

Exploring Critical Pedagogy through English Social Media Content in a High School Classroom

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Abstract

This research examines how Indonesian senior high school students engage with English language material on social media, drawing on critical pedagogy principles. Through in-depth interviews with two students, the conversations were analyzed to explore their interpretation of digital texts, encompassing underlying power dynamics and ideologies. Key results indicate that social media serves as an enjoyable platform for English learning, such as via videos and posts, yet linguistic challenges frequently impede thorough comprehension and critical analysis. Factors like apprehension about errors, anxiety, and imbalanced classroom dialogues result in students remaining passive and engaging only superficially with topics. Nonetheless, they are beginning to recognize diverse viewpoints on societal issues, although translating these insights into action proves difficult. The study concludes that fostering critical thinking in English education requires a comprehensive strategy, incorporating language assistance, supportive atmospheres, and inclusive discussions to empower student development. Further research should involve extended periods and wider contexts to advance digital content literacy.

Keywords: *Critical Pedagogy; Social Media; Think Critically; Understanding*

Abstract

Penelitian ini meneliti bagaimana siswa sekolah menengah atas di Indonesia berinteraksi dengan materi berbahasa Inggris di media sosial, dengan mengadopsi prinsip-prinsip pedagogi kritis. Melalui wawancara mendalam dengan dua siswa, percakapan tersebut dianalisis untuk memahami interpretasi mereka terhadap teks digital, termasuk dinamika kekuasaan dan ideologi yang mendasarinya. Hasil utama menunjukkan bahwa media sosial berfungsi sebagai platform yang menyenangkan untuk belajar bahasa Inggris, seperti melalui video dan postingan, namun tantangan linguistik sering kali menghambat pemahaman mendalam dan analisis kritis. Faktor seperti kekhawatiran tentang kesalahan, kecemasan, dan dialog kelas yang tidak seimbang membuat siswa tetap pasif dan hanya terlibat secara dangkal dengan topik. Meskipun demikian, mereka mulai mengenali sudut pandang yang beragam tentang isu-isu sosial, meskipun mengubah wawasan tersebut menjadi tindakan terbukti sulit. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa membina pemikiran kritis dalam pendidikan bahasa Inggris memerlukan strategi komprehensif, yang mencakup bantuan keterampilan bahasa, suasana yang mendukung, dan diskusi yang inklusif, untuk memberdayakan perkembangan siswa. Penelitian lanjutan sebaiknya melibatkan periode yang lebih panjang dan konteks yang lebih luas untuk meningkatkan literasi konten digital.

Kata Kunci: *Berfikir Kritis; Media Sosial; Pedagogi Kritis; Pemahaman*

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INTRODUCTION

The development of social media has brought fundamental changes in how adolescents access information, construct understanding, and shape their social identities. For senior high school students, social media no longer functions merely as a means of communication. Instead, it has become a primary space where global discourses are produced, circulated, and interpreted. Research by Anderson and Jiang (2018) shows that adolescents tend to rely on social media as their main source of

news and public opinion, often replacing the role of mainstream media and formal educational institutions. In this context, English serves as a dominant language that carries global values, ideologies, and interests into students' local experiences. This makes social media not just a place for entertainment, but also an arena where major global ideas enter their daily lives.

However, the dominance of social media as a source of information also presents serious challenges. The rapid and massive flow of digital content includes not only educational information but also hoaxes, misinformation, cultural stereotypes, and biased social representations. Without adequate critical thinking skills, students risk becoming passive consumers who accept and reproduce dominant discourses without reflection. Livingstone and Sefton-Green (2016) reveal that although young people often possess high technical competence in using digital technologies, this competence is not necessarily accompanied by analytical skills to evaluate the meanings, interests, and ideologies embedded in media content. For example, they might be easily influenced by viral videos or popular posts without questioning who created them or the purpose behind them.

