

BRIDGING EFL LEARNERS' TARGET LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE DISCREPANCY WITH THE SUPPORT OF CRITICAL CULTURAL AWARENESS

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ABSTRACT

It has been a long-standing issue that EFL learners are required to consistently showcase gratifying target language performances, competencies, and achievements while taking part in a wide variety of second language learning activities without being prepared well with suitable and authentic learning materials. In response to this aforesaid issue, second language educators need to immerse EFL learners into critical cultural awareness to make them become more efficient target language users. This present small-scale library study was projected to profoundly investigate the way critical cultural awareness can bridge globalized EFL learners' target language knowledge discrepancy in actual second language learning contexts. To do so, the researcher conducted an in-depth thematic analysis of the previously generated research results addressed by 20 critical cultural awareness studies published worldwide. Concerning the specifically-obtained research results, critical cultural awareness can potentially become one of the worthwhile strategies to be further applied in nowadays second language circumstances by which EFL learners foster their target language competencies to the desired outcomes and transform into more skillful target language users.

Keywords: *Critical cultural awareness; EFL learners; library study; thematic analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Acquiring a second language cannot be detached from the cultural transmission transmitted by target language educators. By possessing an in-depth understanding of the targeted second language culture, EFL learners can master this newly obtained language comfortably since they are more capable of applying all of the linguistic features in accord with their specifically situated life and learning contexts. Civelek and Toplu (2021) theorize that with the accompaniment of the prolific cultivation of prolific target language culture understanding, EFL learners will have broader opportunities to endure more meaningful daily learning processes as they have already familiarized themselves with a wide variety of cultural values resided in their already-learned language.

In contrast, worldwide EFL educators still have a higher level of tendency to overlook the importance of constant cultural transmission in their quotidian teaching-learning process. They are more prone to focus on their learners' cognitive abilities and test-taking scores since both features are deemed as the most paramount parameters in the successful target language competencies attainment. The aforementioned fact is supported by Azizpour (2021) who unveiled that a predominant number of globalized EFL teachers are more liable to internalize a vast range of relevant teaching-learning dynamics in which language learners' second language skills can

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significantly thrive to the fullest potential.

Interestingly, there is a tangible discrepancy between EFL educationalists' pedagogical knowledge and the designated target language learning enterprises they are going to further incorporate. Since modern second language classroom circumstances are manifested in a more dynamic instead of a static appearance, it is of foremost crucial for second language educators to activate, nurture, and reinforce their critical cultural awareness to pave a more enlightening, purposeful, and holistic learning pathway for diverse wide-ranging learners by which they establish more collaborative learning nature with all learning community members through meaningful classroom interactions. The aforementioned suggestion is in harmony with Ghavamnia (2020) averring that in the continual support of critical cultural awareness, second language educators can sustainably actualize more emotionally supportive classroom vicinities where all EFL learners can set up more meaningful classroom interactions with other learning companions.

To better cultivate a higher level of critical cultural awareness, it is pivotal for worldwide second language educators to thoroughly value the major essence of cultural diversity at the commencement of their classroom learning basis. By totally embracing the rich, unique, and inescapable cultural differences forming in their living classroom miniatures, globalized second language educationalists are going to have another promising potential to design a vast variety of teaching-learning activities accommodating the whole learners' particular learning needs, interests, backgrounds, and purposes. The above-explicated notion is positively linked to Kiziltan and Ayar (2020) avowing that by the means of sincere cultural diversity acknowledgment, globalized second language educationalists can efficiently navigate their presently situated classroom learning enterprises in a better-coordinated purpose since learners incessantly come through a wide array of relatable learning materials.

Another probable approach worldwide second language educators can potentially release upon implementing their critical cultural awareness into their existing classroom learning surroundings is through the assistance of authentic target language learning materials. In the light of authentic target language learning materials, EFL learners will not solely master the desired target language competencies but also inculcate a more comprehensive understanding of how to apply their novel target language skills in global settings. Simply speaking, the robust construction of critical cultural awareness can probably allow more positive trajectories for EFL learners to utilize their previously mastered target language proficiency in conjunction with their daily life situations. This rewarding second language learning benefit resonated well with Gayatri et al. (2023) stating that with an insistent enlightenment of exhaustive critical cultural awareness applied by second language teachers, EFL learners will be more capable of juxtaposing the previously attained language skills in agreement with their specific life events.

