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Beyond Participation: Understanding Learner Engagement in Critical Literacy Practices in EFL Contexts

Thidawan Wichanee
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Sakon Nakhon Rajabhat University, Thailand
Email: thidawan@snru.ac.th
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Abstract

Learner engagement plays a crucial role in language learning, particularly in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, where classroom participation is shaped by sociocultural norms. While critical literacy has increasingly been introduced into EFL classrooms, limited research has examined how learner engagement emerges within these practices, particularly in Thai contexts. This study therefore investigates how learner engagement unfolds during critical literacy practices in an EFL classroom. This study qualitatively examined data from eight English major students enrolled in an English literacy course. Data were collected through participatory observation, field notes, reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis and subsequently interpreted through Lewison et al.'s (2015) four-dimensional framework of critical literacy. The findings revealed that learner engagement unfolded as a socioculturally mediated process shaped by three interrelated conditions: collectivist norms, deference to textual authority, and perceived legitimacy of learners' linguistic and experiential resources. These conditions influenced learner engagement in meaning-making processes, gradually enabling the negotiation of perspectives and the development of interpretive agency. This study contributes to critical literacy teaching and research by reconceptualizing learner engagement, highlighting how learners' participation is shaped by their lived experiences, their positioning toward discourses and ideologies, and their use of sociocultural resources within given contexts.

Keywords: critical literacy, learner engagement, EFL classrooms, sociocultural contexts

1. Introduction

In increasingly globalized and digitally mediated contexts, texts are constructed by social, cultural, economic, and political norms (Luke, 2012). In many EFL classrooms, reading practices remain the primary mode through which learners interact with texts. Consequently, reading instruction continues to emphasize literal-level comprehension, limiting opportunities for learners to engage critically with multiple perspectives and sociocultural issues. For EFL learners from culturally diverse backgrounds, focusing on linguistic comprehension alone may overlook how their lived experiences and funds of knowledge shape their interpretation of texts. In response to these limitations, critical literacy, an educational approach that encourages learners to examine how language, power, and ideology shape meaning across a range of communicative practices (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Luke, 2012), offers an alternative by situating reading practices within learners' experiences in local sociocultural contexts. Through dialogic interaction, learners engage with texts cognitively, socially, and critically by positioning themselves in relation to broader social contexts (Ko, 2013; Papadopoulos & Griva, 2025). Accordingly, this study focuses on reading practices as a platform for examining learner engagement in critical literacy practices.

Within critical literacy practices, reading is conceptualized as a social practice through which learners interpret texts in relation to power, discourse, and ideology. Rather than focusing solely on identifying main ideas and linguistic details, it encourages readers to question how meaning is socially constructed (Janks, 2010; Luke, 2011). Given this perspective, learner engagement plays a pivotal role in shaping how meaning-making emerges in classroom settings. Engagement in EFL classrooms is not merely reflected in observable participation but involves learners' active cognitive processing, emotional involvement, and sustained commitment to language learning tasks (Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Prada Arias et al., 2021). In this sense, engagement can be understood as a dynamic process involving cognitive meaning-making, dialogic interaction, and participation, reflected in how learners interrogate textual meanings, consider multiple viewpoints, and position themselves in relation to issues of power and ideology.

However, existing perspectives often assume that engagement is observed through overt forms of critique, questioning, and individual expression (Janks, 2010; Ko, 2013; Shin & Crookes, 2005). Such assumptions risk oversimplifying engagement as a fixed outcome or a linear progression rather than recognizing it as a process enacted through classroom interaction. These assumptions may not fully account for how engagement is realized in EFL classrooms, where it may extend beyond language interaction alone but not be consistently manifested

through explicit forms of critique and critical inquiry (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016). Moreover, existing research has largely emphasized instructional design and learning outcomes, with comparatively limited attention to how learner engagement unfolds in critical literacy practices (Insuwan & Thongrin, 2025; Papadopoulos & Griva, 2025; Prada Arias et al., 2021; Taşpınar & Cubukcu, 2020; Wongwit, 2017).

Previous studies have predominantly employed quantitative or mixed-method designs to examine the effectiveness of critical literacy instruction. While these approaches provide evidence of learning outcomes, they offer limited insight into how learners engage in critical literacy practices. To address this gap, the current study adopts a qualitative design to explore how learner engagement unfolds within critical literacy practices by drawing on the four-dimensional critical literacy model (Lewison et al., 2015), which consists of disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action to promote social justice. The current study conceptualizes learner engagement as a dynamic process that unfolds through learners' interactions with texts. This study also contributes to critical literacy research in EFL contexts by proposing a conceptual account of how engagement unfolds in classroom interactions. In doing so, the study is guided by the following research question:

How does learner engagement in critical literacy practices unfold in an EFL classroom context?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Critical Literacy in English as a Foreign Language Context

Critical literacy emerged in language education in the 1980s, grounded in Paulo Freire's view of learners as social agents who develop critical consciousness through language and reflection on social realities (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Since the mid-1990s, scholarly discussion has shifted from decoding texts toward examining how texts are socially constructed within relations of power, ideology, and representation (Kuo, 2014; Stevens & Bean, 2007). Within this tradition, critical literacy is commonly conceptualized as readers' ability to recognize unbalanced ideologies, question dominant discourses, and act for a more just society (Janks, 2010; Luke, 2011). Therefore, reading is not a neutral cognitive process but a social practice in which meanings are negotiated through readers' cultural, historical, and ideological positioning.

