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EXPLORING STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING CRITICAL LITERACY SKILLS IN STUDENTS IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES: THE CASE OF JOS NORTH LGA

[1]Roseline Sule Jacob, [2]Johnson Ojeka Ebibi, PhD & [3]Judith M. Patrick, PhD
[1,2,3] Department of Arts Education, Faculty of Education, University of Jos, Nigeria
[2]ebibiojeka@gmail.com

Abstract
Critical literacy has emerged as a vital pedagogical approach in English language education, emphasising learners' ability to question, analyse and interpret texts beyond surface meanings. In an era characterised by diverse media, global interconnectedness and sociocultural complexities, the English classroom provides an important space for fostering these skills. This paper explores strategies for promoting critical literacy among students in crisis-prone areas, focusing on practices that encourage active engagement with texts, interrogation of underlying ideologies, and the development of independent, reflective thinking. Focusing specifically on Jos North Local Government Area (LGA) of Plateau State, a region structurally destabilised by recurrent ethno-religious conflicts and by the socioeconomic pressures of unregulated artisanal mining, this paper models a context-specific application of critical pedagogy. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from Freirean pedagogy and contemporary African literacy studies, the discussion highlights approaches such as dialogic teaching, the use of multimodal texts, problem-posing strategies and culturally responsive pedagogy. The study also examines the challenges faced by educators in implementing critical literacy, including rigid curriculum constraints, fragile teacher professional safety and systemic infrastructure deficits. The study argues that promoting critical literacy in the English classroom equips students not only with advanced language skills but also with the critical consciousness required to deconstruct divisive propaganda, process localised trauma and transform their sociocultural realities.

Keywords: Critical Literacy, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Conflict-Affected Communities, Peace Education, English Language Teaching (ELT)

Introduction
The teaching of English has traditionally focused on foundational, functional skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. However, in a world marked by global interconnectedness, digital media and socio-political polarisation, a new educational paradigm has emerged. This approach, known as critical literacy, moves beyond basic text comprehension to equip students with the ability to question, critique and reflect upon the social, cultural and

ideological dimensions of texts. The capacity to remain acutely aware of one's own position and assumptions while interpreting a text is fundamental to navigating complex societal discourses (Luke, 2012). This is particularly relevant in the Nigerian context, where critical literacy skills are increasingly recognised as essential for preparing students for active, reflexive citizenship in the twenty-first century (Aremu, 2024). Within sub-Saharan Africa, the English language classroom is no longer merely a site for structural grammar acquisition; it has become a crucial arena for fostering transformative civic skills capable of healing fractured multi-ethnic spaces.

Despite its structural importance, critical literacy is systematically underemphasised in Nigerian English classrooms. This neglect is especially evident in public secondary schools, where centralised curricula prioritise rote memorisation, teacher-centred dictation and the immediate demands of high-stakes examinations such as WAEC and NECO (Saiphet, 2025). This pedagogical gap is acute in conflict-affected regions such as Jos North Local Government Area (LGA) of Plateau State. In this locality, the educational system operates under conditions of chronic crisis. Recurrent ethno-religious conflicts, driven principally by historical political frictions, land disputes and volatile identity politics between indigenous groups and settler populations, have severely fractured community lines (Ostien, 2009; Krause, 2011; Bertoni, Maio, Molini, & Nisticò, 2019; Muhammad & Abdullahi, 2025). This structural instability is compounded by socioeconomic pressures arising from expanding and hazardous artisanal mining operations in the region.

Together, these factors have contributed to high student dropout rates, severe psychological trauma and a classroom experience detached from the realities of the students (Sibanda, 2021; Saiphet, 2025; Isah, 2025). The standard, government-mandated "back-to-basics" approach to literacy focuses narrowly on phonetic decoding and passive comprehension. This baseline model alienates students and overlooks their urgent need to analyse critically the divisive propaganda and biased narratives that fuel local cycles of violence (Sibanda, 2021; Saiphet, 2025). Consequently, an investigation into how critical literacy pedagogy may serve as a practical, context-specific intervention is necessary. Such an approach can empower students to process lived trauma, interrogate ethnocentric misinformation and act as agents of positive peacebuilding.

