NEGOTIATING CRITICAL LITERACY IN JUNIOR HIGH: A TEACHER'S EXPLORATION USING FAIRY TALES

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Abstract: Critical literacy is context dependent in nature; its practice is negotiated by teachers with their local contexts (Comber & Simpson, 2001). While this context dependency has been widely acknowledged, not much research has explored the negotiation process. This study explores how teachers negotiate their local contexts to integrate critical literacy into their English classrooms. Action research was conducted using the Framework for Critical Literacy Negotiation in EFL Classrooms (Novianti, 2023), involving a junior high school teacher as part of a professional learning program. The results show that the integration of critical literacy is a complex process that requires negotiating multiple factors, including curriculum constraints, relevance to students' experiences, and local artifacts. The teacher also negotiated the incorporation of the principles of critical literacy pedagogy that encompass text analysis, bridging the word and the world, and social action into the instruction. The findings underscore the context-dependent nature of critical literacy practice, highlighting the need for teachers to adapt their approaches to their specific local environments.

Keywords: *critical literacy; framework of critical literacy negotiation; EFL teacher; junior high school*

INTRODUCTION

It is increasingly becoming more important for students to be not only literate, but critically literate in this complex global society. This importance highlights the need for the integration of critical literacy in the English classroom. However, enacting critical literacy in the classroom remains challenging both to experienced and novice teachers (Brownell, 2020; Gustine & Insani, 2019; Hidayat et al., 2020). The challenges range from teachers' lack of understanding of critical literacy to the complexity of classroom teaching and learning process.

Several studies show that many teachers still have difficulty in understanding critical literacy (Hidayat, 2020; Novianti, 2021; Novianti et al., 2020). More specifically, some teachers confuse critical literacy with other theories where the word "critical" is used, such as critical thinking and critical reading (Novianti, 2023). Teacher's conflicting beliefs and fear of inciting controversies by raising sensitive issues in the classroom also create a barrier in the practice of critical literacy (Novianti, 2023; Ranschaert, 2023). The challenges are increased by the non-existence of a single method to enact critical literacy. This absence, though, is desirable because critical literacy is contextual in nature. Its practice should be different from one classroom to another (Vasquez et al., 2019). Nevertheless, this context dependency also poses another challenge for teachers to adapt their instructional approaches to their local environments.

In response to a lack of methodological framework for the practice of critical literacy, many scholars have created various frameworks and models of critical literacy. Some of the most popularly adapted frameworks internationally include: Freebody and Luke's (1990) Four Resources Model; Janks' (2000) Four Interdependent Conceptual Dimensions; Lewison, Flint, and van Sluys' (2002) Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy; and Jones' (2006) Framework of Critical Literacy. These frameworks have been used in the context of English Language Teaching (Gustine & Insani, 2019; Murillo Egurrola & Flórez García, 2023; Setyaningsih, 2019) and language arts in general (Olifant & Boakye, 2022; Sotirovska & Vaughn, 2023). They have assisted teachers in translating the highly philosophical theory of critical literacy into classroom teaching and learning.

However, while helpful, the existing frameworks and models have not particularly addressed the complexities of classroom practice of critical literacy that require constant negotiation of the local contexts and happenings by the practicing teacher (Novianti, 2023; Trigos-Carrillo et al., 2021). Such studies have been conducted beyond the context of EFL. Comber and Simpson

(2001) and Vasquez et al. (2013) are among the few pioneering scholars who have examined how teachers negotiate the tension between their aspirations to teach critical literacy and the often-restrictive curricula. However, there is still a scarcity of such studies within the EFL contexts, although many have shown acknowledgment of the complex local contexts and realities that could shape a teacher's practice of critical literacy in the classroom. This study is an attempt to fill that void using a framework that specifically addresses the negotiation process of critical literacy (Novianti, 2023).

