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Story-based teaching as a pedagogical strategy to foster critical literacy in language learning contexts

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ABSTRACT

Although many teachers claim to value the teaching of critical thinking, the questions and activities they design often remain at the level of literal comprehension and rarely progress toward deeper analytical engagement. This study explores story-based teaching as an instructional approach to foster critical literacy in language-learning contexts. In response to the demands of 21st-century education, critical literacy is viewed as an integration of knowledge construction, critical thinking, social awareness, ethics, and cross-cultural competence, skills needed to analyse how texts shape power relations and social meanings. Using a qualitative design, the study analyses children's story texts and synthesizes theoretical and empirical literature to formulate an instructional model for critical literacy. The story analysis identified nine rhetorical moves and fourteen steps that characterize well-structured narratives for classroom use. The literature review led to a four-stage pedagogical framework: preparation, critical reading and discussion, critical response and application, and assessment and reflection. This framework enables students to understand narratives, question dominant ideologies, and produce counter-responses linked to real-world issues. The outcomes include a draft model of story-based critical literacy instruction and plans for publication and further research.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Issues of literacy today are no longer confined to conventional reading skills; they increasingly involve the ability to evaluate digital information critically. The digital landscape presents an overwhelming volume of information that is multimodal, fragmented, and frequently biased. A systematic review of ten studies on Generation Z published between 2017 and 2024 identified three recurring challenges: limited critical thinking when evaluating digital information, exposure to algorithmic bias that narrows the range of information encountered, and low ethical awareness in digital media use (Anisti et al., 2024). Large-scale assessments point in the same direction. In a nationally representative sample of 3,446 high school students in the United States, most students struggled to judge the credibility of online sources, and two-thirds could not distinguish news stories from advertisements (Breakstone et al., 2021). Across OECD countries, only about 47% of 15-year-olds in PISA 2018 correctly distinguished fact from opinion in a released reading item (OECD, 2021). Evidence on algorithmic narrowing is more nuanced: among 10.1 million U.S. Facebook users, algorithmic ranking reduced exposure to ideologically cross-cutting news only modestly, while users' own choices limited it further (Bakshy et al., 2015). This suggests that the problem lies as much in how readers select and interpret texts as in the platforms themselves. In the Indonesian context, conceptual studies argue that users in the post-truth era tend to engage with digital media technically rather than critically (Dahur & Solosumantro, 2024), and that digital literacy extends media literacy, whose core is the critical analysis of how media messages are constructed (Restianty, 2018).

These findings, however, concern information literacy, that is, the ability to verify sources and assess accuracy. That ability is not the same as critical literacy. Critical literacy asks how texts represent the world, whose interests they serve, and how they position their readers (Janks, 2010; Luke, 2012). Pangrazio (2016) argues that critical digital literacy draws on this tradition. Beyond checking whether information is true, readers need to recognise the ideological work that digital texts perform and how those texts work on their own emotional responses. This is where narrative becomes relevant. A considerable share of what young people encounter online, including personal testimonials, viral anecdotes, and short-form video, takes narrative form. Narratives make particular values seem natural by inviting readers to identify with certain characters and viewpoints (Stephens, 1992).

These findings correspond with the PISA 2022 data, which indicate that students in many countries, including Indonesia, struggle to comprehend complex texts and filter digital information saturated with opinions, visuals, and persuasive elements. OECD further emphasizes that low reading competence in the digital age is directly associated with weak critical literacy skills, particularly in identifying bias, assessing credibility, and evaluating social representations in texts—especially multimodal texts. In this context, digital critical literacy encompasses four essential pillars: digital skills, digital culture, digital ethics, and digital safety (Dahur et al., 2024), reinforcing the notion that mere access to technology is insufficient to develop critical and responsible digital citizens. As such, efforts to strengthen critical literacy—both in reading print texts and navigating digital narratives—must adopt multidimensional, systematic, and contextually rooted approaches, including story-based pedagogies that integrate ideological analysis, ethical reflection, and multimodal interpretation.