From the perspective of critical education, this condition underscores the importance of critical pedagogy as an epistemological and pedagogical foundation. Freire (2005) views education as a practice of freedom, in which learners are encouraged to develop critical consciousness through processes of dialogue, reflection, and transformative action. Critical pedagogy rejects the assumption that education is neutral and instead understands learning as a social and political practice inseparable from power relations and ideological interests. This means education is not just about memorizing facts, but about questioning how knowledge is formed and used to maintain or change social structures.

In line with this view, within media literacy studies, Kellner and Share (2007) develop the concept of critical media literacy, which requires learners to analyze how media constructs meaning, influences public opinion, and reproduces or challenges power structures. Giroux (2020) emphasizes that digital spaces should be understood as pedagogical spaces in which students learn to read, question, and critically negotiate dominant discourses. Thus, social media cannot be positioned merely as a supplementary learning tool, but rather as an ideological text that demands critical reading. For instance, when students see ads or news on Instagram, they need to learn to identify how such content promotes certain values, such as consumerism or Western cultural norms.

Although theoretical frameworks in critical pedagogy and media literacy have developed substantially, empirical research in the context of language education, particularly EFL (English as a Foreign Language), remains limited. Most studies focus on the development of critical thinking skills within formal classroom environments, using texts that are selected and mediated by teachers. Yulianto (2020), for example, shows that the application of critical pedagogy principles in EFL instruction at the senior high school level can yield pedagogical benefits, such as increased language awareness and enriched learning experiences. However, in that study, critical pedagogy is positioned more as an instructional approach than as a cognitive framework used by students to independently interpret social reality.

In this context, Yulianto's (2020) study and similar research still exhibit several limitations. First, critical pedagogy tends to be understood as a practice that occurs primarily within the classroom and under teacher control, leaving students' roles as interpretive subjects insufficiently explored. Second, the texts analyzed are generally curriculum-adjusted instructional materials rather than authentic digital texts that students encounter in their everyday lives. Third, research findings tend to emphasize general outcomes of implementing critical pedagogy, such as improved language proficiency, without examining in detail the cognitive and ideological processes through which students interpret the social meanings of texts. This aligns with Buckingham's (2003) argument that media literacy education often becomes trapped in a technocratic approach, focusing primarily on technical media skills rather than fostering critical awareness of representation, ideology, and power relations. McLaren (2015) similarly

asserts that without a critical pedagogical approach, education risks reproducing cultural and political domination through language and media.

From here, it is clear that there is a gap in research: there is a lack of in-depth empirical studies exploring how senior high school students understand and practice critical pedagogy when interpreting English-language social media content as part of their everyday digital experiences. Therefore, this study aims to explore senior high school students' understanding of critical pedagogy in interpreting English-language social media content by positioning students as active subjects in the process of meaning construction. Specifically, the study seeks to examine how students understand the concept of critical pedagogy; how they interpret the social, cultural, and ideological meanings embedded in English-language social media content; the extent to which they demonstrate critical awareness of bias, power relations, and dominant discourses; and the obstacles they encounter in applying such critical perspectives. In addition, this study seeks to understand how students' classroom learning experiences influence the ways they read and respond to digital content critically. The urgency of this research lies in the pressing need to equip students with critical consciousness so that they can navigate digital spaces reflectively, ethically, and responsibly, particularly amid the dominance of global discourses mediated through the English language. Thus, this study is expected to provide practical insights for integrating critical pedagogy into the EFL curriculum, so that students not only learn the language, but also learn to question the world around them.

METHODS

This study used a qualitative approach based on critical pedagogy to look into how senior high school students understand English-language social media content. A qualitative approach means we focus on deep stories and thoughts from people, not just numbers or quick facts. Critical pedagogy, from thinkers like Paulo Freire (2005), is a way of thinking that stresses the need to be aware of unfairness in society, power, and ideas. Here, the study wanted to see how students not only read social media posts but also question the meanings behind them, like who has power in those posts and how certain ideas are pushed forward.

To choose the participants, the researchers used purposive sampling, which means picking people on purpose based on specific reasons that fit the study's goals. In this case, two senior high school students were selected because they were very active on English social media, like Instagram or Twitter, and they often joined classroom talks about social issues such as gender equality, the environment, or politics. This careful choice made sure the participants had useful experiences, so the data could give rich insights into the topic.