Critical literacy and its classroom practices

Critical literacy has been defined in various ways: as a philosophy, a tool or a lens, an approach to critical reading and thinking, and a pedagogical approach. There is, however, a fine line that connects the definitions, in which literacy is viewed as a social practice that is not neutral (e.g., Janks, 2000; Luke, 2012). Instead, literacy is socio-culturally and politically situated, and as such it bears some economic ramifications (Luke, 1995). Literacy is seen as a dynamic practice in a way that what constitutes literacy changes from time to time and varies from context to context (Vasquez et al., 2019). In the same vein, critical literacy views text as being not neutral, but as a social practice that is transformable, and the implication is that text can open opportunities to transform the social situations (Leander & Burriss, 2020).

The idea of critical literacy has been associated with the ground-breaking work of Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/1993/2005). This association is despite the fact that Freire himself never came up with the term 'critical literacy.' Abednia and Crookes (2019), in fact, argued that critical literacy was born at the same time as the inception of the idea of literacy. Others (e.g., Quadri, 2024) traced its origin way back to the time of Greek philosophers such as Socrates and Aristotle.

However, critical literacy practices only flourished later in the 1980s and1990s (Duboc & Ferraz, 2020), with a focus on adult education. The focus on adult students is sensible, considering the fact that Freire focused his work on adult literacy (Floyd, 2022), and many teachers were in doubt whether or not critical literacies could be taught to younger students (Comber, 2001). It was only later towards the end of the twentieth century that critical literacy came to be practiced with younger students, including pre-school children (Quadri, 2024). Since then, critical literacy has been practiced in various levels of education, across many disciplines, and in different contexts.

The framework for critical literacy negotiation

Although critical literacy has been widely practiced in various contexts, there are still many problems that remain unaddressed. As explained in the introduction, teachers ultimately find it difficult to embed critical literacy in their teaching and learning. While being helpful in translating the highly theoretical nature of critical literacy into practice, the existing frameworks do not really address the complexity of the negotiation process involved in the integration of critical literacy. To address this gap, the author used a framework for critical literacy negotiations to explore the process a teacher goes through in integrating critical literacy in her classroom, as illustrated in Figure 1.

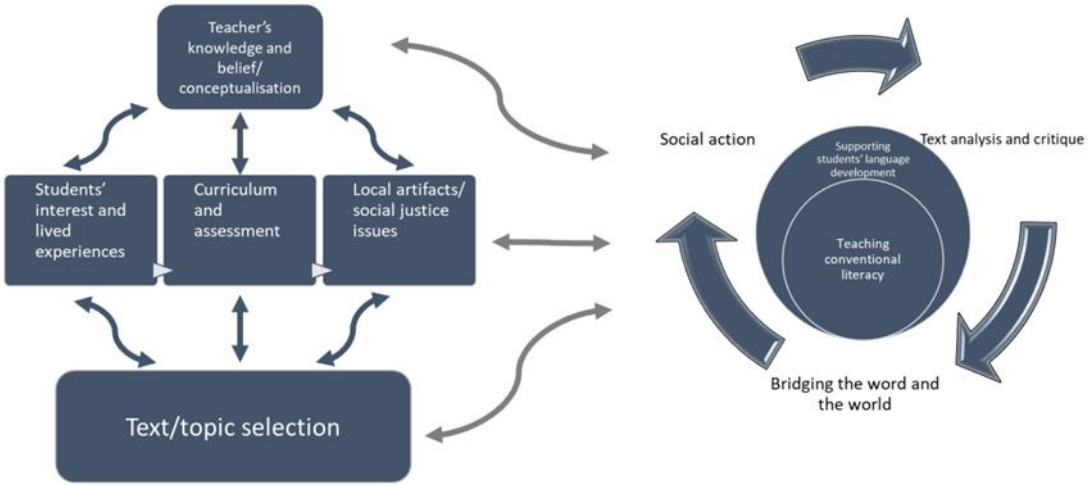

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Figure 1. *A framework of critical literacy negotiation (Novianti, 2023)*

In the framework for critical literacy negotiation in EFL classrooms, there are three core components of local negotiations that would eventually shape or inform the implementation of the three principles of critical literacy pedagogy synthesised from the existing instructional frameworks and models in EFL classrooms. Based on the framework, EFL teachers need to negotiate the local contexts and realities to integrate critical literacy in their teaching and learning through the use of literature. that include curriculum and assessment requirements, students' interests, identities, and lived experiences, as well as local artifacts and social justice issues. It recognises that teachers' negotiation with these local contexts and realities will influence the way they select the topic or text for teaching critical literacy and how they implement the three principles of critical literacy pedagogy in their classrooms.