In Indonesia, the Kurikulum Merdeka places strong emphasis on multiliteracies, meaning-making, and narrative interpretation. Stories possess significant pedagogical value because they encompass linguistic features, moral messages, social contexts, and global issues that enable students to connect language with lived realities (Rose, 2013; Salmaso, 2017). From a critical literacy perspective, texts are never neutral; they are constructed through ideological positioning, power relations, and social representations (Fajardo, 2015). Consequently, language instruction must provide opportunities for learners to both understand and interrogate the perspectives and value systems embedded in texts.

Despite the growing recognition of critical literacy, its implementation in Indonesian classrooms remains limited. Research reports reveal a notable gap between teachers' beliefs and

their actual classroom practices. Although many teachers claim to value the teaching of critical thinking, the questions and activities they design often remain at the level of literal comprehension and rarely progress toward deeper analytical engagement (Harsiati, 2018) [Revised: 80% Progress Report]. Many tasks can even be completed without students meaningfully engaging with the text, indicating the absence of instructional models that consistently integrate critical literacy principles into story-reading activities.

These capacities are therefore not separate from critical engagement with digital information; they are part of its foundation. Restianty (2018) similarly suggests that digital literacy education can begin by sharpening how readers read content. On this basis, the present study treats story-based critical reading as a site where the dispositions needed for critical engagement with digital texts can be cultivated. At the same time, it treats transfer from narrative texts to digital information environments as an assumption to be examined rather than taken for granted.

Furthermore, traditional story-based instruction risks reinforcing dominant ideologies embedded in canonical texts. Stories commonly taught in schools often originate from specific cultural traditions that privilege majority perspectives, thereby heightening the risk of reinforcing stereotypes related to gender, social class, ethnicity, or other identity categories if taught without critical examination (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). This underscores the necessity of pedagogical approaches that encourage students to ask: Whose voices are represented? and Whose perspectives are marginalized or excluded?

On another level, research on narrative genres has shown that rhetorical structures display relatively stable patterns. However, systematic mapping of rhetorical structures in children's stories for pedagogical purposes—particularly within critical literacy frameworks—remains scarce. Preliminary analysis in this study identifies nine moves and fourteen steps in digital stories created by university students, suggesting stable cross-linguistic rhetorical patterns. Although genre analysis has been widely applied to academic texts (Swales, 1990), its application to story texts within the context of critical literacy has received limited scholarly attention in Indonesia.

Moreover, although pedagogical frameworks such as the PACE model (Donato & Adair-Hauck, 2016) and the Critical Literacy Pedagogy of Kalantzis and Cope (2012) are well established, the integration of both frameworks into story-based instruction and technology-mediated assessment remains uncommon. Thus, there exists a clear research gap in developing a comprehensive and contextually grounded story-based learning model capable of bridging students' critical thinking with their ability to interpret multimodal narratives.

Drawing from these gaps, the present study aims to formulate a story-based instructional model oriented toward enhancing critical literacy at the primary education level. Specifically, the study seeks to: (1) identify the rhetorical structure of stories that teachers may use as a basis for selecting and analyzing narrative texts, and (2) develop a learning syntax that emphasizes critical reading, critical discussion, and critical response. This qualitative study analyzes children's narratives to uncover recurrent moves and steps, integrating them with theoretical and empirical literature. The analysis reveals rhetorical patterns that can assist teachers in guiding students to explore narrative structure and meaning more profoundly.

1.1. Critical Literacy Pedagogy

Critical literacy extends beyond traditional conceptions of literacy, which merely emphasize textual comprehension, by highlighting how texts embody power relations, ideological positions, and social constructs. According to Kalantzis and Cope (2012), critical literacy enables learners to interpret the world through language while simultaneously questioning how texts shape thought patterns, values, and social representations. This aligns with Fajardo (2015), who asserts that critical literacy supports students in identifying bias, interests, dominant perspectives, and silenced voices across print and multimodal texts.

