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INTEGRATING CRITICAL LITERACY AND LOCAL WISDOM: A STUDY OF BATAK ANGKOLA CULTURAL DISCOURSE IN INDONESIAN EFL HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract- *Critical literacy in English language education plays a role in developing reading and writing skills, while also integrating learning with everyday life. However, some researchers have found a lack of literacy activities in Indonesia, particularly at the higher education level. This study explores the application of a critical literacy approach in English language learning through the discourse analysis of Batak Angkola local wisdom. This classroom action research involves 8 EFL students. The study examines the development patterns of students' critical literacy, their change in perspective towards the values of local wisdom, and identifies the challenges and benefits of applying the critical literacy approach. The results show that the critical literacy approach improved students' analytical skills from 65 to 85, their understanding of philosophical values from 30% to 85%, and their awareness of cultural preservation from 40% to 95%. There were also improvements in English language skills and other competencies, such as leadership, presentation, collaboration, self-contribution, respect, critical thinking, and the broadening of perspectives through discussions. This study contributes to the development of English language teaching methods integrated with the preservation of local wisdom.*

Keywords: Critical Literacy, Action Research, EFL Students, Local Wisdom, Batak Angkola

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INTRODUCTION

Literacy has become a crucial aspect of English language education that relates to the ability to read, write, and then integrate and connect what has been learned with daily life (Wardani, 2021). In the era of globalization and rapid technological advancement, critical literacy skills have become increasingly important, particularly for students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Critical literacy involves not only reading and writing abilities but also the capability to analyze, evaluate, and create information from various forms of media (Grabe & Stoller, 2013).

Critical literacy plays several vital roles in today's educational environment. In academic learning, it empowers students to move beyond surface-level comprehension to deeper analytical engagement with texts, enabling them to evaluate credibility, identify bias, and construct well-reasoned arguments (CAFE, n.d.; Mukhamedov & Durdona, 2023). In professional environments, critical literacy equips graduates with essential skills for workplace success, including the ability to analyze complex documents, make informed decisions, and communicate effectively across cultural boundaries (Hilton & Pellegrino, 2012; Olusola, 2023). Moreover, in an era of information abundance and digital media, critical literacy serves as a crucial tool for navigating the overwhelming flow of information, helping students distinguish fact from misinformation and make informed judgments about the content they encounter (LaGarde & Hudgins, 2018; Taylor & Jaeger, 2021). This is particularly significant for EFL students who must develop these critical capabilities while simultaneously mastering a foreign language.

Recent studies indicate a concerning trend in Indonesia's literacy landscape. The 2022 PISA results show that despite a modest improvement to 57.4 points from the previous year's 54.29 (PISA, 2023), only 25% of Indonesian students achieve Level 2 or higher in reading literacy - significantly below the OECD average of 74%. This gap becomes particularly critical in higher education, where advanced literacy skills are fundamental for academic success and professional development. While existing research has explored critical literacy implementation in Indonesian education, most studies have focused on general pedagogical approaches without addressing the unique challenges faced by EFL students in culturally diverse.

The integration of critical literacy in Indonesian higher education faces three distinct challenges that previous research has not adequately addressed. First, there is a persistent disconnect between theoretical understanding and practical application, with many institutions struggling to move beyond traditional reading comprehension approaches (Ko, 2013; Mbau & Sugeng, 2019). Second, while studies have acknowledged the importance of cultural in literacy development, there remains a notable absence of research examining how local wisdom can be systematically integrated into critical literacy instruction. Recent studies indicate that Indonesian university students tend to focus on surface-level text analysis rather than engaging in critical evaluation (Gustine, 2018; Wardani, 2021).

These broader challenges manifest in specific obstacles within Indonesian EFL classrooms. Based on existing literature and empirical evidence, the main challenges in developing critical literacy in Indonesia encompass several key aspects. First, there is still a low level of students' critical literacy as evident in the EFL examination system and memorization practices in EFL teaching (Ko, 2013). Second, there is a lack of understanding about the importance of critical literacy and limited knowledge and skills regarding its implementation (Kim, 2012). Third, most students are afraid to express their critical opinions due to cultural reasons, where expressing critical opinions to others, especially to lecturers, is considered disrespectful (Kuo, 2009).

Luke (2012) states that high-level understanding in critical literacy requires learners to engage in critical analysis of written texts. Bobkina and Stefanova (2016) define critical literacy as the ability to actively and analytically assess written materials to understand and recognize injustice, authority, and inequality in human relationships. Critical literacy helps readers understand power relationships reflected in texts, enabling them to identify hidden injustices (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004).

