

Critical Digital Literacy in English Education: Preparing Students for Information Age Communication

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Abstract: This study responds to the growing prevalence of misinformation in the digital era, which poses significant challenges for students' ability to critically evaluate online information. This study aims to examine how critical digital literacy can be integrated into English language education to address these challenges. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving English teachers. The findings indicate that integrating critical digital literacy through collaborative learning strategies enhances students' critical thinking and communication skills, particularly in evaluating online information. This study contributes to existing literature by proposing a contextual integration model of critical digital literacy in EFL classrooms, offering practical implications for curriculum development and teacher training.

Keywords digital literacy; english language education; collaborative learning; communication skills; efl

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INTRODUCTION

Critical digital literacy is the ability to critically evaluate, analyze, and use information found online (Silvhiany et al., 2021). This involves the ability to distinguish between valid information and false or misleading information. Critical digital literacy is indeed very important in the digital age to protect oneself from hoaxes and false information that can be harmful (Gouseti et al., 2024; Ilomäki et al., 2023; Lo et al., 2024). The application of digital literacy through Critical Thinking (CT) methods is very important in preventing hoaxes and disinformation. CT skills are a prerequisite for successful digital literacy and should be integrated into educational institutions as a compulsory subject. Teaching individuals to be critical and skeptical of information found online can help prevent hoaxes. According to the Reuters Institute (2023), organizations must continue to monitor South Africa's social, political, and economic landscape to remain relevant and build stronger relationships with consumers through journalism.

According to the Reuters Institute (2023), 59% of the global population is concerned about their ability to distinguish between fact and fiction in online content, while 76% of respondents reported encountering misleading information in the past three months. Newman et al. (2019) digital literacy issues have become a significant problem in Indonesia. Therefore, to stop the spread of false information and online hoaxes, Indonesians need to become highly digitally literate. Indonesians can protect themselves from inaccurate or misleading content by developing the ability to critically evaluate the information they find online. Improving digital literacy can empower individuals to make informed decisions and effectively navigate the digital landscape by developing critical evaluation skills, recognizing false information, and interacting responsibly with online content (Komariah & Saepudin, 2019).

Regional disparities in digital literacy education pose serious challenges, particularly in developing countries like Indonesia. Recent data indicates that Indonesia is making slow progress in developing digital competencies, with its digital literacy index score rising slightly from 3.46 in 2020 to 3.54 in 2022. The education sector's digital literacy index score of 3.7 is more concerning as it remains below the ideal level for successful digital learning integration. Research shows that "56% of respondents primarily encounter hoaxes and false information on social media and online media platforms, with 45% of respondents unsure how to distinguish between credible and false information" (EMACS Journal, 2024), further exacerbating the situation. Indonesia continues to face "low digital literacy levels among its population, which poses a significant challenge in the era of global digitalization, particularly due to limited access to and understanding of information technology", despite having 185.3 million internet users and an internet penetration rate of 66.5% at the beginning of 2024.

Therefore, to stop the spread of false information and hoaxes on the internet, the Indonesian public needs to improve their digital literacy. Indonesians can protect themselves from inaccurate or misleading content by developing the ability to critically evaluate the information they find online. By developing critical evaluation skills, identifying false information, and using online content responsibly, improved digital literacy can empower people to make wise decisions and successfully navigate the digital environment (Chaliha et al., 2024). Additionally, acquiring digital literacy skills can help people protect themselves from online threats such as identity theft, cyberbullying, and false information. Key elements of digital literacy include the ability to recognize reliable information sources, verify information, and understand the consequences of sharing personal information online. However, there are cases where people spread false information by disregarding the reliability of information sources and relying solely on an unreliable source.

According to research by Sadaf & Johnson (2017) 78% of teachers reported difficulties in implementing effective digital literacy strategies in language learning, highlighting a significant practical gap between theoretical understanding of digital literacy and its implementation in an educational context. Although much research has been conducted on digital literacy, there is still a significant empirical gap in determining how the integration of digital literacy affects students' communication skills. According to Nguyen & Habók (2022) "Although digital literacy has become a popular research topic, there is still a lack of strong empirical evidence regarding its effectiveness in language curriculum integration." The best conceptual framework for integrating digital literacy into language learning processes remains a subject of theoretical debate. According to Min & Lee (2025) "a comprehensive theoretical model to explain the relationship

between digital literacy and students' communication competencies is still lacking in the current literature". Methodologically, previous research continues to highlight weaknesses in methodology (Ip, 2024; Prastyanti et al., 2025).

Patel et al. (2022) note that "the majority of research on digital literacy uses a purely quantitative approach, without exploring students' experiences and perspectives in depth through qualitative approaches." Findings on the integration of digital literacy into language teaching are inconsistent. On one hand, integrating digital literacy can significantly enhance students' motivation and engagement in language learning, according to Getenet et al. (2024) A contrasting view is presented by Berger (2025), who state that an excessive emphasis on technology can disrupt students' ability in conventional interpersonal communication (Berger, 2025; Mutmainnah et al., 2025; Suciati, 2024). On the other hand, Prastyanti et al. (2025) take a moderate stance, emphasizing the importance of balancing traditional communication skills and digital literacy. To bridge the current gap, Yim & Su (2025) propose "longitudinal research with a mixed-methods approach to understand the long-term impact of digital literacy integration on students' communication competencies across various learning contexts." (Elsa et al., 2025; Ghorbanian Zolbin et al., 2022; Yim & Su, 2025).