Pedagogically, critical literacy is operationalized through two reading orientations: reading with the text to understand content and structure, and reading against the text to challenge assumptions,

detect bias, and identify gaps in representation. This approach parallels multiliteracies pedagogy, which positions learners as active, reflective, and transformative readers (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). The critical literacy pedagogy model recommended in the research report comprises four key phases: (1) learner experience and activation of prior knowledge, (2) concept construction and analysis, (3) critical application through projects or creative responses, and (4) reflection to ensure shifts in perspective and social engagement. These phases provide a strong theoretical foundation for designing story-based learning oriented toward critical literacy.

1.2. Story-Based Teaching

Stories serve as powerful pedagogical tools in language education because they integrate linguistic features, moral values, social meanings, and narrative structures that help students make meaningful connections to the world (Rose, 2013; Salmaso, 2017). Story-based teaching employs narrative as a medium for enhancing language comprehension, fostering empathy, strengthening interpretive skills, and cultivating critical reflection. Within the framework of critical literacy, stories function as dialogic spaces where students negotiate meaning, question dominant perspectives, and identify the ideologies embedded in texts.

Findings from the 80% progress report reveal that analysis of student-created digital stories identifies nine moves and fourteen steps that constitute the rhetorical structure of the narratives. These moves—such as building interpersonal connection, engaging the audience, setting the scene, and resolving the climax—reflect universal rhetorical patterns across languages. This information can support teachers in guiding students to deconstruct narrative structure before conducting critical analyses of ideology and representation. These findings are consistent with Swales' (1990) principles of genre analysis, which emphasize that each text possesses communicative purposes and rhetorical structures that can be systematically mapped to enhance learners' understanding.

Story-based critical literacy instruction typically involves three major stages:

- 1) Pre-reading – activating prior knowledge, providing context, introducing critical literacy concepts, and stimulating reflective questions.
- 2) Reading and Critical Discussion – analyzing plot, characters, themes, context, representation, and ideology through both reading orientations (with and against the text). Teachers facilitate critical questioning such as: Whose perspectives are included or excluded? or What values are normalized by this text?
- 3) Critical Response and Application – producing countertexts, reimagining narratives from marginalized perspectives, or creating creative projects that connect the story to contemporary social issues.

This approach is strengthened through the integration of the PACE model (Donato & Adair-Hauck, 2016) and the Critical Literacy Pedagogy of Kalantzis & Cope (2012), resulting in a four-stage instructional framework: preparation, critical reading and discussion, critical response, and assessment–reflection. This combined model is more comprehensive because it addresses linguistic skills while also cultivating students' capacity to critically interpret social realities, as demanded by the Indonesian curriculum and PISA benchmarks.

Accordingly, story-based instruction allows teachers to integrate cognitive, affective, and social dimensions within a more meaningful pedagogical design. Stories become effective vehicles for developing multimodal interpretation and critical reflection, equipping students to become more aware, analytical, and transformative readers.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach aimed at analyzing the story-based instructional model oriented toward the development of critical literacy. The qualitative design was selected because it allows for an in-depth exploration of pedagogical processes and provides space for contextual interpretation of textual data and theoretical literature. The study involved five expert informants in the fields of digital storytelling and rhetorical move analysis—each of whom is a faculty member in the Indonesian, Korean, or English Language Education programs—along with 68 prospective

teachers. The research draws upon theoretical and empirical literature on critical literacy pedagogy, genre analysis, multiliteracies, and the PACE model to construct a comprehensive and contextually grounded learning framework.

Data were collected using two primary techniques. First, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted to explore how story-based instruction can strengthen students' critical literacy skills. Second, literature data were gathered through a systematic review of relevant academic sources, including Kalantzis and Cope's work on critical literacy; genre-based analyses by Rose (2013) and Salmaso (2017); and Donato and Adair-Hauck's (2016) PACE instructional framework. These sources served as the conceptual foundation for formulating and validating the proposed learning model.