The theoretical foundations of critical literacy are rooted in Paulo Freire's (1970) seminal concept of "reading the word and the world", which positions literacy as an instrument for human emancipation and structural social transformation. This perspective is a central component of critical pedagogy, which views education as an active process of liberating learners from oppressive socio-political conditions. In deeply divided societies, the link between critical literacy and peace education is well established. Scholars observe that critical literacy provides the cognitive and analytical tools required to deconstruct biased media reports, rumours and hate speech that often trigger communal conflicts (Luke, 2012; Gowon, Achor, Korb, Hanior, Ebibi, & Lengman, 2026). When applied within a conflict zone, critical literacy ceases to be an academic refinement and becomes a vital element of psychosocial survival and peacebuilding.

In the Nigerian educational landscape, existing research has documented the negative effects of communal conflict on school participation, highlighting infrastructural damage and widespread psychological distress among learners (Agabi, Samaki, Abubakar, & Baju, 2025; Muhammad & Abdullahi, 2025). Concurrently, localised studies have identified critical literacy as a vital skill for preparing secondary students for contemporary global challenges (Sama & Fingilla, 2025).

These studies, however, focus primarily on identifying macro-level problems or on discussing critical literacy as an abstract theory, rather than on providing concrete, classroom-based interventions tailored to conflict zones. A significant gap therefore exists in the literature regarding how secondary school teachers may implement practical critical literacy strategies within a specific and highly sensitive community such as Jos North. This study seeks to address that gap by providing an actionable, context-driven framework. The problem in Jos North is twofold:

Socio-Environmental Vulnerability: The interaction of violent ethno-religious clashes and economic survival strategies such as unregulated artisanal mining creates a condition of instability and trauma. This directly disrupts students' safe access to, and emotional engagement with, secondary education (Isah, 2025; Agabi et al., 2025).

Pedagogical Disconnect: The standard English language curriculum, with its strict focus on mechanical decoding, does not equip students with the critical tools to understand, process or challenge the realities of their local environment (Sibanda, 2021). This leaves students vulnerable to manipulation by radical narratives and prevents them from participating in community reconciliation. Without a teaching approach that connects literacy to social context and to localised power dynamics, the educational system risks perpetuating a cycle of alienation and social fragmentation (Gowon, Achor, Korb, Hanior, Ebibi, & Lengman, 2026).

Literature Review

The Concept of Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is an instructional approach that encourages an active, analytical perspective towards texts, moving beyond surface-level decoding to uncover underlying power structures, messages and cultural assumptions (Saiphet, 2025). It allows individuals to reflect actively on texts in order to understand power, inequality and justice in human relationships (Ebibi & Muodumogu, 2019). This approach is grounded in the work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who advocated a "problem-posing pedagogy" that rejects the traditional "banking model" of education, in which teachers deposit knowledge into passive students (Freire, 1970). For Freire, education is a practice of freedom that empowers learners to understand their immediate reality and to take action to change it. This perspective is a core element of critical pedagogy, which views education as a means of liberating learners from oppressive social conditions.

In recent years, scholars have reconceptualised critical literacy as a dynamic, multimodal practice. Sibanda (2021) argues that it involves understanding how texts position readers, identifying underlying ideologies and generating alternative readings. Darder, Baltodano and Torres (2017) extend this position by emphasising reflexivity, urging learners to be aware not only of texts but also of themselves as readers shaped by their own sociocultural contexts. Critical literacy is, moreover, distinct from standard critical reading. While critical reading questions a text's internal logic, context and rhetorical framework, critical literacy goes further by focusing on the production of knowledge and power (Luke, 2012). It asks: who decides what the problems and solutions are? Who benefits from this text? Who is silenced? This constitutes a process of social change aimed at building a more just society, free from discrimination (Sama & Fingilla, 2025).