Data was gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews done in Indonesian. Semi-structured interviews mean there was a main list of questions prepared ahead, but the interviewer could ask more based on what the participants said to get deeper details. Using Indonesian was important so participants could share their views freely without worrying about English language limits, letting them express their real thoughts and experiences naturally. Each interview was recorded with an audio device to keep it accurate, and then it was transcribed verbatim, which means every word, pause, and expression was written down exactly as spoken, without changing anything.

After collecting the data, it was analyzed using a thematic approach following Braun and Clarke's framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a standard way to find patterns and main ideas in qualitative data. The process started by reading the transcripts many times to spot common patterns, then grouping similar ideas into key themes. This analysis was done inductively, meaning the themes came from the data itself, not forced from outside theories. But it was also guided by critical pedagogy and critical media literacy views (Hobbs, 2011), which helped interpret how students dealt with meaning, power, and ideas in digital texts. For example, the researchers looked at whether students

noticed how social media content might promote certain ideas, like capitalism or gender stereotypes, and how they used their own power to understand or challenge that content. In this way, the study not only described what students thought but also analyzed the social and cultural context behind it, giving a deeper understanding of how media education can help students become more critical about online information (Bhalla et al., 2025).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents an in-depth and integrated analysis of the findings derived from qualitative interviews with senior high school students. Using thematic analysis, students' experiences are examined through the lens of critical pedagogy, critical literacy, and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. The discussion does not merely describe students' responses, but critically interprets how linguistic ability, emotional factors, and classroom power relations shape students' engagement with English-language social media content and their development of critical awareness.

Social Media as a Primary Space for English Exposure and Meaning Construction

The findings indicate that social media has become the primary space where students encounter English in their everyday lives. Participants consistently reported that their engagement with English occurs more frequently through digital content such as films, music, and social media posts rather than through formal classroom materials. One participant explained that English learning felt easier and more enjoyable when it was connected to entertainment content, such as watching films or listening to music. Another participant similarly noted that exposure to English through songs and online texts helped them learn new vocabulary without the pressure commonly associated with school-based learning. For instance, they mentioned how lyrics in popular songs or captions on Instagram posts introduced words related to emotions, technology, or current events, making the language feel practical and fun rather than just a list of rules to memorize.

These responses suggest that English learning increasingly takes place in informal and digitally mediated environments. Unlike textbooks, social media content is perceived as authentic, relevant, and emotionally engaging. This finding aligns with Livingstone and Sefton-Green's (2016) argument that young people develop literacy practices primarily through participation in digital culture rather than through formal instruction alone. From a critical pedagogy perspective, this shift is significant because it places students' lived experiences at the center of meaning-making processes. In other words, by using content that students already interact with daily, education can become more meaningful and less disconnected from their real-world interests, encouraging them to explore language in a way that feels personal and motivating.

Freire (2005) emphasizes that education should begin with learners' concrete realities. In this study, social media content functions as a generative context that reflects students' daily encounters with global discourses mediated through English. However, while social media provides abundant exposure to English, the findings reveal that exposure alone does not guarantee critical engagement. Students may recognize English as familiar and accessible, yet still struggle to interrogate the social meanings and ideological positions embedded in digital texts. For example, they might enjoy memes or viral videos without questioning how these posts reinforce certain cultural norms or power structures, such as idealized body images or consumerist values promoted in English-language ads.

Beyond functioning as a source of language exposure, social media also shapes how students construct meaning and interpret social reality through English. Participants implicitly positioned social media as a space where English feels "alive" and relevant, rather than abstract or academic. This perception suggests that students do not experience English merely as a school subject, but as a medium through which global narratives circulate. Such experiences are pedagogically significant

because they blur the boundary between formal education and everyday life. For instance, discussing trending topics on Twitter or TikTok can help students see English as a tool for sharing ideas about world events, friendships, or personal challenges, making it more relatable and less like a distant academic requirement.