The local contexts and realities

Curriculum and Standards

Critical literacy is generally not spelled out explicitly in the curriculum and serves as an add-on (Novianti et al., 2020; Weng, 2021) or additional activity. Whereas many frameworks do not consider this situation, the negotiation framework argues that the non-inclusion of critical literacy will discourage teachers from practicing critical literacy (Hidayat et al., 2020). Teachers' ability to negotiate a space for critical literacy integration in the existing curriculum is thus integral to the success of the integration.

Local artifacts and social (justice) issues

The ultimate goal of critical literacy is concerned with creating students who can be agents of social change (Bishop, 2023; Cherland & Harper, 2023). Many teachers assume this goal means they have to make students aware of social justice issues that they deem controversial and frequently raise parents' concern (Wessel-Powell & Bentley, 2022). However, as Janks (2012) has reminded, social action in the context of critical literacy practice should not always be concerned with the "big Politics" such as globalisation, wars, gender bias, religious issues, and other political issues with a big "P." Instead, she strongly recommends teachers to look at their own local community because there is politic even at the classroom or school level. These "little politics" that involve daily decision making is equally important because "[w]hile the social constructs who we are, so do we construct the social. This dialectic relationship is fluid and dynamic, creating possibilities for social action and change" (Janks, 2012, p. 151). Janks (2012) further argues that addressing local social issues that matter to students will be more meaningful and engaging for students.

In this context, the framework sees that local artifacts and or social justice issues play an important role in the design of a critical literacy instruction, as implied in the assertion made by Vasquez et al. (2019) that "'critical literacy' should look, feel, and sound different in different contexts" (p. 300). Teachers who believe in critical literacy as a pedagogical tool that can create agents of social change would negotiate the inclusion of local artifacts and/or social justice issues in their critical literacy instruction.

Students' lived experiences

Integrating students' lived experiences and background into the critical literacy instruction is highly advocated by Freire (Freire, 1970/1993/2005) who argued that as students face and respond to interconnected real-world challenges, their critical understanding deepens, leading to a sense of commitment and ongoing engagement. Concurring with Freire, the framework argues that teachers who seek to help students become critically literate would negotiate their lived experiences into their critical literacy instruction.

The three principles of critical literacy pedagogy

The framework further argues that the negotiation of the three important aspects of a teacher's local contexts and realities would shape the way the teacher implements any of the three principles of critical literacy pedagogy and the extent to which the implement these principles.

Text analysis and critique

With the importance of text in critical literacy, the first principle of critical literacy is concerned with developing students' critical stance towards text in a literal sense and in a broader sense of being the socio-political systems of their lives. Students can be taught to take this critical stance by being invited to analyse and critique the text. Janks (2013) advises to start the analysis and critique with a discussion on students' positions in favor of the text. Teachers can subsequently question why students take such a position and encourage them to take alternative positions and to reason why.

In the same vein, Jones (2006) commends teachers to "to peel away the layers through the consideration of perspective, positioning, and power" (p. 79) when analysing and critiquing a text. This way, students will be able to see in a better light the perspective(s) and power operating in the text. They will also be able to understand how the text has positioned them as a reader. In other words, the principle of text analysis and critique activity is aimed at creating an awareness in students of such important concepts as authorship, readership, ideology, and linguistic and semiotic systems that make up meanings.

Bridging the word and the world

The critical stance towards text should be transferrable to that towards the socio-political systems governing students' lives. Lewison et al. (2002) suggest that the teaching of critical literacy should enable students to use literacy for the political purposes in their lives. For the marginalised groups, for instance, critical literacy instruction can help provide more opportunities for students to participate in society and subvert their marginalisation.