The literature data were analyzed through thematic synthesis, a process that groups theoretical findings into key themes related to critical reading, ideological representation, multimodal analysis, and instructional strategies. The resulting thematic synthesis was then integrated with the analysis of narrative texts to construct a story-based learning model comprising four stages: preparation, critical reading and discussion, critical response, and assessment-reflection. To ensure the model's validity, the researchers conducted additional FGDs with experts in critical literacy pedagogy and language education. Feedback from these experts was used to refine the model so that it aligns more closely with the context of primary education and adheres to multiliteracies principles.

Through these methodological procedures, the study produces both a detailed analysis of narrative rhetorical structures and a theoretically robust yet practical instructional framework, thereby offering a model that can be effectively integrated into critical literacy development in primary schools.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the principal findings of the study, derived from learner responses during critical literacy enhancement activities, as well as expert insights generated through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The data reveal that stories—whether in print form or as digital storytelling—play a central role in activating critical thinking, broadening interpretive perspectives, and fostering ideological awareness in language learning. These findings further reinforce the pedagogical framework proposed in this study, namely a four-stage story-based instructional model designed to integrate the processes of understanding, analyzing, responding to, and reflecting on narrative texts critically. Accordingly, the discussion in this section focuses on two key aspects: first, the ways in which stories function as a medium for strengthening critical literacy; and second, how story-based teaching operates as an effective pedagogical strategy for cultivating critical literacy competencies in language education. Together, these two focal points not only represent the empirical foundations of the study but also offer an epistemological grounding for developing pedagogical practices that respond to the demands of twenty-first-century education.

3.1. The Role of Story in Strengthening Critical Literacy

Findings from the study demonstrate that both traditional stories and digital narratives hold significant value in activating critical literacy skills among language learners. Qualitative analysis of open-ended responses indicates that exposure to digital narratives stimulates learners to engage in deeper meaning-making processes, such as identifying conflicts, understanding character perspectives, analyzing social contexts, and evaluating moral messages. These processes align with the principles of critical literacy emphasizing the dual orientation of reading with and against the text (Janks, 2019)—constructing meaning while simultaneously interrogating the ideologies and power relations embedded within the narrative.

The rhetorical patterns observed in digital storytelling provide a narrative scaffold that supports learners in tracing storylines, recognizing turning points, understanding micro-tensions, and observing the progression of conflict toward resolution. This structural clarity enhances learners' narrative reasoning—the ability to connect events, character motivations, and social

representations—which Kim and Park (2022) identify as an essential foundation of narrative-based critical literacy.

Insights from FGD participants further support this view, emphasizing that stories inherently carry values and emotional force that activate reflective and critical engagement. Experts noted that effective narratives should both “entertain and educate” while encouraging readers to question value constructions embedded within the text—for example, gender representation or power hierarchies in classical tales. Such perspectives are consistent with critical literacy approaches that seek to “disrupt” dominant ideologies within texts.

Digital storytelling, moreover, expands the possibilities of meaning-making through multimodal resources including visual, gestural, auditory, and verbal modes. Experts highlighted the importance of aligning purpose, audience, and context in narrative construction. The integration of digital modalities enables learners to read not only words but also light, color, music, rhythm, and gesture as components of meaning. This finding aligns with multimodal literacy research by Serafini and Reid (2020), who argue that critical reading in the digital era requires understanding how meaning is constructed across modes.

From a practical standpoint, learners not only comprehend plot and characters but also identify social issues depicted in narratives, such as gender equality, social empathy, loss, and injustice. Several responses explicitly referred to “moral values,” “character representation,” and “social messages,” indicating that stories serve as effective mediums to connect personal experience with broader social phenomena. This supports Janks and Dixon’s (2019) claim that narratives act as bridges between linguistic literacy and social literacy.

