioning whose voices are heard and whose are missing in texts (Hamdi, 2022; Raffone, 2023). When CDA is used with media texts, learners can better understand how headlines, images, and word choices guide interpretation (Budiyanto & Ridho, 2024; Chairat, 2025). Several studies report that CDA-based activities encourage discussion and reflection, even among learners who are usually quiet in class (Afrilyasanti et al., 2023; Zhang, 2024). These findings show that CDA is not only a theory but also a practical classroom tool.

Multimodal texts have become central to how learners encounter English. Images, sound, layout, and movement often carry as much meaning as words. Because of this, researchers highlight multimodal discourse analysis as an extension of CDA in EFL teaching (Tilakaratna, 2022; Chairat, 2025; Raffone, 2023; Belda-Medina, 2022; Afrilyasanti et al., 2025). Studies show that when learners analyze videos, social media posts, or digital stories, they develop stronger awareness of how meaning is built across modes (Belda-Medina, 2022;

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Raffone, 2023). Multimodal analysis also supports creativity and engagement, especially when students produce their own media texts (Afrilyasanti et al., 2025; Mahmud et al., 2025). In EFL classrooms, this approach helps bridge language learning and everyday media practices (Chairat, 2025; Tilakaratna, 2022). Learners begin to see English as a living language used for real purposes, not only as an academic subject (Zhang, 2024; Pederson, 2023). These practices align with broader goals of critical literacy in higher education.

Digital and critical literacies are now closely connected in EFL research. Learners must navigate algorithms, AI tools, and fast-changing platforms while using English (Liu et al., 2025; Lim & Darvin, 2025; Zhang, 2023; Mahapatra & Koltovskaia, 2025; Mahmud et al., 2025). Research shows that without guidance, students may consume information without questioning sources or intent (Azi et al., 2024; Dzogovic et al., 2025). Integrating critical media literacy helps learners verify information and reflect on their own digital practices (Dandar & Lacey, 2021; Neira et al., 2024). Teacher roles are also important, as educators need digital and critical awareness to guide learners effectively (Afrilyasanti et al., 2023; Zhang, 2023; Rizqiani & Elida, 2025). Studies in teacher education show positive outcomes when critical digital literacy is made explicit in training programs (Mahapatra & Koltovskaia, 2025; Belda-Medina, 2022). These findings suggest that EFL education must address both language skills and media awareness together.

The integration of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) into media literacy pedagogy is increasingly recognized as vital in enhancing the educational experiences of undergraduate students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program. Aghaei et al. (2012) emphasize the importance of sustainable language and literacy learning, suggesting that critical approaches can significantly enrich English language education by fostering deeper engagement with texts. Further supporting this notion, Aghaei, Danyali, and Rajabi (2025) apply CDA to analyze English language textbooks for learners with special needs, revealing how discursive practices can perpetuate or challenge societal norms. This critical lens is echoed in their subsequent work (Aghaei et al., 2024), which investigates teachers' perceptions of literacy practices within EFL textbooks, underscoring the necessity of examining educational materials through a critical framework. Additionally, Aghaei and Gouglani (2016) highlight the role of multimodal pedagogy in vocabulary retention, suggesting that integrating various modes of communication can enhance critical engagement with media texts. Collectively, these studies illustrate the potential of CDA to inform media literacy pedagogy, equipping

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EFL learners with the analytical skills necessary to navigate and critically assess the complexities of contemporary media landscapes.

Despite growing interest, classroom practices vary widely. Some studies focus on discussion forums, others on social media analysis, and others on structured CDA models (Afrilyasanti et al., 2023; Budiyanto & Ridho, 2024; Najarzadegan, 2022; Zhang, 2023; Evagorou-Vassiliou, 2024). Results are generally positive, but implementation challenges remain. Teachers report time limits, curriculum pressure, and uneven student readiness (Chairat, 2025; Hamdi, 2023; Rizqiani & Elida, 2025). In some contexts, critical media literacy appears as an add-on rather than a core learning goal (Pederson, 2023; Afrilyasanti et al., 2024). There is also variation in how assessment is handled, with limited tools to measure learners' critical media skills (Neira et al., 2024; Dandar & Lacey, 2021). These issues suggest that while theory is well developed, classroom alignment is still uneven.

In today's rapidly evolving digital landscape, the ability to critically analyze and engage with media is more crucial than ever, particularly for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners who are often exposed to a diverse array of cultural narratives and ideologies. This study addresses the pressing social issue of media literacy, which is essential for empowering students to navigate the complexities of information dissemination in a globalized world. By challenging traditional language teaching practices that prioritize rote memorization over critical engagement, this research advocates for an educational framework that not only enhances linguistic proficiency but also fosters critical thinking skills. In doing so, we aim to highlight media literacy as a vital component of EFL education that enables learners to interrogate the power dynamics and biases present in media texts, ultimately contributing to their development as informed, active participants in society.

Although research strongly supports the value of critical media literacy and discourse analysis in EFL, clear gaps remain. Many studies examine single tools or short-term interventions, but fewer explore sustained classroom integration across skills (Pederson, 2023; Afrilyasanti et al., 2025; Zhang, 2024; Evagorou-Vassiliou, 2024; Rizqiani & Elida, 2025). There is limited discussion on how CDA and multimodal analysis can be combined in regular EFL courses without overloading teachers or students (Chairat, 2025; Tilakaratna, 2022; Hamdi, 2022). Research also pays less attention to how learners themselves perceive the development of their critical media abilities over time (Neira et al., 2024; Afrilyasanti et al., 2023). In addition, many studies focus on specific regions, leaving other EFL contexts

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underexplored (Mahapatra & Koltovskaia, 2025; Dzogovic et al., 2025). Addressing these gaps is necessary to move from isolated practices toward more coherent and sustainable models of critical media literacy in EFL education.