In EFL contexts, critical literacy foregrounds the central role of language in relation to power, discourse, and ideology within collaboration between teachers and learners (Vasquez et al., 2019). As opposed to traditional instruction, critical literacy embraces learners'

funds of knowledge and local experiences as resources for interpreting texts (Jordão & Fogaça, 2012; Waddington & Esteban-Guitart, 2024). Empirical studies have demonstrated how classroom practices that integrate learners' cultural knowledge can facilitate engagement with texts that present multiple perspectives and ideologies. Learners tend to engage in critical literacy more meaningfully when their linguistic and cultural backgrounds are regarded as useful resources rather than obstacles (Li et al., 2025; Park, 2012). Through dialogic interaction, learners can articulate perspectives, negotiate meanings, and engage with multiple viewpoints while participating in meaning-making processes in social contexts (Wardani, 2021). Taken together, learner engagement in critical literacy is closely connected to how learners relate to texts, as their experiences influence how meanings are interpreted in classroom interaction.

Despite the burgeoning body of literature, the implementation of critical literacy across EFL reading classrooms remains uneven. Most research has emphasized instructional outcomes rather than examining how learner engagement unfolds in critical literacy practices (Papadopoulos & Griva, 2025; Taşpınar & Cubukcu, 2020). To provide a structured framework for classroom implementation, Lewison et al. (2015) proposed a four-dimensional model of critical literacy. The model includes 1) disrupting the commonplace, which encourages readers to question overlooked and ongoing situations in everyday texts and practices; 2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, which involves examining both heard and unheard voices; 3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, which situates literacy in wider contexts of power and discourse; and 4) taking action for social justice, which extends critical inquiry toward transformative practices. These dimensions serve as a conceptual framework for the current study to examine how learners participate in critical literacy activities and how engagement unfolds in classroom practices.

2.2 Learner Engagement in Critical Literacy Practices

In EFL settings, learner engagement in critical literacy practices is shaped by the intersection of linguistic development and interaction with ideologically embedded texts. Engagement extends beyond visible participation to entail how learners interact with texts through their backgrounds and prior experiences. Learner engagement is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct that includes cognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions (Wang & Peck, 2013). Cognitive engagement refers to learners' investment in meaning-making processes, while behavioral engagement refers to active participation in learning activities. Lastly, affective engagement refers to learners' interest, motivation, and emotional responses. These dimensions have been associated with meaningful language learning (Fredricks et al., 2004). Previous studies have explored learner engagement and highlighted its role in classroom activities as

a dynamic process in which learners respond to instructional practices through their beliefs, prior experiences, and learning goals, as well as their emotional experiences such as enjoyment, anxiety, and boredom (Han & Hyland, 2015; Yang et al., 2026).

In critical literacy practices, engagement encompasses not only cognitive processes but also social interaction as learners decode the meanings of texts and interpret them in relation to power and ideology (Luke, 2012). Engagement in such contexts can therefore be understood as a multidimensional process through which learners relate to texts, peers, and broader contexts and discourses. Studies in EFL contexts suggest that critical literacy practices require learners to navigate both linguistic features and critical interpretation. Research indicates that learners often engage with texts through a dual process of developing linguistic proficiency while negotiating meaning in social contexts (Mbau & Sugeng, 2019; Pascoal & Mattos, 2022; Suhardiana et al., 2023; Susilowaty et al., 2025). In this sense, critical literacy involves both language learning and critical interpretation, with learners moving beyond literal comprehension to investigate authors' intentions. This process entails managing language development challenges alongside critical inquiry, making their engagement distinct from that of learners in first-language contexts (Papadopoulos & Griva, 2025; Wardani, 2021).

Moreover, research across EFL contexts consistently highlights how engagement is enacted in critical literacy practices. Rather than positioning learners as passive readers, critical literacy requires them to examine how meanings are produced and to question dominant voices and marginalized perspectives. Studies suggest that learners engage with texts by identifying representations of voice and constructing arguments about ideological discourses in relation to their prior experiences (Jung, 2023; Liu et al., 2025; Tseng, 2024). Collectively, these studies suggest that learner engagement in critical literacy is realized through the integration of their personal and social experiences into meaning-making processes, particularly in examining perspectives, representations, and underlying ideologies.

In EFL classrooms, when learners are invited to engage critically with texts, they inevitably integrate their cultural and social experiences into these practices. These experiences are embedded within sociocultural norms, including learners' local contexts, beliefs, values, ways of life, and social expectations. These norms influence how meanings are negotiated and co-constructed during classroom interaction (Janks, 2010; Kubota, 2018). However, texts used in EFL classrooms are socially and ideologically produced and may not align with learners' lived experiences and knowledge (Luke, 2012). As a result, EFL learners may consider critical questioning and interrogating power relations in texts as inappropriate or risky. Empirical studies have discussed the role of critical literacy in fostering critical competence, as learners

interpret texts through their cultural resources, expectations, and critical activities (Huh, 2016; Kuo, 2014; Mas, 2023; Tseng, 2024).

While prior studies have examined the benefits and challenges of critical literacy, limited attention has been given to how learner engagement unfolds as a process in diverse EFL classrooms. Existing research in Thai EFL contexts has highlighted the potential of critical literacy-oriented pedagogy in developing learners' literacy competence through classroom practices and instructional materials (Apairach, 2023; Insuwan & Thongrin, 2025; Pakarasang, 2025). In particular, the inquiry into how learners negotiate between local sociocultural norms and globally produced texts in shaping their engagement within critical literacy practices has not received sufficient attention. To address this gap, this study examines how learner engagement unfolds during critical literacy practices through the four-dimensional framework proposed by Lewison et al. (2015).