Given the importance of the previously stated influential values, globalized second language educators are advised to integrate their specifically made teaching-learning materials with the target language culture EFL learners are going to learn. Two impactful values may be reaped through the means of this initiative. Firstly, EFL learners can terrifically maximize their target language competencies in concord with the second language cultural values they have already obtained. This first conception aligns with Dewi and Rahmawati (2022) mentioning that it is becoming progressively essential for worldwide second language educationalists to unify their specifically enacted teaching learning materials with the cross-cultural understanding presented in the target language to outstandingly escalate EFL learners' target language proficiency to the utmost development. Secondly, EFL learners can properly apply the entire target language competencies and cultural understanding in appropriate language learning conditions both in oral and written modes. This second contention echoes Farooq et al. (2018) who highly suggested globalized second language educators start invigorating their learners' critical cultural awareness at the onset of regular teaching-learning dynamics in which all learning community members will be

more skilled at making use of their target language proficiency in suitable learning situations.

Of notable importance is EFL learners can progressively transfigure into more adaptable, flexible, knowledgeable, and competent target language users in their prospective society after the meritorious attunement of their second language skills with critical cultural awareness. These skills are highly indispensable in this 21st-century era as a vast majority of working places demand qualified workforces capable of showcasing high-quality target language dispositions and profound familiarization with the specific working customs, cultures, and values EFL learners are going to cope with. This ultimate advantageous benefit conforms to Yurtsever and Özel (2021) who underscore the critical importance of substantiating EFL learners' critical cultural awareness at the outset of the daily teaching-learning processes wherein they can gradually transform into more skillful future workforces who are ready to deal with variegated working demands and shifts.

Five prior studies were conducted given the major theme portrayed in this present small-scale qualitative study. The first study was initiated by Echcharfy (2022) who revealed that a great majority of Moroccan EFL teachers were still struggling with the precise utilization of critical cultural awareness due to the restricted curricula system imposed by their educational institutions. Putri and Kuswando (2020) strongly advocated that Indonesian EFL educators start applying a critical incident technique at the beginning of the teaching journeys to foster their motivation, self-confidence, and professionalism while educating their learners. Sutiyono et al. (2023) unfolded that an overwhelming majority of Indonesian EFL educationalists were capable of elevating their critical cultural awareness with the continuous endorsement of various ICT platforms as they limitlessly access a vast variety of richer information concerning the cultural values shared by the target language. Wijaya (2022) uncovered that a great number of Indonesian EFL educators working in a private school institution residing in the NTT province have been more skilled at designing more appropriate, relevant, and meaningful teaching-learning materials for diverse wide-ranging learners after fostering their critical cultural awareness. In the last investigation, Wijaya (2022) discovered that Indonesian novice EFL educators have ceaselessly brought about more emotionally supportive second language learning environments to the whole learning community members after they cultivate a higher degree of critical cultural awareness. Although many EFL teacher-related studies have been carried out to profoundly investigate the indispensability of nurturing critical cultural awareness amidst nowadays EFL teachers' teaching journeys, scant attention has been dedicated to the paramount role of incorporating this teacher professional development component concerning the regular learners' second language learning dynamics. The above-depicted research gap set the researcher's foundation to initiate an exhaustive investigation concerning the criticality of internalizing critical cultural awareness within globalized EFL learners' daily learning basis in an attempt to supportively provide greater assistance for them to incorporate their newly-acquired target language knowledge and skills in correspond with the particularly presented life contexts they are confronting day by day. To this end, the following research problem was raised: How does the integration of critical cultural awareness assist worldwide EFL learners in bridging their target language knowledge discrepancy?

RESEARCH METHODS

Accompanied by a library study approach, this current small-scale qualitative investigation will pave a more promising pathway for the researcher to obtain more reliable, relatable, and comprehensible research results as the exhaustive exploration of already-yielded research results was the main objective of this study. To that end, the researcher selected 20 previously published critical cultural awareness studies that have been accepted and approved by a wide variety of reputable journal platforms worldwide. Two major reasons kindled the researcher's deepest motivation to conscientiously select this certain number of studies. Firstly, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, none of the prior studies have been conducted to profoundly investigate the pivotal role of critical