Several previous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of the critical literacy approach in English language learning. Gustine (2013) found that the critical literacy approach can enhance students' critical engagement with texts and make them more active, confident, and collaborative in sharing perspectives during discussions. Similarly, Thuy (2016) revealed that critical literacy pedagogy significantly improves students' English language competence and various skills such as leadership,

presentation, and collaboration. Likewise, Rofiuddin and Priyatni (2017) found significant improvements in text analysis and evaluation abilities through the critical literacy approach.

Based on the above problems, the integration of local wisdom in critical literacy learning becomes one potential alternative solution. Aliakbari and Faraji (2011) emphasize that reading topics in critical literacy classes should adapt to social issues occurring in the society where students live. This approach aims not only to improve students' critical literacy skills but also to strengthen their awareness and understanding of local cultural values. Learning materials that are relevant to students' daily lives can facilitate them in reflecting on their previous (Damaianti, Damaianti, & Mulyati, 2017). This is reinforced by Gustine's research (2018), which revealed that the integration of local cultural context significantly increases student engagement. Similar findings were also presented by Kurniawati, Sugaryamah, and Hasanah (2020), who emphasized the importance of cultural contextualization in developing critical abilities.

This study addresses these gaps by proposing an innovative approach that integrates Batak Angkola cultural discourse into critical literacy instruction. Unlike previous research that treated local wisdom as supplementary material, this study positions cultural discourse as a central pedagogical tool for developing critical literacy skills. The novelty of this approach manifests in several key aspects. Foremost, it develops a structured framework for incorporating indigenous knowledge systems into EFL critical literacy instruction, addressing the current lack of culturally responsive teaching models in Indonesian higher education. Additionally, it introduces a dual-focused methodology that simultaneously enhances students' critical literacy skills and cultural awareness, responding to the need for more holistic approaches in EFL education. Furthermore, it provides empirical evidence for how local wisdom can serve as a bridge between abstract critical literacy concepts and students' lived experiences, thereby addressing the theory-practice gap identified in previous research.

Therefore, this research aims to explore the application of the critical literacy approach in English language learning through discourse analysis of Batak Angkola local wisdom. This research is expected to contribute to the development of English language

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learning methods that integrate the preservation of local wisdom and the enhancement of students' critical literacy skills.

METHODS

Research design

This research employs classroom action research methodology with a qualitative approach. This method was chosen as it is suitable for diagnosing, taking action, and reflecting on learning practices (Stephen Kemmis & Robin McTaggart, 2014). The research follows an iterative action research design comprising two cycles, with each cycle containing three meetings. Following Kemmis and McTaggart's framework, each cycle progresses through four interconnected stages.
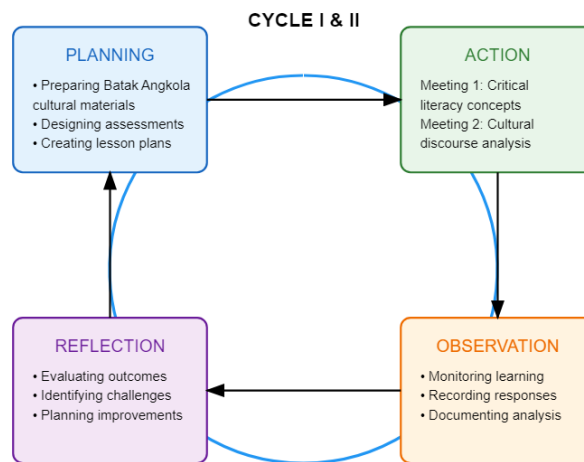

Figure 1. Classroom Action Research Cycle

The research was conducted in the English Education Study Program at Graha Nusantara University during the odd semester of the 2024/2025 academic year for approximately 3 months. The research subjects consisted of 8 fifth-semester students selected using purposive sampling technique with the following criteria: having taken the Reading Comprehension course, having a Batak Angkola cultural background, and willing to participate fully in the research. This number of participants aligns with recommendations by (Creswell, 2020) for qualitative research that enables in-depth exploration. The research procedure follows six phases of (Abednia, 2015) model, namely: introduction to critical literacy, reading negotiation, text content description,

critical questioning, collaborative discussion, and reflective journal writing. In the planning stage, the researcher prepared Batak Angkola local wisdom discourse materials (Marhusip, Mangupa, Dalihan Na Tolu system), designed research instruments referring to Lewison et al.'s (2002) critical literacy framework, and developed lesson plans.