The four-stage instructional model developed in this study—preparation, critical reading and discussion, critical response, and assessment and reflection—gained empirical support from learner responses demonstrating improvement in their ability to interpret, evaluate, and produce critical responses to stories. The critical response stage, in particular, encouraged learners to produce counter-narratives or modify stories from marginalized viewpoints. This aligns with findings by Lopez et al. (2023), who note that rewriting stories from alternative perspectives is an effective strategy for enhancing ideological awareness in narrative texts.

Overall, the findings confirm that stories serve as a powerful pedagogical medium for developing critical literacy because they provide rhetorical structures that scaffold critical thinking through identifiable moves and steps, mapping conflict, tension, and resolution, and activate emotional–cognitive modalities that foster social awareness and critical reflection. It also expands interpretive possibilities through multimodality, enabling critical reading of visuals, sounds, and gestures and facilitates connections between narrative events and social issues, positioning literacy as both linguistic and sociocultural practice. Last but not least, it encourages ideological evaluation and meaning reconstruction—core dimensions of critical literacy in language education.

Thus, the study affirms that stories function not merely as instructional materials but as pedagogical leverage capable of stimulating critical reasoning, social reflection, and ideological awareness—competencies essential in twenty-first-century language learning.

3.2. The Four-Stage Story-Based Learning Model for Critical Literacy Development

The study indicates that the four-stage model—(1) Preparation, (2) Critical Reading and Discussion, (3) Critical Response, and (4) Assessment and Reflection—functions effectively as a systematic pedagogical framework for developing critical literacy skills among language learners. The model emerged directly from the analysis of story rhetorical structures (nine moves and fourteen steps), the demands of critical reading, and learners’ responses during digital storytelling activities.

Stage 1 – Preparation: Activating Knowledge, Social Orientation, and Multiliteracy Perspectives

In the initial phase, learners are introduced to story context, social issues, and critical literacy orientations. FGD results show that learners gained “new understanding about critical literacy,” “strategies for constructing narrative flow,” and “ways of identifying social values in stories.”

These responses suggest that the preparation stage successfully established conceptual readiness for critical reading.

This aligns with research demonstrating that activating critical schemata prior to reading significantly enhances learners' ability to detect bias, representation patterns, and power relations within texts (Janks & Dixon, 2019; Ajayi, 2020; Ko & Choi, 2021). Such studies reaffirm the importance of front-loading in critical literacy instruction: what teachers do before reading fundamentally shapes the quality of critical engagement during reading.

Stage 2 – Critical Reading and Discussion: Reading “With” and “Against” the Text

This second stage is central to activating learners' critical thinking processes. Here, learners engage in two orientations: reading with the text to understand narrative structure (plot, conflict, character relations, setting), and reading against the text to interrogate dominant perspectives, identify bias, and uncover ideology. This dual-frame approach enables learners to transcend surface comprehension and examine the social logic embedded in narratives.

Learners' responses reveal the ability to identify main conflicts, moral arguments, tension points, and problematic elements such as stereotypes or unequal power dynamics. Such findings indicate a shift from text decoding to text interrogation (Janks, 2019). In this sense, stories serve as epistemological tools prompting learners to evaluate how values and ideologies are constructed.

These observations echo expert opinions from FGDs, where participants emphasized that classroom stories should prompt learners to “question inherited values,” rather than simply follow the plot. Digital storytelling enhances this process through multimodal cues—visuals, gestures, audio, color, rhythm—that enrich interpretive depth. This corresponds with findings by Serafini and Reid (2020) and Ahmad & Hoon (2021) demonstrating the role of multimodal narratives in strengthening representational analysis.

Stage 3 – Critical Response: Re-creating Meaning, Counter-Narratives, and Alternative Perspectives

Study findings show that learners exhibit sensitivity to moral issues, representational bias, and social inequalities in stories. They frequently questioned which characters' voices were dominant or marginalized and proposed alternative versions of narratives. This reflects advanced levels of critical literacy, where learners begin to challenge the social logic embedded in texts.