From the perspective of critical pedagogy, this blurring presents both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, Freire (2005) argues that education should be rooted in learners' realities to avoid alienation. Social media texts, as part of students' daily routines, offer authentic material that resonates with their interests. On the other hand, when these texts are consumed without critical mediation, students may unconsciously internalize dominant ideologies embedded in global English discourse. Pennycook (2017) warns that English often carries assumptions about modernity, progress, and authority that may marginalize local perspectives. The findings suggest that while students enjoy engaging with English on social media, they are not yet fully equipped to critically interrogate these ideological dimensions. To address this, educators could incorporate guided discussions or activities that encourage students to analyze how social media content reflects or challenges societal values, helping them build skills to navigate digital spaces more thoughtfully and independently.

Linguistic Constraints and Surface-Level Engagement with English Texts

Despite frequent exposure to English-language social media content, participants reported considerable difficulty in understanding texts, particularly those addressing social or public issues. One participant explained that English posts often required repeated and careful reading to grasp their meaning, sometimes needing to use translation tools or ask friends for help, which could take extra time and make the process feel frustrating or time-consuming. Another participant noted that unfamiliar vocabulary made it difficult to identify the author's stance, especially in argumentative or opinion-based texts, where words like "bias" or "equity" could be confusing without prior knowledge, leading to misunderstandings about what the post was really trying to say or how the author felt about the topic. For example, they described struggling with posts about climate change or political debates, where complex terms hindered their ability to follow the main ideas or arguments presented, often leaving them with only a partial picture of the topic and feeling unsure about the full context.

These findings indicate that students' engagement with English social media texts often remains at a surface level of comprehension. Students focus primarily on decoding vocabulary and basic meanings, rather than analyzing how texts construct arguments, represent social actors, or promote particular ideologies. This surface-level approach means they might understand a post's literal content, like a simple story or fact, but miss the underlying messages, such as how the language portrays certain groups or influences opinions, which could include subtle ways of shaping how people think about society or encouraging certain behaviors. Wallace (2003) argues that critical literacy requires readers to move beyond literal comprehension toward questioning how texts position readers and whose interests they serve. However, in EFL contexts, limited language proficiency often prevents students from reaching this level of analysis, leaving them stuck at basic understanding instead of exploring deeper implications, like why certain words are chosen to make an idea seem more important or true, or how it might affect real-world views.

Kellner and Share (2007) emphasize that critical media literacy involves recognizing bias, power relations, and ideological assumptions within media texts. The findings of this study suggest that students' limited linguistic resources constrain their ability to engage critically with English-language social media content. As a result, students may appear passive or uncritical, not because they lack awareness, but because language barriers restrict their access to deeper levels of meaning. For instance, they might scroll past a post about social justice without realizing how the wording reinforces stereotypes or dominant viewpoints, simply due to not fully grasping the nuances in the text, which could perpetuate unfair ideas without anyone noticing or challenging them. This lack of deep

engagement can make social media feel less like a tool for learning and more like a source of confusion or entertainment, reducing its potential as an educational resource.

The persistence of surface-level engagement highlights the structural challenges of implementing critical pedagogy in EFL contexts. Participants' repeated emphasis on vocabulary difficulty indicates that linguistic barriers consume much of their cognitive effort. As a result, students prioritize understanding "what the text says" rather than questioning "why the text says it in that way." This finding reinforces the argument that critical pedagogy cannot be separated from language development in EFL classrooms, as building vocabulary and grammar skills is essential before students can tackle critical analysis. Without this foundation, efforts to encourage deeper thinking might feel overwhelming or ineffective, potentially discouraging students from trying at all and making them avoid complex texts altogether. For example, if a student can't understand basic words, they won't have the energy or confidence to think about bigger questions like who benefits from the post's message or how it reflects societal power dynamics.