cultural awareness which is based on EFL learners' apparent target language experiences, perspectives, and standpoints. Thus, this present small-scale library study can potentially provide renewable angles concerning the most efficient target language learning trajectories globalized second language educators can carry out after knowing the meritorious benefits produced by critical cultural awareness in learners' daily learning processes. Secondly, upon the impending accomplishment of this qualitative library investigation, worldwide second language educators begin to prioritize the continual integration of critical cultural awareness into their daily teaching-learning materials as an integral part of their classroom learning habituation. By doing so, second language educators all around the globe will not merely be successful in escalating EFL learners' target language competencies to the utmost level but also transmit fully-comprehensive cross-cultural understanding beneficial for the significant advancement of their academic lives and prospective careers. To a lesser extent, these 20 specifically selected critical cultural awareness studies ranged from 2017 until 2023 year. The main impetus propelling the researcher to select these recently published investigations was to produce more up-to-date and contextual research results corresponding with globalized EFL teaching-learning enterprises. During the data analysis processes, the researcher simultaneously internalized a thematic analysis while analyzing the previously generated research results disseminated by 20 critical cultural awareness studies. There were two main positive values imparted by a thematic analysis. The first impactful benefit is the researcher can conduct a more accurate data analysis towards ample research results yielded by the reviewed studies. As a result, the forthcoming research results will be beneficial for transforming EFL teaching-learning enterprises conducted worldwide. The second influential impact is the researcher can produce more understandable research results that will be easily interpreted by globalized ELT parties. Hence, the approaching research results can be accurately incorporated in line with the underlying nature, principles, and procedures presented by critical cultural awareness. To successfully release these positive study values, the researcher also relied on an open-coding analysis. With the accompaniment of an open-coding analysis, the researcher can meaningfully cluster all previously-analyzed research results emanating from 20 critical cultural awareness studies into some major-specific themes. By subdividing each single research result into some identical themes, the targeted research parties will obtain a comprehensive understanding of the particularly discussed research topic. Furthermore, the researcher can easily expound on each single generated research result which is harmonious with the already-proposed research theme and objectives. At the commencement of research result explications, the researcher attempted to explain the already-subcategorized research themes with the further corroboration of closely related research results and theories about critical cultural awareness. By embodying this ultimate research action, the researcher is more likely to generate more solid, reliable, and accountable research results that are impactful for rejuvenating the entire EFL teaching-learning dynamics conducted worldwide.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This part intended to impart more comprehensive depictions concerning the specific roles of critical cultural awareness in bridging globalized EFL learners' target language knowledge discrepancy with their daily life and language learning basis. Methodologically speaking, the prospective research themes were the apparent results derived from a profound library analysis conducted before. Two major specific themes have been clustered namely: (1) Critical cultural awareness induces more holistic second language learning climates and (2) critical cultural awareness meaningfully assists EFL learners to become more ingenious target language users. More in-depth research results analysis, interpretations, and explanations can be further observed in the following lines.

Theme 1: Critical Cultural Awareness Induces More Holistic Second Language Learning Climates

Theme 1	Authors
Critical cultural awareness induces more holistic second language learning climates	Afshar and Moradifar (2021); Afshar and Yousefi (2019); Arcagok and Yilmaz (2020); Atmojo and Putra (2022); Azizpour (2021); Echcharfy (2022); Eren (2023); Estaji and Savarabadi (2020); Ghaffari et al. (2022); Safa and Tofighi (2022).

With an in-depth examination of the above-depicted table, it can be fairly repudiated that critical cultural awareness can potentially induce more holistic second language learning climates for globalized EFL learners. One of the salient holistic second language learning enterprises that can be discerned from this commendable second language learning value is the manifestation of pleasurable teaching-learning environments in which all learning community members are willing to cope with a specific set of second language exposure prepared by their language instructors. This positive learning value takes place since EFL learners have thoroughly discovered the meaningful essence of second language learning dynamics accompanied by the full attainment of critical cultural understanding of this newly acquired language. This conception concurs with Afshar and Yousefi (2019) affirming that in the light of critical cultural awareness, a predominant number of worldwide EFL learners are strongly encouraged to foster their target language competencies to the best levels since they can accurately correlate their main learning purposes with the newly-acquired understanding of the foreign language cultures. Of great interest is the constant cultivation of critical cultural awareness can release a more positively sound and emotionally supportive second language learning atmosphere wherein EFL learners establish a more mutual relationship with their second language teachers and other learning counterparts. The probable inducement of this laudable learning value is prompted by a higher level of commitment derived from second language educators in designing appropriate teaching-learning materials that are in line with their current learners' socio-cultural backgrounds. The above-explained argument is substantiated by Arcagok and Yilmaz (2020) confessing that under the limelight of critical cultural awareness, second language educationalists and learners will have broader opportunities to experience more conducive-friendly learning processes as all of the imparted target language materials are designed in parallel with the distinctive cultural and social values possessed by EFL learners.