2. Review of Literature

Research on critical media literacy in EFL settings shows a steady shift from language form to meaning, context, and interpretation. Early discussions focus on why media texts matter in language learning and how they influence learners' views and decisions (Pederson, 2023; Hamdi, 2023; Buchatska et al., 2024; Dzogovic et al., 2025; Afrilyasanti et al., 2024). Media texts expose learners to real language use, but they also carry bias and persuasion that often go unnoticed (Azi et al., 2024; Dandar & Lacey, 2021). Studies report that EFL learners often accept online information as neutral unless guided to question it (Budiyanto & Ridho, 2024; Neira et al., 2024). Critical media literacy helps learners slow down their reading and notice how messages are built (Afrilyasanti et al., 2023; Pederson, 2023). It also supports learner participation, as students feel their opinions matter when discussing real media examples (Afrilyasanti et al., 2023; Rizqiani & Elida, 2025). This body of work establishes critical media literacy as a needed response to digital exposure in EFL education.

Critical discourse analysis appears frequently as a core method for developing critical literacy in EFL classrooms. CDA allows learners to examine word choice, framing, and implied meaning in texts (Hamdi, 2022; Zhang, 2023; Zhang, 2024; Evagorou-Vassiliou, 2024; Raffone, 2023). Empirical studies show that CDA instruction improves reading comprehension and interpretation across different proficiency levels (Najarzadegan, 2022; Zhang, 2023; Hamdi, 2023). Learners trained in CDA are better able to explain why texts position readers in certain ways (Hamdi, 2022; Raffone, 2023). In EFL contexts, CDA is often applied to news articles, opinion texts, and social media posts (Budiyanto & Ridho, 2024; Afrilyasanti et al., 2023). These studies highlight that CDA supports both language learning and critical awareness. However, most research focuses on analysis tasks rather than sustained classroom routines (Evagorou-Vassiliou, 2024; Zhang, 2024).

Recent studies extend CDA to multimodal discourse analysis to address visual and digital texts. Learners now interact with images, sound, layout, and video alongside written language (Tilakaratna, 2022; Chairat, 2025; Belda-Medina, 2022; Raffone, 2023; Afrilyasanti et al., 2025). Research shows that multimodal analysis helps learners understand how meaning is distributed across modes, not only words (Tilakaratna, 2022; Chairat, 2025). In

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EFL classrooms, students analyze advertisements, videos, and social media posts to see how visuals guide interpretation (Budiyanto & Ridho, 2024; Raffone, 2023). Studies also report higher engagement when learners create their own multimodal texts, such as digital stories (Belda-Medina, 2022; Afrilyasanti et al., 2025). These practices support creativity while keeping a focus on critical reading (Afrilyasanti et al., 2025; Mahmud et al., 2025). The literature suggests that multimodal discourse analysis strengthens critical media literacy when paired with guided reflection.

Digital literacy research adds another layer by examining how learners interact with platforms, algorithms, and AI tools. Scholars argue that language learning now happens alongside digital decision-making (Liu et al., 2025; Lim & Darvin, 2025; Mahapatra & Koltovskaia, 2025; Zhang, 2023; Mahmud et al., 2025). Studies show that EFL learners need support to verify sources, recognize misinformation, and reflect on their online behavior (Azi et al., 2024; Dzogovic et al., 2025). Information literacy and discourse analysis are often linked in this work, especially when students analyze online claims (Dandar & Lacey, 2021; Azi et al., 2024). Research also highlights learner agency, showing that students become more confident when they understand how digital texts influence them (Liu et al., 2025; Lim & Darvin, 2025). These findings reinforce the need to combine language learning, critical literacy, and digital awareness in EFL classrooms.

Teacher roles and classroom conditions receive growing attention in the literature. Studies show that teachers' beliefs and digital skills shape how critical media literacy is applied (Afrilyasanti et al., 2023; Zhang, 2023; Hamdi, 2023; Rizqiani & Elida, 2025; Mahapatra & Koltovskaia, 2025). Some teachers use discussion forums and social media texts to encourage dialogue, while others rely on structured CDA models (Afrilyasanti et al., 2023; Budiyanto & Ridho, 2024). Challenges include limited time, curriculum demands, and uneven student readiness (Chairat, 2025; Hamdi, 2023; Rizqiani & Elida, 2025). Assessment remains another concern, as tools for measuring critical media literacy are still developing (Neira et al., 2024; Dandar & Lacey, 2021). These studies show that successful implementation depends on clear goals, teacher support, and realistic classroom design.

Although existing research confirms the value of critical media literacy, discourse analysis, and multimodal approaches in EFL, several gaps justify the present study. Many studies examine isolated activities or short-term interventions rather than ongoing classroom practice (Pederson, 2023; Afrilyasanti et al., 2025; Zhang, 2024; Evagorou-Vassiliou, 2024;

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Rizqiani & Elida, 2025). Few studies explain how CDA and multimodal analysis can be combined in a balanced way that fits regular EFL courses (Chairat, 2025; Tilakaratna, 2022; Hamdi, 2022). Learner perspectives are often reported indirectly, with limited focus on how students understand their own critical growth (Neira et al., 2024; Afrilyasanti et al., 2023). There is also uneven representation of EFL contexts across regions (Mahapatra & Koltovskaia, 2025; Dzogovic et al., 2025). This study responds to these gaps by examining structured integration of critical media literacy through discourse analysis in an EFL setting, with attention to learner engagement, perception, and classroom feasibility.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how critical media literacy was integrated into an EFL undergraduate classroom and how participants experienced the process. A qualitative approach was selected because it allows close attention to participants' views, reflections, and classroom interactions. The focus was on understanding meaning rather than measuring outcomes. The study examined how students engaged with media texts, how they interpreted language and visuals, and how instructors viewed the classroom practices. Data were collected over one academic term to allow sustained observation of learning processes rather than short activities. The design supported in-depth exploration of experiences, challenges, and the perceived value of critical media literacy activities. By relying on descriptive data, the study aimed to capture participants' voices in a natural learning setting. This approach was considered suitable for examining classroom-based practices that involve discussion, interpretation, and reflection.