According to Fairclough (1995), critical discourse analysis requires attention to lexical choices, framing, and representation. However, such analysis presupposes a level of linguistic competence that allows readers to notice subtle patterns in language use. In this study, students' limited proficiency restricts their access to these analytical tools. Consequently, students may accept English-language social media content as neutral or factual, even when it contains ideological bias. This underscores the importance of integrating linguistic scaffolding with critical inquiry, rather than treating critical pedagogy as an add-on activity. For example, teachers could start with simple exercises to build confidence, like discussing familiar posts before moving to more complex ones, ensuring that language skills support rather than hinder critical engagement. Additionally, providing glossaries or interactive tools for vocabulary could help students gradually build the skills needed to analyze texts more deeply, turning surface-level reading into a habit of questioning and understanding the world around them through digital content. Over time, this integrated approach could empower students to not only read English better but also critically evaluate the information they encounter daily on social media platforms.

Fear, Anxiety, and the Affective Dimension of Critical Pedagogy

A central theme emerging from the data concerns students' fear and anxiety when asked to express their opinions in English during classroom discussions. Participants reported that although they often had ideas or opinions about social issues, fear of making grammatical or pronunciation mistakes prevented them from speaking. One participant explained that speaking English in front of peers felt intimidating, particularly when unsure about language accuracy, like worrying if their sentences sounded right or if they used the wrong words. Another participant expressed concern about being judged or criticized if their opinion differed from others, such as feeling embarrassed if classmates laughed at their accent or disagreed strongly. For example, they described avoiding sharing thoughts on topics like gender equality or environmental problems because they feared looking silly or being seen as less smart.

These findings highlight the affective dimension of critical pedagogy, which is often overlooked in discussions of critical thinking. Freire (2005) argues that dialogue must take place in an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect. When students associate English with fear and embarrassment, dialogue becomes constrained, limiting opportunities for critical reflection and collective meaning-making. In simple terms, if students feel scared to talk, they can't fully join in conversations that help them think deeply about important issues, and the class misses out on their unique viewpoints. This emotional barrier stops the kind of open sharing that critical pedagogy aims for, where everyone learns from each other in a supportive way.

Cummins (2000) and Norton (2013) emphasize that language learning is inseparable from issues of identity and power. In this study, fear operates as a silencing mechanism that restricts whose voices are heard in the classroom. Students with lower confidence in English proficiency may internalize feelings of inadequacy, leading them to withdraw from discussions even when they possess emerging critical awareness. This suggests that emotional safety is a crucial prerequisite for the successful implementation of critical pedagogy in EFL classrooms. For instance, a student might have strong opinions about social justice but stay quiet because they worry about not sounding "perfect," which makes them feel powerless and less likely to participate actively.

The affective barriers identified in this study reveal that fear is not an individual weakness, but a socially constructed response shaped by classroom norms and expectations. Participants' fear of making mistakes reflects an educational culture that implicitly prioritizes correctness over meaning-making. When language accuracy becomes the primary measure of competence, students may perceive errors as failures rather than as part of the learning process. In other words, the classroom environment often values getting things right over exploring ideas, which can make students anxious about trying new things or sharing imperfect thoughts. This setup discourages risk-taking, where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities instead of problems.

Freire (2005) critiques what he terms the "banking model" of education, in which learners are positioned as passive recipients who fear deviation from correctness. Although the classroom practices described by participants are not explicitly authoritarian, the fear of speaking suggests remnants of such a model. Giroux (2020) further argues that critical pedagogy requires educators to recognize emotional dimensions of learning, as emotions shape students' willingness to engage in dialogue. The findings indicate that without addressing fear and anxiety, critical pedagogy risks becoming inaccessible to students who lack confidence in their linguistic abilities. To make this better, teachers could create a safe space by encouraging everyone to share without judgment, using activities like group brainstorming or anonymous feedback, so students feel supported and more open to expressing their thoughts on social issues.

Silence, Unequal Participation, and Classroom Power Relations

The findings further reveal persistent patterns of silence and unequal participation during classroom discussions. Participants described classroom interactions in which a small number of students consistently dominated discussions, while others remained silent. One participant explained that remaining silent felt safer than speaking, as it reduced the risk of making mistakes, like saying the wrong word or stumbling over sentences. Another participant observed that the same students often spoke repeatedly, while quieter students were rarely invited to contribute, perhaps because the teacher didn't call on them or they didn't raise their hands. For example, in a discussion about social media's impact on society, a few confident students might share long opinions, leaving others to just listen without adding their thoughts.