In the same respect, the proper internalization of critical cultural awareness can open up more promising future career pathways for EFL learners. As EFL learners are going to enroll in a wide variety of working places, advanced target language communicative proficiency levels accompanied by exhaustive critical cultural awareness are undeniably one of the essential ingredients to achieve their utmost life objectives. Meaning to say, critical cultural awareness will automatically allow EFL learners to progressively transfigure into more persistent, resilient, and optimistic learning participants despite incessant adverse learning vicinities hindering their fullest learning desire. Atmojo and Putra (2022) claimed that through the insistent activation of critical cultural awareness, Indonesian EFL learners would channel their energy, mind, and commitment to strive and thrive in their existing target language learning enterprises irrespective of varied learning impediments waiting for them, which might result in the significant development of mature learning characters. Because of this, it is of key importance for worldwide second language learning educationalists to embed a vast range of beneficial foreign cultural values in their designated textbooks and learning media at the commencement of second language learning activities. By embodying the above-proposed suggestion, EFL learners can sustainably attain more fruitful target language learning achievements, outcomes, and skills development by which they intensively practice their newly attained target language competencies through a wider range of authentic language exposure. This underlying principle finds further support from the critical cultural awareness theory propounded by Azizpour (2021). This

researcher infused a strong belief that with the continual enlightenment of critical cultural awareness, EFL learners can efficiently hone their target language proficiency to the utmost desired levels impacting the entire elevation of their prospective second language learning competencies, achievements, and outcomes. Given the crucial importance of investing a higher level of critical cultural awareness at the outset of EFL learners' target language learning dynamics, it is worthy of doing for second language teachers and learners to infuse more positive perceptions toward the consistent incorporation of critical cultural awareness in their daily-based learning activities. By instilling such a positive mindset, EFL learners will feel at ease upon acquiring varied novel target language competencies since they can juxtapose their presently-situated learning topics with the particularly-discussed cultural values represented by foreign language settings. The above-suggested advice concurs with the finding of Ghaffari et al. (2022) who highly advised globalized second language educators to enact varied teaching-learning materials accommodating foreign language cross-cultural values learned by their learners to turn them into more broad-minded academicians.

Theme 2: Critical Cultural Awareness Meaningfully Assists EFL Learners to Become More Ingenious Target Language Users

Theme 2	Authors
Critical cultural awareness meaningfully assists EFL learners to become more ingenious target language users	Ahmed et al. (2019); Al-Obaydi (2019); Bouslama and Benaissi (2018); Cheewasukthaworn and Suwanarak (2017); Ghaffari (2022); Ghavamnia (2020); Imsa-Ard (2023); Mighani and Moghadam (2019); Sutyono et al. (2023).

It is worth pinpointing that critical cultural awareness can potentially transform EFL learners into more ingenious target language users. One of the notable characteristics of possessing ingenious features within target language learning enterprises is the adaptability performed by target language users. Ingenious target language users do not merely inculcate advanced target language proficiency levels but also adjustable language adoption and adaptation, which means that EFL learners having been introduced to critical cultural awareness will have a higher level of tendency to apply their already-acquired target language skills in appropriate situations, moments, and conditions as their major focus is to acclimatize themselves with varied customs as well traditions brought about by the targeted interlocutors. This first and foremost critical cultural awareness viewpoint is confirmed by Ahmed et al. (2019) stating that by continually exposing EFL learners to the decent usage of critical cultural awareness, they will be acknowledged as noble target language users by diverse wide-ranging people in their society by which their uttered language expressions suitably matched with the communication nuance addressed by those society members. Another substantive beneficial value promoted by critical cultural awareness is the whole behavior transformation displayed by EFL learners. It is surmised that EFL learners having been armed with critical cultural awareness will be more appreciative towards a vast variety of customs, traditions, and habits performed by foreign language people. As a result of this positive attitude, EFL learners are more eager to conduct a more exhaustive exploration of their target language's cultural values. This contention sits well with Al-Obaydi (2019) affirming that critical cultural awareness can interceded the huge discrepancy that precludes EFL learners from storing a richer understanding of the native and foreign language cultural values they are currently discovering by which they will consistently have a robust reference point to address a higher degree of reverence towards every newly-attained cultural understanding. Since excessive foreign language learning anxiety has become a day-to-day issue in each modern second language learning environment, a more judicious understanding of critical cultural awareness can truly help actualize the diminution of foreign language learning anxiety experienced by worldwide EFL learners. One of the probable strategies second language instructors can implement is through an intended deliberation of their native-like tongue. This diversified cultural learning