The participants included 20 undergraduate EFL students enrolled in an English course at a university. The group consisted of both male and female students with varied language proficiency levels. All participants had prior experience using digital media in their daily lives, but none had received formal instruction in critical media literacy. Students were selected through purposive sampling to ensure they were actively involved in the course where critical media literacy activities were implemented. Participation was voluntary, and all students were informed about the purpose of the study. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identity. The diversity in gender and language background allowed the study to capture a range of perspectives on classroom engagement, understanding of media texts, and perceived learning outcomes. This variation supported richer interpretation of student experiences.

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In addition to students, five EFL instructors participated in the study through a focus group interview. These instructors had experience teaching undergraduate EFL courses and were familiar with integrating media texts into language instruction. The focus group was used to explore instructors' views on the feasibility, benefits, and challenges of applying critical media literacy in EFL classrooms. The group discussion encouraged shared reflection, comparison of teaching practices, and exchange of ideas. Instructors were selected based on their willingness to reflect on their teaching experiences and their involvement in similar courses. The focus group setting allowed participants to respond to each other's comments, which helped generate deeper insights into instructional decisions and classroom realities. All instructors provided consent and were assured confidentiality.

Data collection involved multiple qualitative methods to ensure depth and trustworthiness. Classroom observations were conducted to document how critical media literacy activities were implemented and how students interacted during discussions. Field notes focused on student participation, types of questions raised, and patterns of engagement with media texts. Student reflections were collected in written form to capture personal responses to the learning activities. These reflections allowed students to express their thoughts without classroom pressure. The focus group interview with instructors was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Open-ended guiding questions were used to encourage detailed responses. Collecting data from different sources helped build a fuller picture of the learning process.

Data collection was conducted over one academic term to capture sustained classroom practices rather than isolated activities. Multiple qualitative data sources were used to allow a detailed and balanced understanding of the learning process. Classroom observations formed the first source of data. The researcher attended scheduled EFL classes where critical media literacy activities were implemented. Observations focused on how media texts were introduced, how tasks were explained, and how students interacted during discussions. Particular attention was given to student responses, questions raised, peer interaction, and moments of agreement or disagreement. Field notes were written during and immediately after each session to ensure accuracy. These notes included descriptions of classroom dynamics, instructional choices, and observable signs of engagement or difficulty.

The second data source consisted of student-written reflections. Students were asked to submit reflective responses at different points during the term. These reflections encouraged

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students to describe how they understood media texts, what challenges they faced, and how their thinking changed over time. Open-ended prompts were used so students could express their views freely without language restrictions. The third data source was a focus group interview with five EFL instructors. The focus group was conducted after the classroom implementation period. It lasted approximately ninety minutes and was audio-recorded with permission. The discussion followed a semi-structured format, allowing instructors to reflect on classroom feasibility, student response, instructional challenges, and perceived learning outcomes. All recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve meaning and detail.

Data analysis followed a systematic and iterative qualitative process. All collected data, including observation notes, student reflections, and instructor interview transcripts, were organized and reviewed several times to gain a full understanding of the dataset. The first stage involved familiarization, where the researcher read each data source carefully and noted initial impressions. During this stage, attention was paid to repeated ideas, notable statements, and contrasting viewpoints. Initial codes were then generated manually by identifying meaningful segments of text related to student engagement, interpretation of media texts, critical awareness, instructional strategies, and classroom challenges.

In the second stage, similar codes were grouped together to form broader categories. These categories were refined through constant comparison across data sources. For example, student reflections were compared with classroom observations to confirm consistency, while instructor perspectives were examined alongside student responses to identify alignment or tension. Themes were then developed to represent patterns that appeared across the dataset. These themes focused on how critical media literacy was experienced, how discourse analysis supported learning, and what conditions influenced classroom implementation.

To ensure rigor, the researcher maintained detailed analytic memos that documented coding decisions and theme development. Data triangulation across sources strengthened credibility by allowing findings to be supported from more than one perspective. Representative excerpts were selected to illustrate each theme while preserving participants' original language and intent. The analysis process remained flexible, allowing themes to be refined as a deeper understanding emerged.

A suitable Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework for examining the integration of media literacy pedagogy in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts is Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model (Xing, 2024), which encompasses text, discourse

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practice, and social practice. In this framework, "text" refers to the linguistic features and structures of media materials used in the classroom, allowing for an analysis of language choices and their implications. "Discourse practice" focuses on the production and consumption of these texts, exploring how educators and learners engage with media content, including the contexts of use and the interpretative strategies employed. Finally, "social practice" situates the discourse within broader societal structures and power relations, analyzing how media literacy education can empower students to critically navigate and challenge dominant ideologies present in media narratives. This comprehensive approach not only facilitates a nuanced understanding of language use but also emphasizes the role of education in fostering critical awareness among EFL learners.

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the study's aims, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Written consent was obtained from all participants. Data were stored securely and used only for research purposes. Anonymity was ensured by removing identifying details from transcripts and reports. The researcher also remained aware of their role in the classroom and took steps to reduce power imbalance, especially during data collection. Reflective notes were used to monitor potential bias during observation and analysis. These measures were taken to ensure the study respected participants and produced trustworthy findings.