By connecting the text to the world, this principle leads teachers to step out of the text into real life, especially that of students, facilitating the connection between the text and students' own lives and communities. This principle highlights the importance of selecting text and or local social justice issue that is relevant to students' lives and local communities, allowing students to make connections not only at the personal but larger social contexts.

Taking social action

Finally, in agreement with the critical literacy frameworks of Lewison et al. (2002) and (Jones, 2006), the proposed framework also sees social action as the ultimate goal of critical literacy practice and one of the most important principles of critical literacy pedagogy. As noted by Luke (2012), the ultimate aim of critical literacy is to "transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life" (p. 5) with schools and students as agents of change. Although social action is the ultimate and admittedly most difficult dimension to apply in critical literacy practices (Johnson & Keane, 2023), as Janks (2012) suggested, it can be done in the "small" world of students but with a possibility to have repercussion at the global level.

Previous research has shown that social action can take various forms in critical literacy classroom practice, for example, as simple as posting tweets to criticise and question the social construction of gender (Kunnath & Jackson, 2019) or penning letters to princesses to be true to themselves and not fall into the stereotypes (Novianti, 2023). As the previous research suggests, social action can take the form of a small step in students' lives, but this small step may reverberate in the more global context.

Fairy tales to teach critical literacy

Fairy tales are one of the most popular genres teachers use in teaching critical literacy. There are several reasons for this. First is because fairy tales appeal to and are popular among people of any age (Ashliman, 2004; Lüthi, 1970). In particular, fairy tales frequently feature character archetypes that young people are likely to be familiar with, making the tales more enjoyable as they can relate to the characters (Novianti, 2021). Another reason for the use fairy tales, specifically in EFL critical literacy instruction, is their wealth of language features. Ellis and Brewster (2014) argued that stories are deemed as appropriate for teaching language if thy offer certain features that can facilitate learning, such as repetition, rhythm or rhyme, and figurative language. Their argument is confirmed by Mora and Coyle (2023) who observed that many popular English folktales and fairy tales, when told by adults to children in their native language, use repetitive or predictable language that helps provide scaffolding for learning.

Ultimately, fairy tales provide a rich resource for teaching critical literacy by encouraging discussions on values and cultures, enabling guided questioning by teachers (Lam, 2022), and fostering the ability to interpret stories from multiple perspectives (Kim & Hachey, 2021), thus empowering students to critically analyse and question the moral values embedded in the tales.

METHOD

This qualitative participatory action research study (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; MacDonald, 2012) involved a junior high school teacher in West Java. The research design engaged both the teacher and the author/researcher as active participants, fostering a collaborative investigation. The author worked closely with the teacher, facilitating reflective practice and collaborative inquiry as part of the teacher's professional learning program. Data collection methods included video call sessions, unit plans, written reflections, and interviews. The Framework for Critical Literacy Negotiations (Novianti, 2023) guided the analysis,

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focusing on the teacher's process of integrating critical literacy into her classroom through the use of fairy tales. This approach enabled continuous learning and improvement for both the teacher and the researcher, enhancing their understanding of critical literacy and effective teaching strategies.

To explore the negotiation process that teachers go through as they integrate critical literacy in their EFL classrooms, the author collaborated with a teacher, given the pseudonym Eni, to design a critical literacy lesson. The recruitment began by approaching a group of teachers to whom the author gave a couple of lectures and workshops on literacy in EFL contexts in one regency in West Java. Invitation to be involved in the research was made via email, and only Eni decided to volunteer. Eni has been teaching English at a junior high school in a rural area in the West Java Province for almost 10 years. She taught English for grades 7 and 8, and in this research, she focused on integrating critical literacy into her grade 8 classroom. Eni, just like many teachers in the association, was quite recently introduced to critical literacy and was interested in learning more about it. She agreed to meet the author during the school holiday to learn more about critical literacy and how to practice it.