This stage cultivates agency, enabling learners to intervene in the narrative through critical production. In critical literacy theory, such practices constitute problem-posing reading (Janks, 2019), whereby learners identify injustice or representational imbalance and attempt to restore marginalized voices.

The literature underscores that critical literacy must involve text production, not merely analysis. Lopez et al. (2023) found that counter-narrative writing significantly enhances ideological awareness. Chik (2021) similarly reports that digital story production develops critical creativity and social reasoning, as learners must negotiate perspective, identity, and ideological stance.

Learners in this study demonstrated these capacities through story rewriting, expanding character perspectives, and reinterpreting moral messages—evidence that they successfully combined narrative comprehension with critical reflection.

Stage 4 – Assessment and Reflection: Consolidating Critical Awareness and Internalizing Stance

In this phase, learners consolidate their critical insights through reflective and evaluative practices. They assess ideological patterns, question narrative assumptions, and articulate personal stances toward the issues depicted. This process confirms the epistemological shift from narrative consumption to critical narrative production.

These findings align with contemporary research (2019–2024) affirming that narrative production is central to critical literacy development. Counter-narrative creation requires learners to negotiate character motivations, social consequences, and representational ethics, fostering deeper ideological awareness.

Overall, this stage demonstrates that critical literacy is achieved not only through reading and discussion but through the reconstruction of meaning—an inherently ideological and transformative act.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reaffirm the strategic role of stories in strengthening critical literacy among language learners, particularly in an era characterized by multimodal learning. The analysis demonstrates that learners' engagement with narratives consistently stimulates higher-order thinking processes that form the core of critical literacy. Learners were able to identify moral issues, representational biases, power relations among characters, and negotiate meaning from multiple perspectives. They approached stories not merely as sequences of events but as social constructions embedded with particular values, ideologies, and interests. Their ability to interrogate questions such as "Whose voice is foregrounded?", "Whose voice is absent?", and "How might the story be rewritten from a marginalized perspective?" indicates the emergence of a critical stance, reflecting their capacity to critically evaluate the meanings offered by the text.

The four-stage story-based instructional model developed in this study provides a systematic pedagogical framework for cultivating critical literacy. The preparation stage activates learners' initial awareness of the social context and values within the story. The critical reading and discussion stage facilitate learners in reading both "with" and "against" the text—comprehending narrative structures while interrogating their social representations. The critical response stage, which encourages learners to rewrite narratives or produce counter-stories, extends their skills from analysis to critical creation. Finally, the assessment and reflection stage ensure that learners not only produce work but also review and consolidate their critical positions metacognitively. Together, these four stages function synergistically to create a learning ecosystem that empowers learners to become critical readers, interpreters, and producers of meaning.

Despite its contributions, this study acknowledges several limitations. First, the empirical data primarily derive from qualitative responses and learner perceptions, which means the findings do not yet fully represent the complexities of classroom implementation. Second, the study has not measured the long-term impact of the four-stage model on learners' critical literacy development, as no experimental testing or sustained implementation in formal learning contexts has yet been conducted. Moreover, the multimodal dimensions of digital storytelling have not been examined in depth using a comprehensive multimodal analytical framework.

Nevertheless, the findings yield important implications. Theoretically, this study reinforces contemporary scholarship in critical literacy that positions narratives as rich media for fostering ideological awareness, empathy, and evaluative competence. The four-stage model presented here may serve as a conceptual reference for future research in literacy pedagogy, digital storytelling, and narrative analysis. Practically, the study offers new directions for teachers and curriculum designers seeking to integrate stories more meaningfully into language instruction. Stories are positioned not merely as reading materials but as tools for cultivating reflective abilities, strengthening argumentative skills, and facilitating critical meaning-making. Consequently, story-based learning holds substantial potential to develop learners into readers and writers who are attuned to social, ethical, and ideological issues—competencies essential for navigating the challenges of twenty-first-century education.

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