Data Collection

Data collection employs multiple methods (Yin, 2017) including observation using structured observation sheets, semi-structured interviews, documentation (audio/video recordings, analysis results, reflection journals), and tests (pre-test and post-test). Research instruments consist of structured observation sheets, interview guidelines, assessment rubrics based on the Four Resources Model framework (Luke & Freebody, 1999), student reflection sheets, and critical literacy pre-test and post-test questions.

Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis used an interactive model (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data validation is conducted through source triangulation, method triangulation, and member checking. Success indicators refer to Wardani (2021) which include improvement in students' critical analysis abilities, understanding of philosophical values, cultural preservation awareness, as well as active participation and ability to express analysis in English.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This classroom action research was carried out in two cycles, with each cycle consisting of three meetings.

Cycle I

The planning stage focused on systematic preparation for implementing critical literacy instruction. This stage involved three key activities aligned with action research principles. First, researchers developed culturally-relevant teaching materials centered on Batak Angkola local wisdom discourse, specifically Marhusip and Mangupa texts. Second, assessment instruments were designed to measure students' critical literacy

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development across four dimensions: interpretation, analysis, inference, and evaluation. Third, researchers conducted a pre-test to establish baseline data for students' critical literacy abilities.

Table 1. Critical Literacy Pre-test Results

Student	Interpretation	Analysis	Inference	Evaluation	Average
S1	60	65	58	62	61.25
S2	63	62	60	65	62.50
S3	58	60	55	59	58.00
S4	65	68	62	64	64.75
S5	61	63	59	63	61.50
S6	59	62	56	60	59.25
S7	62	64	58	61	61.25
S8	64	66	60	63	63.25
Average	61.50	63.75	58.50	62.13	61.47

Based on the critical literacy pre-test results, which showed an overall average score of 61.47, it can be concluded that students had not yet achieved the desired target of 85. Although most aspects, such as analysis (63.75) and evaluation (62.13), demonstrated fairly good abilities, inference (58.50) and interpretation (61.50) capabilities were still far from the target. Students were not yet fully capable of conducting more complex analyses or providing critical assessments of existing arguments and evidence. These results indicate that while students had a good foundation in critical literacy, they needed further development, particularly in inferential abilities and deeper assessment skills to achieve higher levels of critical literacy.

Figure 2. Critical Literacy Skills Pre-test Results

The action stage was implemented through three structured meetings, each designed to progressively develop students' critical literacy skills. In the first meeting focused on introducing critical literacy concepts and Marhusip discourse. In the second meeting, students conducted Mangupa discourse analysis in groups. Participation increased to 70%, marked by the emergence of critical questions and more lively group discussions. However, challenges in using academic English persisted. Observation data showed increased student engagement in group discussions, though still limited to several dominant students. The third meeting included group analysis presentations with participation reaching 75%. Development was evident in analysis quality, presentation confidence, and academic terminology usage. Observation recordings showed students beginning to use academic terms in their presentations.
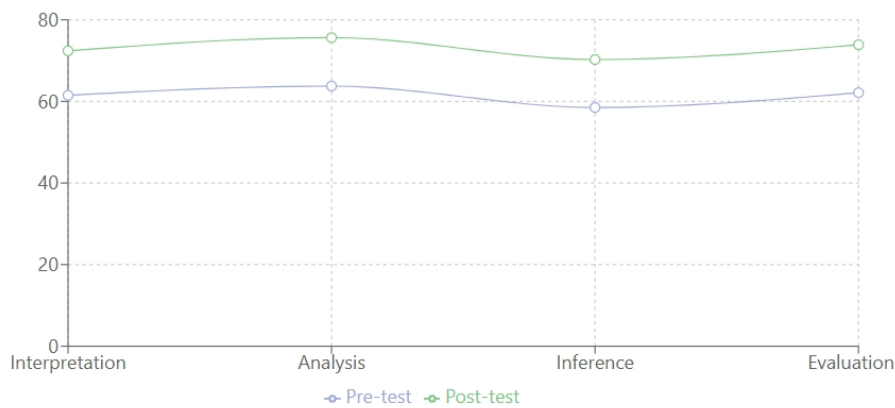

Figure 3. Comparison of Pre-test and Post-test Cycle I

Cycle I evaluation showed an increase in average critical literacy ability to 73.04. Interpretation ability increased to 72.38 (+10.88), analysis to 75.63 (+11.88), inference to 70.25 (+11.75), and evaluation to 73.88 (+11.75). Although improvement occurred, these results still did not reach the established target of 85. Throughout the implementation, systematic **observation** was conducted to document the learning process and student development. Observations showed low student participation rates, with only 60% actively engaging in discussions. Students experienced difficulties in understanding critical literacy concepts, expressing ideas in English, and analyzing texts critically. Observation notes indicated students tended to be passive and hesitant in expressing opinions.