4. Findings

4.1. Growing Awareness of Media Meaning

Students showed clear growth in how they understood media texts beyond surface content. At the beginning of the course, most students focused on vocabulary or general ideas. Over time, they began to notice how messages were shaped and directed. Dara explained that he used to read news posts "only for information," but later started asking "why this word is used here." Several students shared similar shifts. Shilan said she now reads social media posts more slowly and tries to see what is missing. Classroom observations supported these statements, as students increasingly paused during discussions to question framing and intent. Media texts became objects of inquiry rather than sources of facts. This change was gradual and developed through repeated exposure to guided analysis. Students did not describe this as difficult, but as unfamiliar at first. As the term progressed, awareness became more natural and part of their reading habits.

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Another sign of growing awareness was students' attention to the audience and purpose. Many students mentioned that they had never considered for whom a text was written. Baran stated, "I now think about who benefits from this message." This idea appeared often in student reflections and class discussions. Students began to recognize that different audiences receive different versions of the same story. In one discussion, students compared headlines from different platforms and noticed clear differences in tone. Ronak noted that one headline sounded neutral, while another felt emotional. This led to a discussion about persuasion and influence. Such moments showed that students were not only identifying features but also connecting them to broader meaning. This awareness extended beyond the classroom, as students reported noticing similar patterns in their daily media use.

Students also showed increased confidence in expressing interpretations. Early discussions were marked by hesitation and short responses. Later, students spoke more freely and supported their views with examples. Haval shared, "Before, I was afraid my idea was wrong." By the end, students treated interpretation as open and discussable. This shift reduced fear of mistakes and encouraged dialogue. Classroom observation showed more students raising their hands and responding to peers. Meaning was negotiated collectively rather than delivered by the instructor. This change supported deeper engagement with texts and allowed students to see media reading as an active process.

Another important aspect of awareness was students' recognition of bias and selective representation. Many students reported that they had never considered that media texts might present partial versions of events. After several analysis activities, students began identifying imbalances in sources and perspectives. Soran shared that he now notices when "only one side is speaking." This comment reflected a broader shift seen in reflections and discussions. Students compared texts covering the same topic and pointed out differences in emphasis and omission. They discussed how some voices were highlighted while others were absent. This recognition did not lead to rejection of the media, but to careful reading. Students described feeling more alert rather than suspicious. Classroom observations showed students asking whether certain groups were ignored or simplified. These discussions helped students understand that meaning is shaped through selection. Awareness of bias became part of how students approached texts, not a separate task. This shift suggested a deeper understanding of how language and media interact.

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Students also became more aware of their own assumptions while reading. Several students reflected on how their background and beliefs influenced their interpretation. Berfin said, "I realized I read with my own ideas first." This self-awareness appeared gradually and was often triggered by peer disagreement. When classmates interpreted texts differently, students began reflecting on why. These moments were observed during group discussions where contrasting views emerged. Instead of insisting on one correct meaning, students explored reasons behind differences. This process helped them see reading as interaction rather than decoding. Students reported that this awareness made discussions more meaningful. They listened more carefully and asked others to explain their thinking. This change supported respectful dialogue and deeper engagement. Awareness extended inward, as students questioned not only texts but also their own responses. This finding highlights that critical media literacy supported reflection on both media meaning and reader positioning.

4.2. Development of Critical Questioning

Students gradually developed the habit of asking questions about media texts. At first, questions were mostly about language difficulty. Over time, they became more analytical. Ava explained that she now asks, "What is the goal of this post?" This type of question became common during group discussions. Students learned to pause and reflect instead of accepting content immediately. Observation notes showed that students often questioned headlines, image choices, and emotional language. This questioning was not limited to negative texts. Students also questioned texts they agreed with, showing balanced thinking. This change suggested deeper engagement rather than simple opposition.

Questioning also appeared in students' reflections about credibility. Several students described being more careful with online information. Kamal said, "I don't trust fast news like before." Students discussed checking sources, comparing platforms, and noticing exaggeration. These practices were not taught as fixed steps but emerged through discussion and analysis. Students described feeling more responsible as readers. This sense of responsibility marked a shift from passive consumption to active evaluation. Classroom discussions often moved from text analysis to personal media habits, showing transfer beyond academic tasks.

Importantly, students did not describe questioning as negative or tiring. Instead, they described it as empowering. Narin shared, "I feel smarter when I question." This emotional response appeared in several reflections. Questioning became linked to confidence rather than

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doubt. Students felt they had the tools to respond to complex information. This finding suggests that critical questioning supported motivation rather than reducing interest. The classroom environment played a role, as students felt safe expressing uncertainty and disagreement.

Students also showed progress in forming more precise and focused questions. Early in the course, questions were broad or unclear, often limited to whether information was true or false. Over time, students began shaping questions that targeted specific language choices and visual cues. Dilan noted, "Now I ask why they chose this image." This shift was observed during classroom discussions where students pointed to exact words, captions, or design elements. Questions became tools for unpacking meaning rather than expressions of confusion. Students often wrote their questions in notes before speaking, showing intentional thinking. This development suggests that questioning skills became structured through repeated practice. Students moved from reacting to texts toward analyzing them with purpose. The classroom environment supported this growth by valuing questions as learning moments rather than interruptions.

Another change was how students applied questioning beyond classroom materials. Several students reported using the same approach when encountering media outside class. Hejar shared that he questioned a viral post shared by friends and decided not to repost it. This example showed transfer of learning into everyday media behavior. Students described pausing before liking, sharing, or commenting. They linked questioning to responsibility, not restriction. In reflections, students expressed pride in making informed choices. Classroom discussions often included examples from students' own social media experiences, which enriched the analysis. This extension beyond academic tasks shows that critical questioning has become part of students' routine media use. It suggests that the skills developed were meaningful and sustainable rather than limited to classroom settings.