3. Methodology

3.1 Design

The current study employed a qualitative design (Creswell, 2011) to investigate how learner engagement unfolded during critical literacy practices in an EFL classroom. Data collection methods included participatory observation, field notes, reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews. The integration of these data sources enabled methodological triangulation, strengthening the credibility of the findings by linking observable classroom interactions with learners' reflective and verbal accounts, thus offering a nuanced understanding of learner engagement in the classroom. This approach was well-suited to gathering information in a naturalistic setting, where learners' participation could be examined as it emerged through interaction and sociocultural context (Angrosino, 2016).

3.2 Research Context and Participants

This study was conducted in an institution of higher education in a provincial town in Northeastern Thailand. The institution served students from diverse sociocultural backgrounds, and students who attended represented multiple ethnic groups. In response to the research question, an English literacy practices course was selected as the research site where students' local cultural experiences could fully inform their engagement in critical literacy practices. The researcher, who was also the course instructor, adopted a teacher-researcher role to gain an in-depth understanding of students' learning experiences while maintaining ethical considerations throughout the research process.

The participants were eight English major students enrolled in the course: five were female and three were male. Although the course initially included a total of forty students, eight participants were purposively selected based on their sustained engagement in critical literacy practices throughout the study and their willingness to participate in interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Their engagement was identified through multiple sources, namely classroom observations, teacher field notes, classroom participation, and reflective journals, which provided evidence of their capacity to offer insightful perspectives.

These participants also represented diverse ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds, and each brought distinctive beliefs, values, and norms to the classroom. Their English proficiency ranged from A2 to C1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), based on the university's English placement test administered prior to the course (see Table 1).

Table 1
Participants in the Study

Participant	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	CEFR Level
Student 04	Female	19	So (ไทโส้)	A2
Student 07	Female	20	Yo (ญ้อ)	B2
Student 08	Female	20	Isan Lao (ลาวอีสาน)	B2
Student 10	Male	20	Yo (ญ้อ)	B2
Student 13	Male	20	Phu Tai (ผู้ไท)	C1
Student 16	Male	20	Phu Tai (ผู้ไท)	B1
Student 17	Female	19	Isan Lao (ลาวอีสาน)	B2
Student 24	Female	20	Phu Tai (ผู้ไท)	C1

3.3 Instruments

This study employed four qualitative instruments: participatory observation, field notes, reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews. Participatory observation was conducted throughout the course to capture students' behaviors and classroom discourse relevant to the research question. The teacher's field notes were used to record interactions and emerging engagement patterns for further analysis. Learners' reflective journals provided valuable insights into the internal experiences of participants throughout the study. Students completed the journals after each critical literacy activity to reflect on the texts, classroom discussions, and connections to their own experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the final stage of the study (see Appendix A). The interview questions were

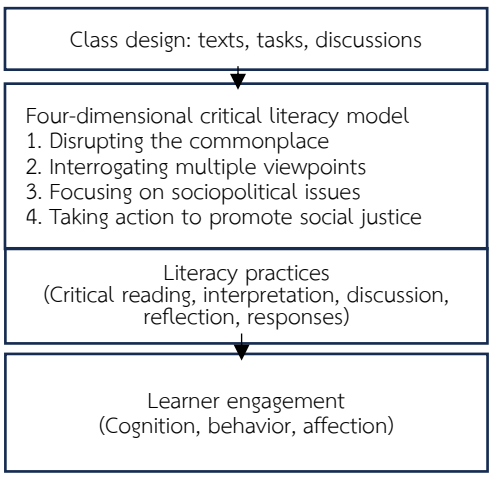
drafted and validated by three experts using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC); the overall value was 0.95. Participation in interviews was voluntary and followed ethical research principles (Document No. HE67-065).

3.4 Data Collection and Procedure

Drawing on the four-dimensional model (Lewison et al., 2015), classroom activities were collaboratively designed by the teacher and learners, involving text selection, types of tasks, and classroom discussions that reflected learners' experiences (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Research Framework



Note. Adapted from "Four-Dimensional Critical Literacy Model" by M. Lewison, C. Leland and J. Hartse, 2015, Creating *critical classrooms: Reading and writing with an edge*. Routledge.

At the beginning of the study, a group discussion was conducted to explore learners' needs, interests, and concerns related to social issues in their local contexts. The participants were then informed about the course as a dual setting involving both a classroom and a research site. For the reading activities, five different reading texts were selected based on learners' needs and interests identified prior to the course (see Table 2). They were drawn and adapted from authentic English-language sources, including books and online media, representing global discourse that reflects social and cultural issues while providing opportunities for learners to relate these issues to their own local experiences.

Table 2
Reading Texts Selected Based on Learners' Needs and Interests

No.	Reading texts	Words	Source	Source Type	CEFR
1	Fashion and Values	285	*Unlock Level 3*	Textbook	B2
2	Children Need to Have Down Time	362	*Chiang Mai Citylife*	Magazine	B2
3	The Changing Northeastern Labor Force in Thailand	360	Thai PBS World	Online News	B2–C1
4	Famous Brand Names Accessories: Luxury Brands, Luxury Living?	360	*Reading Explorer 5*	Textbook	B2–C1
5	Graffiti: Art or Vandalism?	337	British Council	Educational Website	B2

After the students had demonstrated a basic understanding of the texts through comprehension tasks, critical questions were introduced to guide discussion and collaborative meaning-making (see Table 3; Janks, 2010; Lewison et al., 2015; Luke, 2012; Vasquez et al., 2019). Writing activities were then incorporated to provide space for participants to express their ideas in the form of projects or presentations.