Figure 4. Development of Student Participation Cycle I

However, several challenges emerged, including students' hesitancy to express opinions and difficulties with academic English terminology. The observation data indicated that while student engagement improved, participation remained concentrated among more dominant students.

The reflection stage involved comprehensive analysis of data collected during planning, action, and observation stages. This analysis revealed both achievements and areas requiring improvement. While students showed progress in critical literacy abilities, with overall scores increasing to 73.04, they still fell short of the 85-point target. Cycle I reflection identified several constraints requiring attention, including limited academic vocabulary, lack of confidence in discussions, insufficient depth of analysis, and the need for enhanced language scaffolding. Interview data indicated students still experienced difficulty expressing their critical thoughts in English. These reflection results formed the basis for improvements in the next cycle.

Cycle II

Based on the reflections from Cycle I, improvement planning for Cycle II was conducted with several strategic adjustments. These improvements included adding a bilingual glossary to enrich academic vocabulary, strengthening group activities to enhance collaboration, increasing language scaffolding to support expression in English, and using more concrete analysis examples to clarify critical literacy concepts.

Table 2. Improvement Strategies and Learning Impact in Cycle II

Improvement Strategy	Implementation	Measured Impact
Bilingual Glossary	- 50 academic terms	- Increased academic terminology use (75%)
	- 30 cultural concepts	- Improved language confidence (80%)
	- Usage examples	- Enhanced analysis quality (85%)
Group Activities	- Structured discussions	- Increased participation (85%)
	- Peer review	- More effective collaboration (80%)
	- Team presentations	- Strengthened concept understanding (85%)
Language Scaffolding	- Analysis templates	- Better analysis structure (85%)
	- Sentence frames	- More organized expression (80%)
	- Discussion guides	- More effective communication (85%)
Analysis Examples	- Analysis models	- Increased concept understanding (90%)
	- Case studies	- More accurate application (85%)
	- Guided practice	- Analysis independence (80%)

The action stage implementation demonstrated marked improvement in learning engagement and outcomes. In the first meeting, learning focused on strengthening critical literacy concepts through local wisdom discourse analysis. Results showed increased student participation reaching 80%, accompanied by more mature concept understanding and deeper analytical abilities. Students began showing confidence in using critical literacy frameworks to analyze cultural texts.

The second meeting demonstrated more significant progress with participation rates reaching 85%. At this stage, class discussions became more critical and substantive, marked by the emergence of analytical questions and deeper argumentation. Academic language use also showed notable improvement, with students beginning to use more precise terminology and formal language structures in expressing their analyses.

In the third meeting, which culminated Cycle II, student participation reached its peak at 90%. Final presentations demonstrated comprehensive analysis of local wisdom discourse, with students able to convincingly integrate cultural and academic perspectives. They not only analyzed texts from a critical literacy viewpoint but also successfully connected them to broader cultural contexts and used appropriate academic language in their presentations.
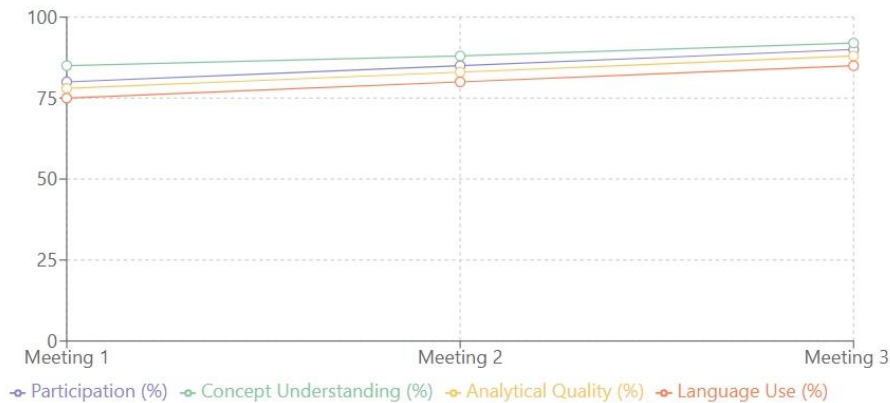
Figure 5. Cycle II Learning Development Graph

The results of the cycle II evaluation showed significant improvements in all aspects measured.