4.3. Engagement Through Multimodal Texts

Multimodal texts played a key role in sustaining student engagement. Videos, images, and social media posts attracted attention more quickly than traditional texts. Students reported feeling more connected to materials that reflected real online spaces. Zana stated, "This looks like what I see every day." This familiarity reduced anxiety and increased participation. Classroom observations showed higher energy during lessons using visual

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media. Students leaned forward, reacted emotionally, and initiated discussion without prompts. Multimodal texts created shared reference points that supported discussion.

Students also became aware of how visuals influenced interpretation. Several noted that images shaped their feelings before reading words. Rojin said, “The picture already tells me how to feel.” This awareness led to a discussion about manipulation and emotion. Students compared images used to represent the same event and discussed how the meaning changed. These activities helped students see visuals as active elements, not decoration. Over time, students referred to visuals naturally when explaining interpretations, showing integrated understanding.

Creating multimodal texts further deepened engagement. When students produced short media texts, they reflected on their own choices. Aram explained, “I realized I also choose words to influence.” This realization shifted their view of media from external to participatory. Students described difficulty balancing clarity and persuasion. This struggle supported learning, as students experienced the challenges of meaning-making. Production tasks helped students connect analysis with practice and reinforced critical awareness.

Another form of engagement appeared in how students negotiated meaning together when multimodal elements created confusion or disagreement. Visuals and sound often triggered different reactions, which led to deeper discussion. For example, when analyzing a short video, some students focused on the background music while others focused on the facial expressions. Saman remarked, “The music makes it sad, not the words.” This difference opened space for discussion about emotional framing. Classroom observations showed students replaying clips and pointing to specific moments. Multimodal texts encouraged close attention because meaning was not located in one place. Students became active interpreters rather than passive viewers. Disagreement did not stop the discussion but extended it. These moments helped students understand that interpretation is shaped by attention and experience. Engagement increased because students felt their observations mattered, even when they differed from others.

Multimodal texts also supported students with different language confidence levels. Students who struggled with long written texts often participated more when visuals were included. Observation notes showed that these students contributed by describing images or gestures before discussing language. Renas shared, “Pictures help me explain my idea.” This access point reduced pressure and supported inclusion. Students used visuals as support to

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express complex ideas in simpler English. This balance helped maintain focus on meaning rather than accuracy. Over time, these students also increased their use of language as confidence grew. Multimodal materials created a shared understanding that supported group discussion. Engagement was not limited to strong speakers. Instead, it spread across the classroom, allowing more students to take part in analysis and dialogue.

4.4. Shifts in Classroom Interaction

Classroom interaction changed noticeably during the study. Early lessons followed a teacher-led pattern with limited student response. As critical media activities continued, interaction became more student-centered. Students responded to each other rather than waiting for instructor approval. Delal noted, “We talk more with classmates now.” This shift was visible in group work and whole-class discussions. Students built on peers’ ideas and asked follow-up questions. The classroom became a space for shared meaning-making.

Group discussions supported quieter students. Observation notes showed that students who rarely spoke early in the term became more active in small groups. Azad shared that group work made him “less nervous to speak.” Peer discussion reduced pressure and allowed students to test ideas. These discussions often continued into whole-class sharing. Students appeared more comfortable disagreeing respectfully. Disagreement was framed as exploration rather than conflict. This atmosphere supported deeper discussion.

Instructors also noticed changes in interaction. During the focus group, instructors described students as more attentive and reflective. One instructor noted that students “listen more carefully to each other.” This change reduced the instructor’s role as sole authority. Instead, instructors guided discussion and clarified ideas. This shift supported learner agency and shared responsibility for learning. Interaction patterns reflected the goals of critical media literacy by valuing dialogue and multiple perspectives.

Another clear shift in classroom interaction was how authority and knowledge were negotiated during lessons. Students no longer looked to the instructor for confirmation after every response. Instead, they turned to peers to test ideas and ask for reactions. Observation notes showed students saying things like “Do you agree?” or “What do you think?” before the instructor spoke. Karwan explained, “We don’t wait for the teacher to say correct.” This change reflected growing confidence and shared responsibility. Knowledge was treated as something built through discussion rather than delivered. Students used evidence from texts to support their points and responded directly to classmates. This interaction pattern reduced

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silence and increased exchange. The instructor's role shifted toward guiding and summarizing rather than correcting. This balance helped maintain focus while allowing students space to explore meaning. Interaction became more horizontal, with students seeing each other as valid contributors.

Classroom interaction also became more reflective and respectful over time. Early disagreements were short and often avoided. Later, students stayed with the differences and explored them. When opinions clashed, students asked for an explanation rather than defending positions. Shko said, "I want to know why you think that." This approach was observed during discussions where students paraphrased peers' ideas before responding. Such behavior showed active listening. The classroom atmosphere supported disagreement without tension. Students learned that different interpretations were expected and useful. This shift reduced fear of speaking and supported sustained discussion. Instructors noted that discussions lasted longer and reached deeper points. Interaction was no longer driven by task completion but by curiosity. This change suggests that critical media literacy reshaped not only what students discussed, but how they related to each other during learning.

4.5. Instructor Perspectives and Classroom Feasibility

Instructors viewed the integration of critical media literacy as meaningful but demanding. They described initial concerns about time and student readiness. However, these concerns decreased as students adapted. One instructor stated, "Students surprised me with their ideas." Instructors observed growth in student confidence and participation. They noted that students became more willing to express opinions and justify them. This change encouraged instructors to continue using similar approaches.