Table 3
Examples of Critical Questions Used to Guide Classroom Discussion

Dimension	Critical Questions to Guide Discussion
Disrupting the commonplace	• What ideas in the texts are treated as normal? • Which words, phrases, or sentences guide readers to feel or think in certain ways?
Interrogating multiple viewpoints	• Whose voices are emphasized in the text? • Whose voices are missing?
Focusing on sociopolitical issues	• What social issues appear in the text? • Could you identify power relations in the texts?
Taking action and promoting social justice	• What can readers do to balance power in the text? • How can this text help readers think about change in their context?

Moreover, the students were asked to write weekly reflections in their journals on their perspectives and experiences in each literacy practice. They were also provided with guided prompts to support their reflective journal writing, focusing on their interpretation of texts,

engagement in classroom interactions, and their views and positions on critical issues. The participants were allowed to use both English and Thai in their writing. After reviewing all journals, the journals of the eight selected participants were included in the analysis as they provided rich and detailed accounts of their engagement in critical literacy practices. Throughout the study, participatory observation was conducted to capture relevant phenomena occurring in the classroom setting.

In the final week of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain insights into how participants engaged in the practices. The interviews were conducted in Thai to allow participants to express their experiences and perspectives more freely and in greater depth. Each interview lasted 40–45 minutes. Eight students were invited to participate in the interview sessions. These participants were selected because their classroom responses and journal reflections indicated different ways of engaging with critical discussion. Participation in the interviews was voluntary. The interview data were translated from Thai into English and verified by the participants to ensure the accuracy of the translated meanings.

3.5 Data Analysis

To examine learner engagement as it unfolded in critical literacy practices, the qualitative data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles et al., 2014). The data were first read repeatedly for familiarization and initial memo writing. Initial codes were then generated across the data through line-by-line coding. Codes with conceptual similarities were categorized into themes, which were then reviewed and refined. To enhance trustworthiness and reduce researcher bias, the generated themes were reviewed by two raters to assess credibility and consistency. Based on this process, the themes were finalized into three themes, namely collectivism-oriented restraint in classroom engagement, negotiating with textual authority, and engaging with global discourse through local linguistic and cultural resources (see Table 4).

Table 4

Summary of Codes and Themes

Codes	Themes
● Preference for group-based meaning-making ● Indirect expression to maintain group harmony ● Hesitation in challenging peers' perspectives	● Collectivism norms ● Deference to textual authority ● Linguistic resource and global discourse

Table 4

Summary of Codes and Themes (cont.)

Codes	Themes
• Reluctance to question the author's intentions • Fear of giving incorrect interpretations • Switching to L1 to express complex thoughts • Confidence fluctuating with language proficiency	

4. Findings

In response to the research question, "How does learner engagement in critical literacy practices unfold in an EFL classroom context?" the findings indicate that learner engagement unfolded through culturally influenced factors during the practices. The factors included collectivist norms, deference to textual authority, and norms concerning the legitimacy of linguistic and experiential resources. These factors operated dynamically and mediated learner engagement in classroom interaction. Through this process, learner engagement contributed to the gradual development of interpretive agency, as learners began to negotiate meanings on their own and articulate their own interpretations. In the following sections, the term "excerpt" refers to data obtained from interview sessions, whereas "extract" refers to data taken from students' reflective journals.

4.1 Collectivism as a Mediating Mechanism of Engagement

The data analysis suggests that learner engagement in critical literacy practices initially unfolded through collectivist norms, which mediated how participants interacted in critical discussion. At the outset, values of humility and harmony, as well as notions of conformity, shaped learners' hesitation to express their viewpoints. These patterns reflect a collectivist orientation that emphasizes group harmony over individual viewpoints when encountering different ideas. However, as learners engaged in dialogic interaction, these norms were gradually renegotiated. Rather than suppressing disagreements, the participants began to reinterpret the texts from multiple perspectives. In this process, critical literacy practices functioned not simply as a space for critique but as a site where the meaning of disagreement was redefined within participants' sociocultural context. As a result, learner engagement unfolded from cautious participation toward more open and critical exchanges of viewpoints, as shown in the following excerpt.

Excerpt 1

Researcher: Which part of the practices has been beneficial to your reading practices the most?

Student 24: I like quizzes and presentations and I like discussion the most.

Researcher: How would you explain it?

Student 24: I used to think that arguing would cause conflict. I learned from the discussion that we could have fun argument with no right or wrong.

Researcher: Would you describe what happened in the group discussion?

Student 24: I noticed that everyone saw different things in the text. For example, Nan (pseudonym) said she liked dressing beautifully because it made her feel confident, while Fern thought inner intelligence was more important. When Nan shared her experience of working as a weekend receptionist at a restaurant, she explained that being well-dressed helped her work more effectively because appearance matters in service jobs. That makes sense, I did not think of it that way as well as Fern. We ended up talking about making money from part-time jobs. (Laugh)

During the discussion of the text "Fashion and Values," Student 24 illustrated collectivist norms through the statement "*I used to think that arguing would cause conflict*." This reflects a cultural orientation in which disagreement was initially positioned as socially risky and disruptive. Rather than immediately and directly opposing peers' viewpoints, the participant engaged in a form of mediated participation by acknowledging and accommodating multiple viewpoints. This suggests that engagement was not absent, but unfolded through cultural forms that prioritize group harmony. In this way, the participants began to renegotiate this restraint by shifting their perception from viewing disagreement as a conflict to understanding it as a constructive exchange of perspectives.