Data gathered for this study consisted of recordings of the video calling sessions between the author and the teacher, unit plan, written reflections, and interviews. In total, there were five transcripts of the video calling-sessions, three drafts of unit design, an essay of Eni's reflections, and a final interview transcript. The first video-calling session was to probe Eni's initial understandings of critical literacy and how Eni had/not practiced it in her classrooms. In the second meeting, the author gave a lecture on critical literacy and how to enact it in the classroom. Prior to the meeting, Eni was assigned to read two articles on critical literacy theory and practice. In the subsequent meetings, Eni and the author collaborated to design a critical literacy instruction. The final meeting was spent on reflections on the whole activity. To elicit more responses from Eni to the framework, the author did a semi-structured interview in the last meeting.

The author analysed the transcribed videos, interviews, and reflections thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). The unit plan was also analysed thematically based on the framework of critical literacy negotiation. This dual analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of both the teacher's professional development and the practical implementation of critical literacy in the educational setting, offering valuable insights for future pedagogical practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Eni's initial understandings of critical literacy

The results indicate that Eni had some limited understanding of critical literacy. Eni admitted that she did not study critical literacy in her college, but she was eager to learn about it. She was first introduced to the theory through one of the workshops on English teaching. When asked what she thinks critical literacy is in one of the first video-calling sessions, Eni replied "I think critical literacy is about thinking critically, being critical with what we read, like students questioning why the author has chosen to create a character this way or another." Her reply showed her confusion of the term with critical thinking and critical reading, a finding that is echoed by previous researchers (Hidayat, 2020). She also revealed that although she previously participated in a workshop on critical literacy, she could not really grasp the whole concept. She noted, "the trainer did not really explain the differences among those terms" (referring to critical literacy, critical thinking, and critical reading). She added that if she had learned about critical literacy in her college years, she would probably have better understanding of it and have had practiced it in her class.

In the next session on a discussion on critical literacy and its effective practice. The author and Eni read one article on the theory of critical literacy. Whilst Eni was enthusiastic in learning more about critical literacy, she became concerned with, in her own words, "How far can I be critical and invite my students to be the same?" She was particularly concerned with raising local social justice issues that might be deemed controversial in her classroom. However, after reading a couple of articles on teachers' practice of critical literacy and discussing the concept of critical literacy practice with the author using the proposed framework, she became aware that critical literacy deals not so much with controversial issues, but issues that matter to students' lives (Janks, 2018). She then decided to start observing issues around the classroom and school environment.

Another concern that she had was about ways to embed critical literacy in her teaching because the curriculum does not explicitly mandate teachers to teach critical literacy. Again, this problem was not new or unique to her situation. As previously mentioned, in many countries, including where English is taught as a foreign language, critical literacy is not specifically

included in the curriculum (Novianti et al., 2020; Weng, 2021). Eni was aware that if she would like to integrate critical literacy into her classroom, she would have to use knowledge of critical literacy and creativity to embed it into the existing curriculum.

The negotiation process in the unit design

In the two meetings following discussion on the theory and the framework of critical literacy practice, the author and the teacher discussed the local realities that Eni had to negotiate in order to integrate critical literacy into her classroom.

Local social justice issue

As Eni was preoccupied with the kind of social justice issue that she could raise as a topic in her lesson, for fear of inciting controversies, the planning began with the selection of a topic. After brainstorming some possible topics, from bullying to hoaxes, Eni decided to raise the issue of climate change.

Recently, a whirlwind hit one of the subdistricts where Eni's school is located. Dozens of houses were destroyed with several people injured and one teenager badly injured. The teenager went to Eni's school, and hence the disaster received special attention from the whole school community. One of the interesting comments Eni caught from her students and colleague teachers was a suggestion that the storm was caused by climate change. It had Eni contemplate about the disaster because the whirlwind actually occurred for the first time in her area. Eni became convinced that climate change had to a large extent caused the whirlwind. She was then interested in pursuing this issue by raising it as a topic of her critical literacy lesson.