Critical Literacy in the Twenty-First Century Classroom

Contemporary English classrooms are increasingly multimodal, and meaning is constructed through images, sounds, gestures and digital technologies rather than through print alone (Serafini, 2022). Critical literacy must therefore include visual and digital literacies, enabling learners to interrogate memes, online videos and digital discourses. In the Nigerian context, studies show that integrating digital media for multimodal literacy offers opportunities for a dynamic learning environment, although the potential of these tools remains limited by infrastructure gaps (Sama & Fingilla, 2025). A study by Ajayi (2015) in a Nigerian high school demonstrated how students could use critical multimodal literacy to critique gender representations in textbooks and social media, empowering them to resist structural practices that diminish their voices. In ESL (English as a Second Language) contexts, critical literacy has been shown to empower students to engage with social issues in meaningful ways. Challenges nevertheless remain in balancing language acquisition with critical engagement, particularly within highly centralised, examination-driven educational systems (Aremu, 2024; Saiphet, 2025).

Strategies for Promoting Critical Literacy in Conflict-Affected Communities

Several pedagogical strategies may be used to integrate critical literacy into the English language classroom within conflict-affected communities. These are discussed as follows:

Dialogic Teaching

Dialogic teaching emphasises structured classroom dialogue as a collaborative tool for questioning and constructing meaning (Alexander, 2008). This approach, rooted in the work of Lev Vygotsky, positions talk as an instrument for cognitive and social development (Vygotsky, 1978). It moves away from the traditional "Initiation–Response–Evaluation" (IRE) cycle, in which teachers ask closed questions and students provide brief answers, in favour of open, genuine inquiry questions that encourage deeper reflection (Alexander, 2008). Through teacher-guided discussions, students interrogate authorial intent, bias and hidden ideologies. Research indicates that dialogic teaching increases engagement, fosters collaborative meaning construction

and creates a safe space in which students may express diverse perspectives, even in high-conflict situations (Alexander, 2008; Sibanda, 2021). Techniques such as "reflect–write–speak" can support students who require additional time to process their thoughts, including English language learners navigating complex socio-political concepts.

Reciprocal Teaching

Reciprocal teaching, originally designed to enhance reading comprehension and based on the four core strategies of predicting, questioning, summarising and clarifying (Palincsar & Brown, 1984), has been adapted to promote critical literacy. Evidence from classroom-based intervention studies indicates that reciprocal teaching improves comprehension outcomes, although its effectiveness depends substantially on the quality of teacher instruction (Okkinga, van Steensel, van Gelderen, & Sleegers, 2018). Within a conflict-affected classroom, reciprocal teaching can be adapted into a teacher-led strategy that helps students deconstruct complex, politically loaded texts, encouraging them to clarify hidden motives and to predict the social consequences of biased reporting (Gowon, Achor, Korb, Hanior, Ebibi, & Lengman, 2026).

Multimodal Literacy

Critical engagement with multimodal texts, such as films, social media posts and community flyers, is essential for modern students (Serafini, 2022; Pederson & Myers, 2021). Teachers may ask students to deconstruct how images and digital tools convey ideology, for example by analysing how local political events are framed across different news outlets or online platforms. Studies in Nigerian secondary schools show that this approach helps students to critique structural biases and to resist unequal social narratives (Ajayi, 2015). Other activities include the use of diagrams, graphs and audiobooks to engage different learning preferences, alongside practical projects that encourage students to document their immediate community realities visually.

Problem-Posing Pedagogy

Freire's problem-posing pedagogy remains central to critical literacy. Instead of presenting static facts, teachers present real-world issues, such as environmental degradation arising from local artisanal mining or historical cultural stereotypes, and guide students in analysing critically the texts that address these problems (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2017; Vlach, 2025). This approach encourages learners to connect classroom material to their own lives, helping them to think critically and collaboratively about practical solutions to challenges within their immediate communities.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

By incorporating learners' cultural backgrounds, indigenous knowledge systems and home languages into the classroom, teachers can make critical literacy more relevant and inclusive (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Gowon, Achor, Korb, Hanior, Ebibi and Lengman (2026) state that culturally responsive pedagogy validates student identities and promotes more equitable

engagement. In the Nigerian context, this means using instructional materials that reflect the experiences of marginalised or displaced populations, helping students to connect their lived realities with the literary texts they read in class.