These patterns indicate that classroom discussions are shaped by power relations that privilege fluency, confidence, and assertiveness. Giroux (1988) conceptualizes silence as a form of passive resistance that reflects unequal power dynamics within educational settings. In this study, silence should not be interpreted as disengagement or lack of critical thinking, but as a rational response to classroom environments that do not adequately support diverse forms of participation. In simple terms, students might stay quiet not because they don't care or don't have ideas, but because the setup makes it hard for everyone to join in equally, favoring those who are bold or skilled in English.

Buckingham (2003) warns that educational practices claiming to promote critical engagement may inadvertently reproduce inequality if they fail to address participation structures. From a critical pedagogy perspective, it is essential to examine not only the content of classroom discussions, but also the conditions under which dialogue takes place. Without intentional efforts to redistribute voice,

critical pedagogy risks reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than challenging them. This means teachers need to think about how to make sure all students get a chance to speak, like using turn-taking rules or small group talks, so that the class doesn't just hear from the loudest voices.

Silence in classroom discussions should be understood as a meaningful social practice rather than an absence of participation. Participants' descriptions of classroom dynamics suggest that silence functions as a strategy to avoid exposure and judgment. This interpretation aligns with Giroux's (1988) view that student behaviors must be read politically, as responses to power structures rather than individual dispositions. For instance, a student might choose to be quiet to avoid feeling embarrassed or criticized, which is a smart way to protect themselves in an uneven environment, rather than just being shy or uninterested.

Moreover, the dominance of certain students in discussions reflects unequal access to symbolic capital, particularly linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). Students who possess greater fluency and confidence in English are more likely to be perceived as knowledgeable, reinforcing their authority in classroom discourse. Meanwhile, quieter students may internalize a sense of inferiority, further entrenching silence. From a critical pedagogy standpoint, this dynamic is problematic because it reproduces hierarchies that critical education seeks to challenge. The findings suggest that teachers play a crucial role in mediating participation and redistributing voice to create genuinely dialogic learning spaces. To do this, educators could encourage quieter students by asking open questions or using activities that don't require speaking up in front of the whole class, helping everyone feel included and valued in discussions about important topics.

Emerging Critical Awareness and the Limits of Praxis

Despite linguistic, emotional, and structural constraints, the findings indicate that students demonstrate emerging critical awareness through engagement with English-language social media issues. Participants acknowledged that classroom discussions helped them recognize multiple perspectives and broaden their understanding of social issues. One participant stated that discussions made them realize that social issues are complex and cannot be understood from a single viewpoint, such as seeing how a post about racism might have different meanings depending on who is reading it or sharing it, which could depend on personal background or cultural views. Another participant mentioned that talking about these topics in class opened their eyes to ideas they hadn't thought about before, like how social media can spread both good and bad information about things like equality or the environment, including how viral posts might promote positive changes but also spread misinformation that harms certain groups. For instance, they talked about learning to question why some posts get more attention than others, revealing hidden biases in how information is shared online.

This suggests that students are in the early stages of developing critical consciousness. Freire (2005) conceptualizes critical consciousness as a process involving reflection and action (praxis). In this study, students demonstrate reflective awareness but struggle to transform reflection into action, particularly in the form of active participation and dialogue. This gap between reflection and action highlights the limitations of critical pedagogy when linguistic and affective barriers are not adequately addressed. In simple terms, students can think about and understand issues better, but they find it hard to actually do something about it, like speaking up or debating in class, because of language worries or fear of judgment, which makes them hold back even when they have valuable insights to share. This creates a cycle where their growing awareness stays inside their minds without leading to real-world changes or classroom contributions.