Curriculum and standards

Another preoccupation that Eni had was concerned with how she would embed critical literacy into the unit translated from the mandated curriculum. After considering some of the possible English units, Eni decided to embed the practice in a unit on narrative. As background information, Eni's school was still transitioning into the Emancipated or *Merdeka* Curriculum. During the transition, she still largely used the Indonesian 2013 curriculum. Eni admitted that she was not sure how to translate the new curriculum into practice, a difficulty shared by many secondary school teachers (Rohmah et al., 2024). According to the Curriculum, every subject taught in school has its own competency standards, basic competencies, and indicators of learning. The curriculum is also generally geared towards character building.

Eni has chosen the following competency standards: (1) Understanding the meaning of functional written texts and simple short essays in the form of narrative to interact in the context of everyday life. (2) Expressing meaning in functional written texts and simple short essays in the form of narrative to interact in the context of everyday life.

The basic competencies for this unit include reading aloud narrative texts with intelligible pronunciation, stressing, and intonation; and composing a short narrative text using appropriate linguistic features. These basic competencies are translated into the following indicators of learning outcomes: (1) Identifying the meaning, type, and social function; structure; and linguistic elements of a simple, short narrative text. (2) Recognizing new vocabulary in a narrative text. (3) Identifying messages or moral values in a narrative text. (4) Reading aloud a narrative text with intelligible expressions, pronunciation and intonation. (5) Composing a simple, short narrative text. (6) Presenting a simple, short narrative text.

The next thing that Eni would like to do was to identify which character traits to teach in the unit. The main feature of the 2013 Curriculum is its focus on character building which requires teachers to explicitly mention which character traits they will cultivate in their students through their unit. In this case, Eni decided to focus on the character traits of environmental awareness, confidence, respect, responsibility, and mutual aid.

During discussion on curriculum links, Eni expressed her particular attraction to the idea of social action (Lewison et al., 2002), which she thought was highly relevant to character building. She commented:

> "I think through the social action part, I can really teach my students about certain characters [sic] in action instead of words. Usually, I will just give advice to my students that they should be nice, caring, etc. But, with social action, I think I can encourage students to build the character [traits] through real actions."

This comment shows how Eni was able to find the relevance of teaching critical literacy to the curriculum that she referenced in her teaching.

Students' lived experiences

In this part, Eni was encouraged to think about her students' lived experiences that will help determine whether the critical literacy lessons will be relevant

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and meaningful to them. Eni argued that the students all knew about the incident of the whirlwind, as it had been a topic of discussion for quite some time. When asked whether her students would understand the link between the recently occurring whirlwind and climate change, the topic that she would focus on, Eni was perplexed.

The author then invited Eni to think about her students' past reading experiences and exposure to the topic of climate change and how she could connect the whirlwind incident to it. Eni believed that her students had learned about climate change in other subjects, such as natural science and social science. When further questioned whether her students would think climate change had affected their local communities and their lives, Eni expressed her doubt. The author suggested Eni to have her students read supplementary texts (Nam, 2020) that will help make them more aware of the urgency of climate change for their lives.

Text selection

Eni has always used fairy tales for the teaching of the unit on narrative. However, she was at first unsure whether she could use fairy tales to raise the issue of climate change. The author then helped Eni brainstorm some of the fairy tales that may help raise the issue. Some of the fairy tales that emerged in the brainstorming along with some potential environmental issues included *Hansel and Gretel* (illegal logging), *Cinderella, Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (animal welfare), and *the Little Match Girl* (industries and pollution). Unfortunately, Eni did not think that any of them could be used in her critical literacy practice.

The author encouraged Eni to search for the potential fairy tales on the internet using the keywords "fairy tales" and "climate change." They came across an interesting cartoon titled *The Three Little Pigs and Climate Change* (UNECE, 2018) which is a twisted tale of *The Three Little Pigs* created by UNECE (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe) in collaboration with the Polish Ministry of the Environment and State Forests Poland. Both Eni and the author agreed that the fairy tale had so much potential to encourage students to be more aware of climate change.

Eni and the author agreed to use the original version of *The Three Little Pigs* juxtaposed with *The Three Little Pigs and Climate Change* (2018). Juxtaposing texts for critical literacy practice is advocated by McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2020). Both also agreed to use supplementary texts to build students' knowledge and understanding of climate change, such as news articles, videos, etc.