The participants engaged in the activities as collective meaning-makers rather than through individual assertion, as illustrated in the following excerpt taken from another reflective journal. The participant eventually shared their stories, while peers responded by connecting their own experiences. This reciprocal exchange of experiences deepened mutual understanding within the group, suggesting that engagement with collectivist norms emerged not through individual critique but through shared narrative exchange.

Extract 1

My group helped me notice things I see every day but never thought about them. We listened and built ideas together. At first, I wasn't sure about sharing my views, like when the text said students shouldn't take extra classes. I wanted to say I once wanted to join after-school classes just to be with friends, but I had to help my grandma on her farm. Later I realized it was fine to speak up. When I shared it, my classmates connected their own stories, and it made me feel like we really understood each other. (Student 08)

Regarding a critical discussion, Student 08 initially expressed uncertainty about speaking up and showed concern about appropriateness and group harmony. This hesitation indicates how collectivist norms may constrain the expression of individual viewpoints at the outset. However, as the classroom environment became more supportive and non-judgmental, the participant began to engage more actively by sharing personal experiences and responding to peers' contributions. This shift suggests that engagement was gradually mediated through collective interaction, where meanings were co-constructed through shared narratives. The statement "*We listened and built ideas together*" highlights how mutual understanding was achieved through collaborative dialogue grounded in collectivist values. Supported by an observation field note taken during the discussion, the participants adopted flexible roles during discussion, at times defending or challenging viewpoints by drawing on supporting evidence.

Another pattern indicates that learner engagement unfolded through concerns about group acceptance. Peer approval became an important condition for critical engagement. Even after sharing, participants continued to negotiate their engagement when they felt less confident in the classroom, as illustrated in the following extract drawn from a reflective journal.

Extract 2

I thought the tasks were done once I finished the activities on finding main ideas. When the class was requested to relate the ideas with our own stories, I was not sure if mine was weird or different from my friends'. The text mentioned graffiti in town; I was not even sure that my opinions would be acceptable because I could only relate to the similar issue in my village. I watched Jack (Pseudonym) share his experiences on how he did not like it when people put the commercial banners on his house's fence. The class seemed to engage with the ideas. Later, I tried my story, but I still have a feeling of hesitation whether it is acceptable. (Student 10)

Student 10 illustrates collectivist norms through his hesitation, which suggests an orientation toward normative conformity. As presented in Extract 2, Student 10 waited until his peer contributed a story to the group, and engagement was negotiated through group

dynamics and self-monitoring. The participant entered the dialogue carefully, using his peer's responses as cues for when and how personal perspectives could be shared. In this sense, questioning the texts was not considered a pedagogical task but a socially situated act, as observed in the following interview transcript.

Excerpt 2

Researcher: In the class, you were asked to question the norms of taking extra classes as a trend not to study for real. How did you feel then?

Student 08: At first, I thought that if I express my opinion and it was contrary to the text, I have nothing against extra classes outside schools if the students really want to study. Anyway, I was worried how would my friends would feel, or was it OK to question the texts like that.

Researcher: Anyway, you made your point toward the text at the end, why was that?

Student 08: After, the teacher affirmed that there was no right no wrong about this, I tried and when I saw that my friends were intentionally listen to me with positive feelings, I started to feel more comfortable.

In Excerpt 2, the interview concerns the participant's experiences of questioning ideas from the text "Children Need to Study and Have Down Time." After discussing the issue with peers, the participant was constrained by anxiety about expressing different ideas, as indicated in the statement, "*I was worried how my friends would feel.*" This illustrates cultural norms that prioritize social acceptance, reflecting the Northeastern cultural context, in which collectivism and social harmony can contribute to discomfort with disagreement and conflict (Petchkam, 2018).

4.2 Textual Authority as a Constraint on Interpretive Agency

The analysis also reveals that learner engagement in critical literacy practices unfolded through an initial deference to textual authority. The participants initially perceived texts as legitimate sources of knowledge, which led to hesitation in questioning the perspectives embedded in the texts. However, through dialogic classroom interaction, the participants gradually began to reconsider the assumption that texts were unquestionable. The following interview excerpt illustrates how learners negotiated this deference through discussion with peers.

Excerpt 3

Researcher: How did you feel when you were asked to analyze the text deeply?

Student 04: Honestly, I was confused at first. I thought what we read is always true.

Researcher: What helped you start looking beyond the surface meaning?

Student 04: Group discussion, when I heard the other possible points from my friend, I eventually came to understand that was why we should question the texts.

Researcher: Did you feel comfortable challenging the ideas of the texts?

Student 04: Not at first, I felt so strange like I did not believe the ideas. Slowly, I learned that negotiating different perspectives were fine.

The excerpt above illustrates how deference to textual authority initially shaped the participants' engagement in critical literacy practices. Student 4's statement, "*I thought what we read is always true*," reflects an underlying assumption of textual legitimacy. This perception positioned texts as authoritative and unquestionable rather than as socially constructed discourses. Moreover, classroom observation revealed that some learners tended to align with dominant ideas presented in texts and hesitated to challenge hidden meanings. Critical discussion appeared to mediate this normative constraint, as learners began to explore alternative interpretations and reconsider textual authority.

Regarding questioning texts or the author's intentions, local cultural norms reinforced participants' deference to textual authority and shaped their engagement in the practices. The data revealed feelings of discomfort and being overwhelmed when learners were required to interrogate power relations and the author's intentions, as observed in the following reflection from a journal.