Systematic observation during Cycle II revealed substantial positive changes in learning dynamics. Quantitative data showed consistent improvement in student engagement, while qualitative observations documented enhanced quality of critical analysis and discussion. Researchers noted that students began using academic terminology more confidently and demonstrated greater ability to connect cultural discourse with critical literacy frameworks. The observation data indicated that previously hesitant students became more actively involved in discussions, suggesting successful implementation of the revised teaching strategies.

The reflection stage analysis revealed significant achievements across multiple dimensions. Students' overall critical literacy abilities improved markedly, with average scores increasing to 84.19. Specific improvements were noted in interpretation (83.75), analysis (85.88), inference (82.63), and evaluation (84.50). This comprehensive improvement aligned with the action research goal of achieving meaningful change through iterative refinement. The reflection also highlighted the effectiveness of the enhanced scaffolding and collaborative learning strategies implemented in Cycle II, demonstrating successful application of insights gained from Cycle I reflection.
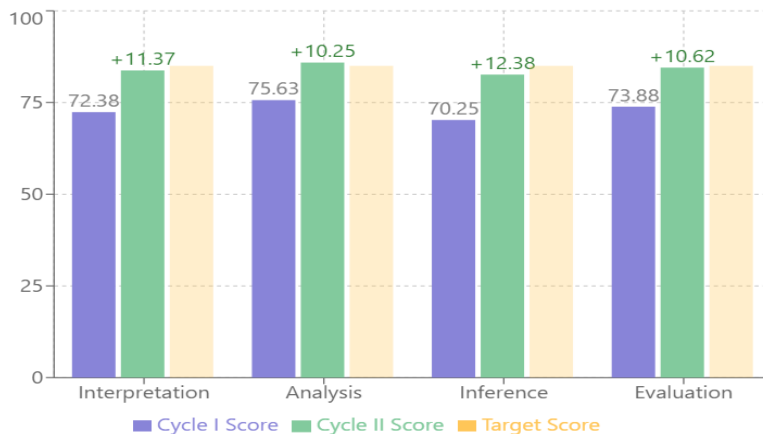
Figure 6. Comparison of Cycle I and II Results

The final research outcomes indicate that the local wisdom-based critical literacy approach successfully achieved and even exceeded the set targets. Analytical ability reached 85.88, philosophical value understanding 85%, cultural awareness 95%, and active participation 90%. These achievements demonstrate the effectiveness of the approach in improving critical literacy abilities while strengthening understanding and appreciation of local wisdom.

Discussion

This classroom action research has produced significant findings regarding the implementation of a local wisdom-based critical literacy approach in college-level English language learning. The research results demonstrate substantial development in students' critical literacy abilities, reflected in the increase of average scores from 73.04 in Cycle I to 84.19 in Cycle II. This improvement aligns with Lewison et al. (2002) regarding the four dimensions of critical literacy, which encompass the ability to disrupt the commonplace, consider multiple perspectives, examine socio-political issues, and take action for social justice.

The development of students' interpretation abilities from 72.38 to 83.75 indicates better mastery in analyzing hidden meanings within texts. As Luke (2012) suggests, high-level understanding in critical literacy requires learners to engage in critical analysis of written texts. This is evidenced by students' improved ability to identify and analyze implicit aspects of the local wisdom discourse they studied.

The use of Batak Angkola local wisdom discourse as learning material proved effective in increasing student engagement. This finding supports Aliakbari and Faraji's (2011) argument that reading topics in critical literacy classes should adapt social issues relevant to students' local context. The increase in participation from 60% at the beginning of Cycle I to 90% at the end of Cycle II demonstrates that using local content successfully created more meaningful and contextual learning.

Another important aspect is the transformation in students' cultural perspectives and understanding. The development of philosophical value comprehension from 30% to 85% confirms Bobkina and Stefanova (2016) view of critical literacy as a tool for understanding power relations and inequalities in texts. Students were not only able to comprehend the surface meaning of local wisdom discourse but also successfully analyzed its socio-cultural implications.