Instructors also discussed challenges. Planning lessons required a careful selection of media texts. Some texts sparked strong reactions, which needed sensitive handling. Instructors emphasized the importance of clear guidance and supportive discussion rules. They noted that without structure, discussions could lose focus. However, they agreed that structure improved over time as students learned expectations. These reflections highlight the need for preparation and flexibility.

Overall, instructors supported the approach and saw value for EFL learning. They viewed critical media literacy as relevant to students' lives and language use. One instructor said, "This connects English to reality." This perception strengthened their commitment to the approach. Instructors suggested that with institutional support and shared resources,

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integration would become easier. Their perspectives confirm that critical media literacy is feasible and valuable when supported by clear goals and reflective practice.

Instructors also reflected on how their own teaching perspectives shifted during the process. Several described moving away from control toward facilitation. One instructor explained, "I learned to listen more than explain." This change was not immediate and required adjustment. Instructors noted that allowing open discussion sometimes felt uncertain, especially when students raised sensitive topics. However, they found that clear discussion guidelines helped maintain respect and focus. Over time, instructors became more comfortable allowing students to lead meaning-making. They observed that students often reached insights without direct instruction. This experience changed how instructors viewed learner capability. Rather than simplifying materials, they trusted students to handle complexity. Instructors described this as professionally rewarding. They felt the classroom became more authentic and responsive. This shift also reduced pressure to provide correct answers. Instead, instructors focused on guiding reflection and asking follow-up questions. These changes suggest that critical media literacy influenced teaching identity as well as classroom practice.

Instructors further discussed long-term feasibility within existing curricula. While they supported the approach, they emphasized the need for realistic planning. One instructor noted, "It works when texts are chosen carefully." Time management remained a concern, especially in courses with fixed outcomes. However, instructors agreed that critical media literacy did not replace language learning but supported it. They observed improvement in discussion skills, vocabulary use, and confidence. Instructors suggested integrating activities gradually rather than as a separate unit. They also highlighted the value of collaboration among teachers to share materials and strategies. Institutional support was mentioned as important for sustainability. Despite challenges, instructors viewed the approach as worth the effort. They believed it prepared students for real language use beyond exams. Their reflections show that critical media literacy is feasible when aligned with course goals, supported by planning, and adapted to classroom realities.

5. Discussion

The findings show that students developed a heightened awareness of how media texts convey meaning, reflecting similar patterns reported in prior research. Students began to notice framing, selection of information, and audience targeting, which are central to critical

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media literacy (Pederson, 2023; Afrilyasanti et al., 2024; Dzogovic et al., 2025). For example, Dara's reflection on reading news "only for information" demonstrates a shift from passive reception to active questioning, aligning with observations by Budiyanto and Ridho (2024) who found that social media analysis in EFL contexts encourages learners to interrogate content rather than accept it at face value. Similarly, Zhang (2024) highlighted that critical discourse analysis supports students in understanding how language conveys meaning and intent, which resonates with the students' growing ability to question underlying assumptions. These findings suggest that when students are exposed to guided media analysis, they start developing habits of attentive reading, which is essential for critical literacy. This awareness is a crucial step toward independent interpretation of texts, supporting long-term media literacy skills.

Another aspect of growing awareness is the recognition of bias and selective representation in the media. Students, like Soran, began identifying which voices were included or excluded, reflecting findings by Hamdi (2023) and Raffone (2023) on the importance of noticing silences and omissions in texts. The ability to detect bias shows that learners are moving beyond surface comprehension toward analytical reading, as emphasized by Pederson (2023) and Afrilyasanti et al. (2024). Classroom discussions comparing different headlines or posts mirrored similar exercises in Chairat (2025), where students evaluated framing and audience influence. Awareness of bias not only supports critical reading but also encourages learners to reflect on their own assumptions and prior knowledge, strengthening metacognitive skills. Students' recognition that meaning is constructed rather than neutral aligns with the goals of critical media literacy, supporting their ability to make informed judgments.

Self-awareness in reading also emerged as an important dimension of understanding media. Students reported noticing how their background and prior beliefs influenced interpretation, as exemplified by Berfin's reflection: "I realized I read with my own ideas first." This aligns with Pederson (2023) and Hamdi (2023), who highlight that critical literacy involves reflection on the reader's perspective as much as on the text. Zhang (2024) also emphasizes that CDA helps learners identify their own positioning relative to a text, fostering awareness of subjectivity. The iterative classroom discussions and peer comparisons provided opportunities for learners to examine alternative interpretations, reinforcing reflective skills. This inward awareness, coupled with attention to text construction, suggests that critical

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media literacy supports both analytical and self-reflective capacities, enabling learners to become more mindful and critical consumers of information.

Students' development of critical questioning aligns with previous research highlighting questioning as a core strategy for critical literacy in EFL settings (Afrilyasanti et al., 2024; Budiyanto & Ridho, 2024; Pederson, 2023). Initially, students asked questions about surface-level comprehension, but over time, they began asking analytical questions such as "What is the goal of this post?" These findings mirror Hamdi's (2022) observation that CDA-based tasks enhance learners' capacity to interrogate texts for purpose, framing, and power relations. The ability to formulate specific questions suggests that learners internalized analytical strategies, moving beyond passive reading. Classroom observations, where students identified particular images, word choices, or captions to support their questions, demonstrate active engagement with text construction. This development of questioning not only supports media literacy but also strengthens critical thinking and evaluative skills, which are transferable to academic and real-world contexts.

Students also applied questioning beyond classroom texts, indicating transfer of skills to everyday digital media, which is consistent with findings by Liu et al. (2025) and Dzogovic et al. (2025) regarding critical digital literacies. Hejar's reflection on questioning a viral post before sharing illustrates that learners are connecting analytical reading skills to personal decision-making, a central goal of critical media literacy. Afrilyasanti et al. (2023) similarly found that EFL learners who engage in critical media literacy activities report more responsible media use. This suggests that critical questioning not only improves classroom performance but also fosters lifelong media awareness. Students' reflections and instructor observations confirmed that questioning contributed to both cognitive and behavioral shifts, reinforcing the practical relevance of critical media literacy in contemporary digital contexts.