Extract 3

I felt nervous or rude to disagree with the author, I worried that if I questioned the ideas, it would be disrespectful. I have been told all along that knowledge is a teacher for us. (Student 16)

As shown in Extract 3, Student 16's reflection illustrates how internalized notions of authority shaped her engagement. The term "disrespectful" signals that questioning the text led to a sense of unease. The participant appeared to position herself as less authoritative

than the author, reflecting values of consideration for others (kreng jai) and a desire to maintain social harmony, which often dissuade learners from disagreeing or positioning themselves as equal contributors in knowledge construction. In line with Alexander and McCargo (2014), EFL learners positioned themselves as modest and less authoritative members in classroom interactions. They often deferred to mainstream knowledge, privileging dominant discourse over personal knowledge in order to maintain group harmony and avoid potential conflict.

4.3 Conditions for Engaging with Global Discourse

Apart from collectivist norms and deference to textual authority, learner engagement in critical literacy practices also unfolded through learners' access to and use of both linguistic and experiential resources, which served as conditions for meaning-making. In classroom discussions, the participants initially hesitated to share their ideas due to uncertainty about their English proficiency and concerns over being understood. Nonetheless, rather than disengaging, they drew on their local languages to mediate understanding and sustain participation. The following interview excerpt illustrates how the use of local linguistic resources enabled learners to engage in critical discussion.

Excerpt 4

Researcher: In class discussion, you looked hesitant at first but somehow made it to share your ideas with the class, would you mind telling me what was going on?

Student 07: I wanted to share my ideas with the class, but I was not sure my English would be fully understandable. So, I tried Thai first and then my friends seemed to be welcoming my ideas and I ended up using Yo (ญ้อ, local dialect).

Researcher: What made you feel more comfortable with using Yo?

Student 07: First, I was afraid that using Thai or Yo will be wrong, but the class opened for them as the teacher nodded when I started describing my ideas. I just know that using my language to explain what I saw in the text helped increase my confidence that I understand it right.

By stating that "*I was not sure my English would be fully understandable,*" Student 07's hesitation reflects an underlying tension between participating in the interpretation of global discourse and maintaining confidence in using English, which the participant perceived as below the expected standard. Despite that, the participant used her L1 (Yo, ญ้อ), a local dialect, to engage with global discourse. This indicates that engagement was reconfigured

through available linguistic resources. Furthermore, observation field notes indicated that learners often shifted from English or Thai into their local languages to negotiate the meaning of unfamiliar words or concepts presented in texts.

Another extract from a reflective journal further illustrates how linguistic hierarchies influenced learner engagement in critical literacy practices. These data reveal that English has a higher symbolic status in academic settings, while local dialects were considered less legitimate or non-academic. This interpretation influenced learners' confidence and willingness to participate in reading practices, as reported in the following extract.

Extract 4

I like the ideas of using preferred language in the discussion and some parts in class presentations. Somehow, I felt that my L1 (Phu Tai) was not academic since it is English class. Even in Thai, I was not so sure if the words I selected were too simple or informal. When I faced English difficult word like "sophisticated", I finally understood it in Thai, when I saw it again in the texts, I was not confident enough to fully share my interpretation because my language might not be suitable to use in English class. (Student 13)

Despite being permitted to use L1, Student 13 continued to evaluate the appropriateness of her linguistic repertoire (Phu Tai, ผู้ไท) against perceived academic norms. While understanding the term "sophisticated" through Thai facilitated comprehension of the text, the learner hesitated to express her interpretation, suggesting that comprehension alone was not adequate for engagement when linguistic legitimacy was in question.

Beyond the use of linguistic resources, another pattern drawn from a reflective journal revealed that the relationship between textual themes and learners' lived experiences shaped their engagement in critical literacy practices. When engaging with texts representing unfamiliar contexts, the participants expressed uncertainty about whether their interpretations were relevant or appropriate to share in class discussion. They hesitated and refrained from fully articulating their ideas due to concerns that their contributions might be perceived as incorrect or meaningless. The following reflection illustrated this tension.

Extract 5

Today, I was not so sure about changing how the text ended. I did not share all my thoughts to the class because I was not sure that my ideas would be correct or meaningful. I know that brand names are out there but all I can think of it was I work in one of the shops not a customer to buy one. (Student 24)

After the text "Famous Brand Names Accessories: Luxury Brands, Luxury Living?" was used in reading practices, Student 24 was constrained by a sense of self-doubt, stating, "*I did not share all my thoughts to the class because I was not sure that my ideas would be correct or meaningful*." This suggests that engagement was influenced by concerns about correctness. The hesitation indicates that critical literacy practices involved not only interpretive ability but also how learners position themselves within academic and social contexts (Tian & Dumlao, 2020). The participant's discomfort also concerned her view of sociocultural and socioeconomic conditions, expressed through the idea of unaffordable products and her self-positioning as a worker. This reflects an internalized sense of inferiority shaped by global consumer hierarchies, as the participant located herself outside the group of legitimate consumers of luxury brands. This finding is consistent with previous studies suggesting that learners' participation in critical discussions can be shaped by their social positioning, with some Thai individuals perceiving their status as lower than that of individuals from other regions of Thailand due to economic inequality (Alexander & McCargo, 2014; Wichanee & Thongrin, 2024).