Students' English language skills also showed significant improvement during the research implementation. This aligns with Wardani's (2021) findings showing that the critical literacy approach can enhance EFL students' English language abilities. The use of scaffolding and bilingual glossaries proved effective in overcoming language barriers which, according to Ko (2013), often become major obstacles in implementing critical literacy in EFL.

Challenges encountered during the research, such as vocabulary limitations and lack of confidence in discussions, were successfully addressed through the implementation of strategies recommended by Kuo (2009). These strategies included intensive scaffolding, bilingual glossary implementation, collaborative group discussions, and peer tutorials. The success of these strategies is evident from the increase in active participation and quality of student discussions.

This research's findings have important pedagogical implications for EFL teaching. Referring to Rizqiani and Yuliani (2023), learning material development needs to integrate local context, facilitate multi-perspective analysis, and encourage critical reflection. Meanwhile, the learning approach, as suggested by Luke and Dooley (2011), should be student-centered, facilitate critical dialogue, and develop social awareness.

Based on these research results, several recommendations can be proposed for future learning development. For teachers, it is important to integrate local wisdom in

EFL learning, develop systematic language scaffolding, and implement critical literacy approaches gradually. For curriculum developers, referring to Mbau and Sugeng (2019), there needs to be integration of critical literacy components in EFL curriculum, development of local culture-based materials, and design of appropriate assessments.

In conclusion, this research proves that a local wisdom-based critical literacy approach is effective in improving EFL students' critical literacy abilities. This success supports Hendriani, Nuryani, and Ibrahim (2018) argument that critical literacy can be a tool for understanding and changing social reality while strengthening local cultural identity in foreign language learning contexts. For future research, it is recommended to examine the long-term effectiveness of this approach, investigate its application in different cultural contexts, and develop more comprehensive critical literacy assessment models.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings and discussion presented, several conclusions can be drawn regarding the implementation of a local wisdom-based critical literacy approach in college-level English language learning:

First, the local wisdom-based critical literacy approach proved effective in enhancing students' critical literacy abilities. This is demonstrated by significant improvements from Cycle I to Cycle II, where the average critical literacy ability increased from 73.04 to 84.19. Interpretation ability improved from 72.38 to 83.75, analytical ability from 75.63 to 85.88, inference ability from 70.25 to 82.63, and evaluation ability from 73.88 to 84.50.

Second, the use of Batak Angkola local wisdom discourse as learning material successfully increased student engagement and participation in learning. Participation rates increased gradually from 60% at the beginning of Cycle I to 90% by the end of Cycle II. This indicates that the use of local content successfully created more meaningful and contextual learning for students.

Third, this research implementation successfully developed not only critical literacy abilities but also students' cultural understanding and English language skills. Understanding of philosophical values increased from 30% to 85%, and cultural

awareness improved from 40% to 95%. The use of academic language in discussions and presentations also showed significant improvement.

Fourth, the developed learning strategies, including scaffolding, bilingual glossaries, and collaborative group activities, proved effective in addressing learning challenges such as vocabulary limitations and lack of confidence in discussions. This is evident from the improvement in the quality of student discussions and presentations throughout the research cycles. Based on these conclusions, this research demonstrates that the integration of critical literacy and local wisdom in college-level English language learning can be an effective approach to enhance students' critical literacy abilities while strengthening their understanding and appreciation of local cultural values.

SUGGESTION

Based on the findings and discussion of this research, several recommendations can be proposed for the future development of local wisdom-based critical literacy learning. For English course instructors, it is recommended to integrate a local wisdom-based critical literacy approach into their teaching practices. This integration should be implemented systematically, taking into account appropriate learning stages, from the introduction of basic concepts to in-depth critical analysis. It is also essential to develop adequate language scaffolding to support students in expressing their critical thoughts in English.

For curriculum developers and study program administrators, it is recommended to consider integrating critical literacy and local wisdom components into the English language learning curriculum. The development of learning materials should maintain a balance between local content and academic requirements, while also designing assessment systems capable of comprehensively measuring students' critical literacy development. Consideration should also be given to providing training for instructors regarding the implementation of critical literacy approaches and the integration of local wisdom in teaching.

For future researchers, it is recommended to conduct follow-up studies examining the long-term effectiveness of this approach. Research could focus on aspects such as the

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sustainability of students' critical literacy abilities, learning transfer to different contexts, or the development of more comprehensive assessment models. Additionally, research should be conducted on the application of this approach in different cultural contexts to enrich understanding of the effectiveness of local wisdom-based critical literacy approaches across various learning environments.

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