Yulianto (2020) argues that the implementation of critical pedagogy in Indonesian EFL contexts is a gradual process that requires sustained pedagogical support. The findings of this study support this argument, showing that while students begin to question social meanings and recognize ideological dimensions of texts, they require structured linguistic scaffolding, emotional support, and

inclusive discussion practices to fully enact critical pedagogy. For example, teachers might need to provide simple language tools, like word lists or sentence starters, along with a safe space where students feel okay to share without being criticized, so they can build on their growing awareness step by step. This could include role-playing activities where students practice expressing opinions in a low-pressure way, helping them gain confidence over time and turn passive thinking into active engagement.

Discussion

The gap between reflection and action identified in this study highlights a central tension in critical pedagogy. While students demonstrate the ability to recognize multiple perspectives and question social issues, they struggle to enact this awareness through dialogue and debate. This tension reflects what Freire (2005) describes as incomplete praxis, where reflection is not yet accompanied by transformative action. Basically, it's like knowing something is wrong but not being able to change it or talk about it confidently, which stops the full process of learning and acting on important ideas. For example, a student might reflect on how a social media post promotes unfair stereotypes but feel too anxious to discuss it in class, leaving the issue unaddressed and the learning incomplete.

This limitation should not be interpreted as failure, but as part of an ongoing developmental process. Yulianto (2020) emphasizes that in EFL contexts, critical pedagogy requires time, repetition, and sustained support. The findings suggest that students are at a transitional stage, moving from passive consumption toward critical engagement. However, without deliberate pedagogical strategies that integrate language development, emotional safety, and inclusive participation, this transition may remain incomplete. Thus, critical pedagogy in EFL classrooms should be understood as a long-term commitment rather than a short-term instructional technique. For instance, ongoing activities like regular group talks or follow-up projects can help students practice turning their thoughts into actions over time, making the learning process more complete and effective. This could involve creating student-led projects where they analyze social media trends and present findings, gradually building their skills and confidence in a supportive environment.

Taken as a whole, the findings and discussion demonstrate that English-language social media content offers significant pedagogical potential for fostering critical awareness among senior high school students. However, this potential is mediated by linguistic competence, emotional readiness, and classroom power relations. Students are not passive or indifferent; rather, they are negotiating complex constraints that shape how and when they can engage critically. By foregrounding students' voices and experiences, this study reinforces the argument that critical pedagogy must address not only texts and topics, but also the social conditions under which learning occurs. Only by integrating language support, affective care, and democratic participation can critical pedagogy fulfill its emancipatory promise in EFL digital contexts. In other words, to truly empower students, educators need to create classrooms where language skills are built alongside emotional well-being and equal opportunities for everyone to speak, ensuring that digital tools like social media become bridges to deeper understanding and positive change rather than sources of frustration or inequality.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study examined senior high school students' engagement with English-language social media content through the lens of critical pedagogy. The findings reveal that social media has become a dominant space for English exposure and informal learning, allowing students to encounter global discourses beyond the classroom. However, frequent exposure does not automatically lead to critical engagement. Students face linguistic challenges that limit comprehension, affective barriers that inhibit participation, and classroom power relations that shape who speaks and who remains silent.

The study demonstrates that students' silence and hesitation should not be interpreted as a lack of critical thinking, but as responses to fear, insecurity, and unequal participation structures. Despite these constraints, students show emerging critical awareness, particularly in recognizing multiple perspectives on social issues. Nevertheless, this awareness often remains at the level of reflection and has not yet developed into full praxis.

Based on these findings, it is suggested that critical pedagogy in EFL classrooms should be implemented as a holistic and sustained approach. Teachers are encouraged to integrate English-language social media content as authentic learning materials while providing linguistic scaffolding to support critical analysis. Creating emotionally safe classroom environments, prioritizing meaning over accuracy, and using inclusive discussion strategies can help reduce fear and encourage participation. Furthermore, critical pedagogy should be embedded across the curriculum to support the gradual development of students' critical consciousness. Future research is encouraged to explore these processes in broader contexts and over longer periods to better understand how critical engagement with digital texts evolves in EFL settings.

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