Critical Writing and Counter-Narratives

Encouraging students to produce their own texts, such as reflective essays, research assignments or creative rewritings, empowers them to challenge dominant perspectives and construct new meanings (Ebibi, Joshua, Ogo, & Jimwan, 2025; Ebibi, Bako, & Dung, 2022). This may involve having students write a counter-narrative to a biased text, or produce an investigative report on local issues such as the social effects of unregulated mining. These activities help to develop critical thinking skills while fostering social agency and an active, democratic disposition (Sama & Fingilla, 2025).

Challenges of Implementation

Implementing critical literacy within Jos North LGA presents distinct structural, institutional and cultural challenges. These are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

Challenges to the Implementation of Critical Literacy in Jos North LGA

Challenge Category	Description and Impact in Jos North LGA
Curriculum Rigidity	The Nigerian educational system is centralised and heavily examination-driven. Teachers face considerable pressure to cover the rigid syllabi of WAEC and NECO, leaving little room for the flexible, inquiry-based approaches required for critical literacy.
Teacher Preparedness and Safety	Many educators are trained primarily in traditional, teacher-centred instructional models (Aremu, 2024). Furthermore, in Jos North, teachers' professional roles, productivity and physical safety are undermined by persistent conflict, making them hesitant to facilitate discussions on sensitive local topics (Agabi, Samaki, Abubakar, & Baju, 2025).
Resource Constraints	Under-resourced public schools in Jos North often lack the basic infrastructure, stable electricity, digital platforms and diverse literary texts necessary to support multimodal and visual literacy strategies.
Student and Cultural Resistance	Students from backgrounds that place a strong emphasis on respect for elders and institutional authority may resist pedagogical approaches that require them to question a text or a teacher's position. This can hinder open dialogue on sensitive topics (Gowon, Achor, Korb, Hanior, Ebibi, & Lengman, 2026).
Language Proficiency Barrier	In ESL environments, limited English language proficiency can constitute a barrier to deep critical engagement. Students who struggle with basic decoding and grammar may find it difficult to analyse subtle textual biases or power dynamics.

Recommendations

1. **Integrate Critical Literacy into Curriculum Design:** Educational planners should embed critical literacy outcomes directly into the national and state English language curricula. This means moving beyond mechanical language skills to include objectives focused on text deconstruction, media literacy and peacebuilding.
2. **Context-Specific Teacher Professional Development:** Educational authorities should provide ongoing professional development for teachers. Such training must equip them with the practical tools to facilitate dialogic teaching and provide strategies for creating safe, structured environments when discussing sensitive socio-political texts (Aremu, 2024; Saiphet, 2025; Gowon, Achor, Korb, Hanior, Ebibi, & Lengman, 2026).
3. **De-escalation of Classroom Discourse:** Teachers in Jos North should be explicitly trained in emotional scaffolding and de-escalation strategies. When using critical writing or dialogic teaching around texts that touch upon ethno-religious themes, teachers should establish collaborative ground rules that redirect emotional defensiveness into academic critique.
4. **Use of Diverse, Locally Grounded Materials:** Educators should balance global literary texts with culturally relevant local materials. Using literature that reflects the immediate realities of Plateau State allows students to analyse local issues critically while connecting them to broader global concepts.
5. **Infrastructure Investment for Multimodal Literacy:** State and local governments should prioritise investment in basic digital resources for public schools. Providing access to diverse media platforms can help students to develop the visual and digital literacy skills required to evaluate online information and counter misinformation.
6. **Encourage Student-Centred, Agentive Practices:** Classrooms should adopt student-centred models in which learners participate in selecting discussion topics and generating counter-narratives. This ownership helps to develop the reflective, independent thinking that critical literacy aims to produce.

Conclusion

Critical literacy equips students not merely to decode text, but to analyse and understand the world around them. In English classrooms situated within conflict-affected communities such as Jos North LGA, it can foster a critical consciousness that empowers learners to question divisive ideologies, resist misinformation and prepare for active citizenship. By integrating pedagogical strategies such as dialogic teaching, multimodal analysis, reciprocal teaching and culturally responsive pedagogy, educators can help to transform passive consumers of information into reflective, active participants in community healing. While structural challenges remain, particularly in relation to resource constraints, rigid curricula and the professional safety of educators, sustained commitment to targeted teacher preparation and curriculum reform can make critical literacy an effective instrument for educational development and social recovery in post-conflict societies.

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