However, critical literacy practices also encouraged participants to seek marginalized voices in texts. Rather than passively accepting dominant representations, the participants negotiated these ideas in relation to their local contexts and lived experiences. Through this process, the participants became more aware of how dominant norms were constructed and normalized in texts. Their interpretations were then drawn from personal experiences, as shown in the following data:

Extract 6

> I know that working in the big cities means better pay, and sometimes I would like to have that chance too. Reading the text and being asked to think about missing voices, I feel more like working in my hometown so I can connect with my family and my way of life. The text referred to big cities as lands of opportunities, I think we have that here too. I would like to stay close to my family since my parents are getting old. (Student 17)

Student 17 critically examined the portrayal of big cities as "lands of opportunities" through a locally grounded perspective. While acknowledging the global discourse that associates urban migration with economic success ("better pay"), the participant did not fully accept this representation as universal. Instead, the notion of success was redefined in relation to values such as family connection, community belonging, and continuity of lifestyle. This reinterpretation also reflects a form of agentive engagement in which the learner selectively engaged with global discourse while rearticulating it through locally meaningful interactions (Huang, 2013).

5. Discussion

This section discusses the findings drawn from the implementation of the critical literacy model (Lewison et al., 2015). The findings highlight the interplay of collectivist norms, deference to textual authority, and perceptions of linguistic and experiential resources in shaping learners' engagement in critical literacy practices. As illustrated in Figure 2, learner engagement did not emerge as an immediate or fixed outcome; rather, it developed through learners' ongoing negotiation of sociocultural conditions, which shaped their confidence, participation, and interpretive agency throughout the learning process. The findings further suggest that learner engagement was shaped not only by these sociocultural conditions but also by pedagogical conditions within the classroom. The selection of texts addressing socially relevant issues, guided critical questions, collaborative peer discussions, and a supportive classroom environment encouraged learners to move beyond literal comprehension toward critical engagement. Rather than emerging automatically from the implementation of the critical literacy framework, engagement developed through the interaction between these pedagogical supports and learners' sociocultural resources.

Figure 2
Learner Engagement in Critical Literacy in EFL Contexts

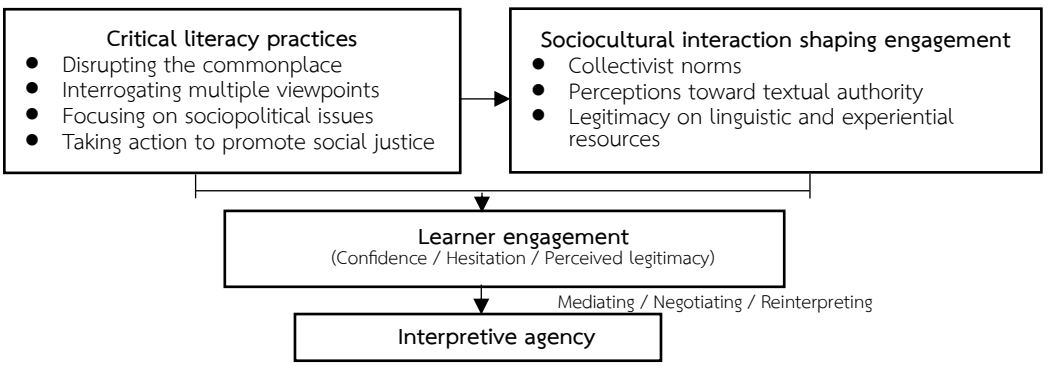


Figure 2 proposes that critical literacy practices are interrelated with sociocultural conditions, including collectivist norms, orientations toward textual authority, and perceptions of the legitimacy of linguistic and experiential resources. First, the data indicate that collectivist norms shaped how participants engaged in critical literacy practices. EFL learners in Northeastern Thailand tended to articulate their stories or personal opinions cautiously in dialogic settings, as they negotiated personal expression within expectations of group harmony. The participants

carefully evaluated the potential impact of their contributions before speaking, reflecting a preference for maintaining social acceptance when engaging with textual meaning (Lin, 2017). Given this, learners approached questioning texts cautiously, and their participation increased gradually as the classroom environment became more supportive. These patterns suggest that engagement did not occur immediately but developed through ongoing negotiation between personal viewpoints and perceived group dynamics. In line with Linh and Van Loi (2024), learners contributed to collective understanding by drawing on shared experiences rather than emphasizing individual achievement. Such tendencies influenced their willingness to engage in critical discussion and questioning (Esteban & Palawatwichai, 2024; Kirkpatrick & Young, 2014).

Second, deference to textual authority functioned as a constraint on learners' interpretive agency. Participants initially positioned texts and authors as legitimate and unquestionable sources of knowledge, which limited their willingness to critically engage with textual meanings. Learners were reluctant to question or challenge underlying ideologies, and only began to do so after gaining confidence through peer discussion. This pattern suggests that deference to textual authority operated as an internalized constraint that bounded how learners positioned themselves in relation to textual meanings. Rather than critically questioning the texts, participants tended to align their responses with what was perceived as legitimate knowledge, limiting the scope of critical interpretation. In this sense, interpretive agency was selectively enacted within these constraints. This aligns with Young (2021), who notes that hierarchy in Thai classrooms often results in learners remaining silent rather than questioning given knowledge. These beliefs treated texts as fixed information and created discomfort when learners proposed alternative interpretations, ultimately impeding learner engagement in critical literacy practices. Such positioning constrained learners' interpretation and limited their engagement in interrogating textual meanings (Luke, 2012).

Third, the use of L1 functioned as a mediational means that enabled learners to articulate interpretations and maintain participation in discussion. Engagement was not dependent on adherence to target-language norms but unfolded through flexible linguistic practices that supported interpretation and expression. This reflects a sociocultural perspective, which views language as a mediational tool for scaffolding individuals' understanding of texts (Vygotsky, 1978). However, learners' perceptions of linguistic and experiential resources shaped how they engaged in these practices. English was positioned as the dominant language, whereas local languages were treated as informal or transitional tools rather than legitimate resources for meaning-making (Esquivel, 2020; Y. Park, 2011). This hierarchical positioning constrained how learners mobilized their linguistic repertoires, limiting their ability to fully enact their interpretations in classroom interaction.