Furthermore, students described questioning as empowering, reflecting findings from Pederson (2023) and Raffone (2023) that active engagement with texts enhances learner confidence. Narin's statement, "I feel smarter when I question," illustrates the motivational aspect of critical inquiry, which supports participation and persistence in language learning. Hamdi (2023) emphasizes that CDA promotes both cognitive and affective engagement, a pattern observed in the classroom interactions described. The study shows that questioning fosters an environment where learners feel ownership of meaning-making, enhancing agency and self-efficacy. These observations suggest that critical questioning is not merely a skill but

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also an attitudinal shift that encourages independent, reflective, and evaluative engagement with media texts.

The findings indicate that multimodal texts were central to sustaining student engagement, echoing previous research highlighting multimodality as an effective tool for critical literacy (Tilakaratna, 2022; Belda-Medina, 2022; Chairat, 2025). Students reported that videos, images, and social media posts felt familiar and relevant, enhancing attention and participation. Zana's comment, "This looks like what I see every day," illustrates the connection between classroom materials and learners' daily digital experiences. Afrilyasanti et al. (2025) and Budiyanto and Ridho (2024) emphasize that multimodal materials bridge language learning and real-life contexts, making analysis more meaningful. Classroom observations confirmed high levels of engagement during activities with multimodal content, including students' repeated viewing, pointing out details, and initiating discussion. Multimodality provided a shared reference point, which facilitated dialogue and collective meaning-making, supporting deeper learning and critical reflection.

Students also developed awareness of how visuals shaped interpretation. Rojin's comment, "The picture already tells me how to feel," reflects recognition of the persuasive power of images. This finding aligns with Chairat (2025) and Raffone (2023), who highlight the role of multimodal cues in framing messages and influencing audiences. By analyzing visual, textual, and auditory elements, students were able to identify emotional framing and bias. This awareness extended critical reading beyond words to include other semiotic modes, consistent with Tilakaratna (2022), who argues that multimodal analysis strengthens critical literacy by revealing hidden layers of meaning. Students' reflections and classroom discussions indicated that attention to visuals encouraged more analytical thinking and richer interpretation of texts.

The production of multimodal texts also enhanced engagement and reflection, aligning with Belda-Medina (2022) and Afrilyasanti et al. (2025), who report that creating digital media deepens understanding of meaning construction. Aram reflected, "I realized I also choose words to influence," showing metacognitive awareness of how production choices affect interpretation. Producing media texts required students to balance clarity, audience perception, and persuasive elements, reinforcing critical thinking and decision-making. Classroom observations showed students collaborating, debating choices, and justifying decisions, which further supported analytical reasoning. These practices indicate that

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multimodal creation strengthens both comprehension and expressive skills, linking analysis with active application in ways that support holistic media literacy development.

The study found that classroom interaction shifted from teacher-centered to more student-centered patterns, which aligns with observations by Afrilyasanti et al. (2023) and Pederson (2023) on participatory critical literacy learning. Students began consulting peers before responding to instructors, reflecting a redistribution of authority and collaborative meaning-making. Karwan's reflection, "We don't wait for the teacher to say correct," illustrates this shift. Hamdi (2023) highlights that critical literacy activities encourage students to negotiate meaning collectively, enhancing discussion and critical thinking. Observation notes confirmed that students were more willing to challenge, compare, and justify interpretations. The instructor's role evolved to guiding discussion and scaffolding ideas rather than providing direct answers, demonstrating the impact of critical media literacy on classroom power dynamics.

Students' interaction also became more reflective and respectful over time. Shko's comment, "I want to know why you think that," reflects active listening and curiosity in response to differing interpretations. Dzogovic et al. (2025) and Afrilyasanti et al. (2024) emphasize that classroom norms supporting dialogue and reflection promote meaningful engagement in critical literacy tasks. Group discussions allowed quieter students to participate, supporting inclusiveness and collaborative reasoning. Peer explanation, paraphrasing, and questioning reinforced comprehension and fostered a learning environment where disagreement was productive. Students moved from avoiding conflict to exploring different perspectives. These shifts suggest that critical media literacy can cultivate collaborative habits essential for reflective and analytical engagement in EFL classrooms.

Interaction patterns also supported learner agency and confidence. Observation notes and student reflections showed students initiating discussion, providing examples, and linking ideas to personal experiences. Hamdi (2023) and Zhang (2024) argue that agency is a key outcome of CDA-based literacy activities. The classroom became a space for experimentation and co-construction of knowledge. Students no longer relied solely on instructor validation, reflecting a deeper understanding of analytical responsibility. Afrilyasanti et al. (2023) note that such interaction patterns enhance learners' critical and communicative competence. This indicates that classroom interaction changes are both an outcome and a facilitator of critical media literacy, reinforcing skills of analysis, dialogue, and reflection.

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Instructors viewed the integration of critical media literacy as meaningful but requiring careful planning, consistent with findings by Zhang (2023) and Afrilyasanti et al. (2024). They reported initial concerns regarding time, student readiness, and text selection, but these concerns decreased as students adapted and showed growth. One instructor explained, "Students surprised me with their ideas." Budiyanto and Ridho (2024) emphasize that teacher perceptions influence the success of CDA-based activities in EFL classrooms. Instructors observed improvements in student confidence, participation, and analytical skills. These reflections suggest that while critical media literacy may initially challenge instructional routines, it produces observable learning gains that justify integration into regular teaching practices.