Given the widespread use of social media, online discussion forums, and digital communication tools, it is essential for students to learn how to produce and distribute information ethically, as well as how to critically absorb digital content. Teachers can facilitate students in using technology for efficient communication, teamwork, and self-expression by incorporating digital literacy into the English language curriculum. By creating a comprehensive integration model that combines digital literacy with English language proficiency using previously unexplored collaborative learning strategies, this research offers originality. According to Kumar (2023) "Innovation in learning approaches that integrate digital literacy with language competence is still very much needed to meet the needs of students in the digital age." For example, students can be taught how to verify information they encounter online before sharing it with others, helping to prevent the spread of misinformation. Without proper guidance on how to distinguish facts from fiction, they may inadvertently contribute to the spread of misinformation rather than combat it. This can harm society and undermine truth and justice. By analyzing the current state of digital literacy education in schools and the challenges and opportunities that may arise, this paper aims to provide insights into the importance of preparing students for the digital age.

This research paper aims to explore the benefits of integrating digital literacy into the English language curriculum and how it can positively impact students' communication skills. It is hoped that this will assist teachers and educational institutions in developing curricula that are relevant to the needs of the modern world. Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on quantitative measurement of digital literacy skills, this study proposes a qualitative and contextual model integrating critical digital literacy into English language learning through collaborative strategies. This approach has not been extensively explored in Indonesian EFL contexts, particularly in relation to students' communication competencies.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a case study design to explore the integration of critical digital literacy in English language education and its contribution to

students' communication skills in the information age. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of teaching practices, perceptions, and contextual factors related to the implementation of critical digital literacy in real classroom settings. The participants of this study were English teachers teaching at the secondary education level. The selection of participants was conducted through purposive sampling, based on their experience in teaching English and their involvement in integrating digital resources into classroom instruction. The research was conducted in an English language learning context where digital media and online resources were regularly used as part of instructional activities.

Data were collected using multiple techniques to ensure credibility and depth of information, including:

1. Semi-structured interviews, conducted with English teachers to explore their understanding, strategies, and experiences in integrating critical digital literacy into English teaching.
2. Classroom observations, aimed at examining how critical digital literacy practices were implemented during teaching and learning activities, particularly in relation to students' communication and critical thinking skills.
3. Document analysis, involving lesson plans, teaching materials, and instructional documents related to digital literacy integration.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis process involved several stages: data familiarization, coding, categorization, and theme development. Emerging themes were identified to capture patterns related to the implementation of critical digital literacy and its impact on students' communication skills. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation was applied by comparing information obtained from interviews, observations, and documents. To ensure the validity and reliability of the qualitative data, the study applied credibility strategies such as prolonged engagement, triangulation of data sources, and careful interpretation of participants' responses. These procedures were intended to strengthen the rigor and reliability of the research findings. For example, this research may include interviews with teachers to understand how current digital literacy initiatives are integrated into the curriculum despite time constraints.

Additionally, student surveys may be conducted to measure their perceptions of how digital literacy skills influence their ability to succeed academically in a technology-driven world. A counterexample to this research could involve schools where digital literacy initiatives are not integrated into the curriculum at all, despite sufficient time for such initiatives. In this scenario, interviews with teachers may reveal a lack of awareness or support for the importance of digital literacy skills in education. Additionally, surveys of students may show that they do not see a correlation between digital literacy skills and academic success in a technology-driven world. While the absence of digital literacy initiatives in the curriculum may hinder students' academic success in a technology-driven world, other factors such as teaching methods, resources, and support systems may also play a significant role in determining their success. It is possible that students possess innate abilities or adaptability to technology that can compensate for the absence of formal digital literacy education.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the integration of critical digital literacy into English language learning positively influences students' communication skills and critical thinking abilities. Based on classroom observations and interviews with English teachers, students

showed increased awareness in evaluating the credibility of online information before using it for academic tasks. Teachers reported that collaborative learning strategies, such as group discussions and digital content analysis, encouraged students to actively engage in evaluating online sources. This finding supports Getenet et al. (2024) who argue that digital literacy integration enhances student engagement and motivation in language learning. Students became more cautious in sharing information and demonstrated improved ability to distinguish between factual and misleading digital content. Furthermore, the results reveal that students who participated in collaborative digital activities were more confident in expressing their opinions during discussions.

This supports Prastyanti et al. (2025) argument that balancing digital literacy and communication skills is essential for effective language education. However, some teachers highlighted challenges, including limited instructional time and varying levels of students' digital competence, which align with the findings. These findings suggest that critical digital literacy should not be taught as a separate subject but integrated into language instruction through contextual and collaborative activities. Such integration allows students to develop communication skills while simultaneously learning to navigate digital information responsibly.

CONCLUSIONS

This study highlights the importance of integrating critical digital literacy into English language education to enhance students' communication skills and critical thinking in the digital era. The findings indicate that collaborative learning strategies effectively support students in evaluating online information, communicating ideas responsibly, and participating actively in digital-based learning activities. Integrating critical digital literacy within the English curriculum enables students not only to improve language proficiency but also to become critical and ethical digital users. Therefore, educators are encouraged to embed digital literacy practices into language instruction to better prepare students for the challenges of the information age. Future research is recommended to explore this integration using broader contexts and mixed-method approaches to strengthen empirical evidence.

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