Despite these constraints, learners demonstrated their ability to reinterpret dominant discourse by drawing on their own experiences. Through critical questions, particularly those focusing on omitted or marginalized voices in texts, participants repositioned dominant meanings and negotiated alternative interpretations. Consistent with Liu et al. (2025) and Kuo (2014), critical literacy practices encouraged learners to develop a sense of agency in defining and co-constructing textual meaning on their own terms.

While previous studies in Thai EFL contexts have primarily examined the outcomes of critical literacy in terms of learners' critical awareness and critical literacy development (Apairach, 2023; Insuwan & Thongrin, 2025; Pakarasang, 2025; Wongwit, 2017), the present study extends this line of inquiry by exploring how learner engagement unfolded in critical literacy practices. In this sense, engagement can be understood as a negotiated space in which varying degrees of confidence, hesitation, and perceived legitimacy intersect in the process of meaning-making. Learners did not simply respond to instructional tasks; rather, they gradually engaged as they navigated social expectations, recognized diverse viewpoints, and co-constructed interpretations through social interactions and dialogue (Huang, 2013; Kang & Kline, 2020). Through this ongoing interaction, learners began to develop interpretive agency by articulating their own perspectives and reinterpreting textual meanings. Engagement, therefore, unfolds through collaborative meaning-making rather than individual performance. Overall, these findings extend existing understanding of learner engagement by demonstrating that learner engagement is not merely a function of participation but a socially and discursively mediated process shaped by learners' positioning within cultural, linguistic, and global contexts.

6. Conclusion, Implications, and Limitations

The implementation of the four-dimensional critical literacy model (Lewison et al., 2015) in this study helps to illuminate how EFL learners engage in critical literacy practices in a university classroom. The findings indicate that learner engagement is not a direct outcome of participation, but unfolds through the interplay of sociocultural norms, orientations toward textual authority, and learners' access to linguistic and experiential resources. Extending the four-dimensional model, the findings of this study point to a nuanced understanding of learner engagement as a socioculturally mediated process, in which learners' participation is shaped by their lived experiences, their positioning toward dominant discourse and ideologies, and their use of available sociocultural resources within a given sociocultural context (Luke, 2012; Moll, 2019). This process was neither linear nor uniform but was socially and contextually shaped.

Taken together, the findings contribute to critical literacy teaching and research in three ways. First, the study reconceptualizes learner engagement as a mediated process, demonstrating that engagement unfolds through identifiable interactional and sociocultural negotiations rather than as an immediate outcome of pedagogical intervention. Second, the findings challenge dominant conceptualizations of critical engagement, particularly in Western contexts where critical engagement has often been associated with direct challenge, confrontation, or explicit critique of texts and dominant discourse (Blixen & Pannell, 2020; Johnson & Keane, 2023; Wallace, 2017; Weninger, 2020). In contrast, the present study suggests that engagement may also emerge through alternative forms, including shared narrative exchange, gradual stance development, meaning co-construction, and moments of respectful hesitation prior to critique, which represent less visible but pedagogically significant forms of engagement. Third, the findings highlight that engagement is not determined solely by language proficiency but also by learners' perceptions of whether their voices, linguistic repertoires, and lived experiences are recognized as legitimate in meaning-making. This shifts the focus from what learners can achieve linguistically to whether they perceive themselves as entitled to engage fully within EFL classrooms.

There are several limitations that future research should consider. First, future research should extend beyond the regional context of the current study and include larger groups of participants in order to gain broader insights. Second, the current study was limited to a single semester; longitudinal studies have the potential to provide further insights into how learner engagement develops over time. Third, a wider range of texts may elicit more diverse perspectives from learners. Lastly, future studies should investigate the interplay between critical literacy practices and adjacent literacy areas such as academic reading and writing and reading and writing in English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The findings of this study may be useful for language teachers in EFL contexts whose practices are relevant to teaching literacy to marginalized learners, as well as researchers interested in literacy teaching and future research in this area.

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Appendix A

Examples of Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Critical Literacy Dimension (Lewison et al., 2015)	Interview Section	Sample Semi-Structured Interview Questions
Disrupting the Commonplace	Experiences of Critical Literacy Practices	1. How did you feel when you were asked to look beyond the surface meaning of the text? 2. Was there any activity that changed the way you usually read English texts? Please explain.
	Reflection on Reading	1. Which classroom activity influenced your reading the most? Why? 2. How has your way of reading changed throughout the course?
Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints	Classroom Discussion and Participation	1. How did group discussions influence your understanding of the texts? 2. Can you describe a time when your classmates helped you see the text differently?
	Negotiating Different Perspectives	1. How did you feel when you disagreed with the author's ideas? 2. What made it easier or more difficult to express alternative viewpoints?
Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues	Connecting Texts to Lived Experiences	1. How did the reading texts relate to your own life or community? 2. Were there any social issues in the texts that reminded you of your own experiences? Please give examples.
	Cultural Identity	1. How did your cultural background influence the way you interpreted the texts? 2. Were your local experiences helpful when discussing social issues in class? Why?
Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice	Confidence and Classroom Agency	1. How did your confidence in expressing your ideas change throughout the course? 2. Can you describe a moment when you felt comfortable sharing your own experiences or opinions?
	Language and Identity	1. How did using Thai or your local language affect your participation in classroom discussions? 2. Did using your preferred language help you communicate your ideas more effectively? Why?