The implementation of the three principles of critical literacy pedagogy in the unit design

Text analysis and critiques

To implement this principle, in her first lesson plan draft, Eni referenced the competency standards formulated in the curriculum and her past teaching experiences. She planned to start by reading aloud the original fairy tale to model intelligible pronunciation and intonation for her students. She would move to the activities exploring students' comprehension of the story with a focus on linguistic features, namely past tense, adverbs of time, action verbs, and direct speech. From here, she planned to invite her students to identify the characters, settings, plot, and themes or meanings of the story. Finally, she would discuss the structure of narrative (orientation, complication, resolution/re-orientation).

So far, Eni had focused on the activities translated from the mandated curriculum. She had not touched on the text analysis and critique activity. The author then asked what Eni planned to do with this part of the critical literacy practice. She admitted she rarely encouraged her students to analyse a text critically. Most of the time, she would be satisfied if she could meet the requirements set by the curriculum.

Finally, after some further discussion and re-reading of the best practice articles, Eni came up with the idea of showing *The Three Little Pigs and Climate Change* after reading the original to her students so that they can have multiple perspectives of the story. Eni planned to ask multiple questions scaffolding her students' critical analysis of the text. Some of the questions she formulated with the help of the author, included: What kind of a house do you have? What is your house made of? What does your house protect you from? Is it a safe house? Is it environmentally friendly? The questions that focus more on the text consisted of: Whose house is the most environmentally friendly among the three pigs? Can we make a house that is environmentally friendly but also sturdy?

Bridging the word and the world

Eni's designed activities thus far revolved around the text and its connection to students' personal lives. The author reminded Eni about her initial reasons for raising the topic of climate change, which was the current whirlwind attacking her area, to help with the implementation of the second principle. This part of the framework is indeed

designed to help teachers connect the instruction to students' lives and the local communities.

Eni decided to lead students to be aware of how climate change that happened at the global level had caused the whirlwind to happen to her sub-district for the first time. In the same vein, she would encourage students to think about how their daily activities have contributed to climate change at the local and also global level. This part of the plan reflects Eni's growing understanding that the local action is linked to and can reverberate at the global level (Janks, 2012).

Eni admitted that she needed to do a lot of searching and independent learning to teach this part to her students. Aided by the author, she finally came up with ideas for this discussion topic. She would highlight students' habits in managing trash, such as trashing, burning trash instead of composting it, not sorting trash, and use of too much plastic. She would ask her students to do their own research on how their day-to-day activities can contribute to local and global climate change.

Taking social action

In accordance with the curriculum mandate of teaching students the basic competence of creating and presenting a short narrative, Eni would ask her students to individually create a short narrative text of their own inspired from the fairy tales they have read. She planned to use such prompts as: If you were a fairy tale character who could build your own environmentally friendly house, who would you be and how would you build your house? If you were a fairy tale character, who would you be and what would you do to save the environment?" She was hoping that her students would come up with interesting ideas. Recreating a fairy tale in the context of critical literacy practice is equivalent to "reconstructing text, which is considered to be a continuing process of transformation" (Foley, 2017, p. 111).

Eni also came up with some interesting ideas of integrating multimodality in the composition. She explained that her students always appreciated her multimodality-imbued lesson, especially when students were allowed to create a video, take pictures, make drawing, and do other additional activities to complement their writing. Some of her ideas were to encourage students to create a video, a comic strip, a drawing, or even to re-enact the re-written fairy tale into a play that they can perform in front of the class.

Finally, for collaborative action research project, Eni would invite her ninth-grade students to think of ways of promoting good understanding about climate change and its effects to the people around them, such as parents, brothers/sisters, neighbors, etc. Eni also believed that it would be a good idea for the students to retell the twisted tale they created to the people around them as a form of educating people on climate change. Eni would further encourage students to think about what they could do both individually and collaboratively to save the environment.

Eni's reflections

There are at least two themes generated from the analysis of Eni's reflections. First is Eni's growing understanding and confidence of critical literacy practice aided by the framework, and second is Eni's preoccupations of the possible challenges she will encounter in practicing critical literacy.