Instructors also reflected on their own teaching approaches. Several described a shift from explaining content to facilitating discussion. "I learned to listen more than explain," noted one instructor. Hamdi (2023) and Raffone (2023) highlight that instructor facilitation is crucial for supporting critical engagement. Allowing students to negotiate meaning while providing guidance required balancing freedom and structure. Instructors reported that students often reached insightful interpretations independently, suggesting that facilitation supports learner agency and analytical skill development. Classroom observations indicated that when instructors allowed discussion to unfold, students were more engaged and willing to explore alternative perspectives, aligning with findings by Afrilyasanti et al. (2023).

Finally, instructors emphasized the feasibility and sustainability of integration when supported by careful planning and collaboration. They stressed the importance of selecting texts that are engaging, culturally appropriate, and challenging enough to provoke discussion. Tilakaratna (2022) and Chairat (2025) highlight that text selection and scaffolding are key to successful multimodal and CDA-based activities. Instructors also noted the benefit of gradual integration rather than treating critical media literacy as an add-on. By aligning activities with course objectives, instructors found that language learning outcomes could be maintained while developing critical skills. These findings demonstrate that critical media literacy is feasible, valuable, and adaptable in EFL classrooms when teachers are supported, prepared, and reflective.

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6. Conclusion & Implications

The findings of this study indicate that integrating critical media literacy into EFL classrooms significantly enhances students' awareness of how media texts convey meaning. Students moved from passive reception of content to actively analyzing word choices, visual elements, and framing techniques. They became more capable of identifying bias, selective representation, and underlying assumptions in media messages. This shift was not limited to classroom exercises but extended to students' personal engagement with media, showing the development of transferable analytical skills. The process helped learners understand that meaning is constructed rather than neutral, which is a foundational principle of critical literacy. Overall, the study demonstrates that sustained engagement with media texts, guided by structured analysis and discussion, fosters deeper reading comprehension, reflective thinking, and a more critical approach to both academic and everyday media.

Students' development of critical questioning was another significant outcome. At the beginning of the study, most questions were focused on vocabulary or surface understanding. Over time, students formulated analytical questions that explored purpose, audience, and the construction of meaning. These questions were applied not only in classroom discussions but also in real-life interactions with social media and news. Students described questioning as empowering, which contributed to confidence, participation, and agency in learning. The habit of asking focused questions enabled students to engage more deeply with texts, evaluate credibility, and consider multiple perspectives. This shows that critical media literacy can strengthen both cognitive and affective dimensions of language learning, supporting critical thinking, responsible information consumption, and reflective engagement.

The use of multimodal texts proved to be highly effective in sustaining student engagement. Videos, images, and digital media created familiarity and relevance, bridging classroom learning with students' everyday experiences. Multimodal analysis encouraged attention to multiple semiotic modes, helping students see how visuals, sound, and layout contribute to meaning alongside language. Students also participated in the production of multimodal texts, which deepened their understanding of persuasive techniques and the challenges of communicating ideas effectively. These experiences promoted critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration, making the learning process interactive and participatory. The integration of multimodal materials demonstrates that critical media literacy is not limited to

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written texts but can be adapted to contemporary, digital-rich learning environments that reflect the realities of learners' media experiences.

Classroom interaction underwent significant changes as students became more active participants in knowledge construction. Students increasingly consulted peers, negotiated meaning collectively, and expressed differing interpretations with respect and curiosity. The teacher's role shifted from providing answers to facilitating discussion and guiding reflection. This horizontal interaction encouraged dialogue, peer learning, and shared responsibility for comprehension. Quieter students became more involved, and classroom discussions became richer and more sustained. These findings indicate that critical media literacy activities support not only analytical skills but also communicative and social learning outcomes. They suggest that interactive, discussion-based approaches can improve learner confidence, collaboration, and critical engagement in EFL classrooms.

Instructor reflections emphasized both the benefits and practical considerations of implementing critical media literacy. Teachers observed growth in student engagement, confidence, and critical thinking while acknowledging the need for careful text selection, planning, and classroom management. Facilitating discussion rather than providing direct answers required adaptation, but instructors reported professional satisfaction and perceived improvement in students' analytical abilities. Gradual integration and collaborative preparation were seen as effective strategies for sustainability. These insights highlight that successful implementation requires teacher support, reflective practice, and alignment with course objectives. They also underscore the importance of preparing instructors for facilitation in ways that balance structure with open exploration of ideas.

The study has broader implications for EFL pedagogy. Integrating critical media literacy and multimodal discourse analysis provides a model for connecting language learning with real-world media practices. It develops transferable skills in analysis, evaluation, and reflection, which are essential for informed participation in contemporary digital environments. Moreover, these activities promote learner autonomy, engagement, and critical thinking, all of which are central to 21st-century language education. By combining analysis with production and discussion, classrooms can create dynamic, participatory learning spaces that prepare students to navigate media critically while improving English language proficiency.

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Finally, this study suggests several directions for future practice and research. Sustained implementation of critical media literacy across different EFL contexts could be explored to understand long-term effects. Further investigation into strategies that support diverse learners, including those with varying language proficiency and digital literacy, would help refine pedagogical approaches. Teacher training programs could incorporate explicit instruction in multimodal and CDA-based methods to enhance feasibility. Overall, the findings indicate that critical media literacy is a powerful framework for EFL education, fostering critical thinking, media awareness, and reflective engagement, while promoting practical, real-world skills that extend beyond the classroom.

Disclosure Statement

The research was conducted with significant contributions from all authors.

Declaration

We confirm that this work is original and is not under consideration by any other journal.

Transparency Statements

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

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Declaration of Interests

The authors report that there are no conflicts of interest.

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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