In her response to how the framework has helped her design a critical literacy practice, she said, "The framework gave me a step-by-step guideline, really helpful for teachers... [and] it also helped me remember that critical literacy is different from critical thinking." She perceived the framework to be "understanding" of her day-to-day struggles in teaching. She remarked that most of the time the government enforced a new theory or concept on teachers, without really heeding the teachers' preparedness and day-to-day teaching realities.

Despite her rising confidence, the final interview with her revealed that she was still in doubt whether she would be able to practice her designed unit. She was more concerned with the upcoming national examination, which was only several months away, a concern shared by other teachers in a similar situation (Hidayat et al., 2020). She confessed that she would probably focus more on preparing her students to pass the examination than on teaching them critical literacy. However, she also hinted on the possibility to practice critical literacy in her classrooms if she thought her students were sufficiently prepared for the exam, adding, "It [the critical literacy lesson] will be a kind of refreshing [activity] for my students. They can do something else that is more meaningful and release the stress of facing the exam."

As with many other EFL teachers, Eni also saw her students' English proficiency as an obstacle in practicing critical literacy. She tended to believe that students with low level of English proficiency will have low critical literacy skills, a myth that has been debunked by previous researchers (Cho & Johnson, 2021). She assumed that she would spend much of her teaching time on reading

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comprehension and have little to almost no time to practice critical literacy.

Finally, Eni expressed her concern with having to dedicate much of her time and energy to design a critical literacy unit. She noted how teaching critical literacy demanded her to be informed about and critical of social justice issues. Eni's concern attests to the argument of Hsieh and Cridland-Hughes (2021) that to be able to teach critical literacy, teachers themselves should be critically literate.

CONCLUSION

The whole sessions with Eni clearly show that practicing critical literacy for teachers, even those who have years of teaching experience, is challenging. The framework highlights the negotiation process that occurred throughout the collaboration with Eni in designing critical literacy-imbued instruction. It emphasises the importance of negotiating local contexts and realities, such as curriculum and assessment requirements, students' lived experiences, and local artifacts and social justice issues. These negotiations influence the selection of topics or texts and the implementation of critical literacy principles in the classroom.

The challenges revealed by Eni, which confirm those unearthed by previous studies, particularly highlight the importance of teacher education programs in preparing pre-service teachers for their future practice of critical literacy (Novianti, 2021, 2023; Sánchez & Chapetón, 2021; Sotirovska & Vaughn, 2023). Teacher education programs should equip pre-service teachers with appropriate understanding of critical literacy principles and goals and prepare them for the possible challenges of enacting critical literacy appropriately in their future classrooms. Pre-service teachers should be ultimately prepared to navigate through the complexity of enacting critical literacy in classroom settings. Teaching practicing or in-service teachers about critical literacy and how to effectively practice it is equally important. The research indicates that experienced teachers may be interested in integrating critical literacy into their classrooms but may not know how to do so. In this context, the framework proposed here can be an alternative.

Admittedly, the complexity of teaching critical literacy in EFL context is not discussed elaborately in this article because the focus was more on how teachers were prepared to practice critical literacy and how the proposed framework could help guide them through the negotiation process. Eni's experience provided insights into the day-to-day challenges that teachers face in their teaching and learning activities. Without proper understanding and encouragement to practice critical literacy, teachers will continue viewing the practice as a burden to their already full workloads.

The newly implemented emancipated curriculum, *Kurikulum Merdeka*, offers flexibility (Ananda, 2022; Wahyuningsih, 2022) that can help teachers navigate these challenges, integrating critical literacy into their teaching in a more manageable and effective way. This flexibility is crucial for negotiating local contexts and realities, which shape the implementation of critical literacy pedagogy. Having said that, EFL teachers still need to carefully negotiate with their local contexts and realities to help determine the appropriate topic or text for their instruction and to guide their implementation of the critical literacy principles in the classroom. The *Kurikulum Merdeka* allows teachers to adapt the framework to their unique classroom contexts, making the practice of critical literacy more feasible and less burdensome.

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