diversity will conclusively instigate EFL learners to become more confident target language users since they are not strictly forced to utilize their target language knowledge and skills by strictly following the standardized versions of native-like communicators. Bouslama and Benaissi (2018) articulate that the flexible and adjustable critical cultural awareness between the host and native-oriented cultures can embolden EFL learners to rehearse their desired target language competencies more often than ever before by which the ideation processes will flow more smoothly, enjoyably, and meaningfully.

In the communication realm, critical cultural awareness can act as one of the effective accompanying strategies for EFL learners to entrench a mutual rapport with their targeted interlocutors. By overlapping the particular communication strengths and weaknesses that occurred during a vast variety of communication occurrences, EFL learners who own the robust construction of critical cultural awareness will have the propensity to address more comprehensible messages for their intended speakers. As a result of this laudable action, they can potentially diminish miscommunication and misunderstanding issues that normally occur among language speakers deriving from different cultures. The above-expounded standpoint is tightly interwoven with Ghavamnia (2020) who theorizes that with the ceaseless endorsement of critical cultural awareness, EFL learners can become impactful self-initiators while participating in a wide range of communication events attended by other language speakers infusing divergent cultures, which in turn, navigating their whole communication trajectories in a more meaningful purpose. Eventually speaking, as the fullest maximization of critical cultural awareness acts as a good means to pave a more promising second language learning pathway for EFL learners to progressively shift into more skillful target language users, it is worth advocating for worldwide second language educationalists to establish a more solid collaborative networking curriculum designers and educational stakeholders in refining the existing target language learning materials to meet with the specific purposes of critical cultural awareness. This suggestive advice is of foremost pivotal to be carried out by globalized ELT parties in a further attempt to alleviate a higher degree of perturbation oftentimes undergone by EFL learners. More importantly, the salient transformation of worldwide second language teaching-learning materials foregrounded by critical cultural awareness is more likely to evoke a strong foundation for EFL learners to become more mindful target language users who are deeply cognizant of the power of language and cultural values in their various lives along with academic contexts. This last data delineation is attributed to Imsa-Ard (2023) who confessed that since there is interconnectedness between the already-learned target language competencies and the newly-obtained cultural values, second language educators should work hand-in-hand with other ELT parties to devise new revised target language learning materials corresponding with the present cultural values they are currently facing to ascertain a significant degree of impending learning benefits to be attained by EFL learners.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

In light of the previous research results explications, it can be fairly deduced that through the decent incorporation of critical cultural awareness, EFL learners will not only have intellectual empowerment upon embarking on their challenging second language learning journeys but also experience better-facilitated English classroom learning enterprises. Regarding these salient influential impacts, second language educators need to fine-tune their teaching-learning materials in line with the appropriate foreign language cultural values to transform EFL learners into more judicious target language users while encountering divergent communication events and language learning situations.

Contrastively, this present small-scale library study was concurrently crammed with a certain number of shortcomings. The first salient drawback can be seen from the whole structure forming in this current library investigation. As this library research specifically focused on delving more profoundly into the way critical

cultural awareness can bridge worldwide EFL learners' target language knowledge discrepancy by reviewing a particular number of previously published critical cultural awareness studies, there is an indispensable need for prospective researchers to conduct a more in-depth investigation to explore the exact procedures of maximizing the utmost utilities of this second language learning approach. By embodying this future research initiative, more fruitful research outcomes will be more rewarding in informing globalized EFL educationalists regarding how to implement critical cultural awareness in their daily-based second language learning enterprises. The second spotted drawback that can be unearthed in this current small-scale qualitative library investigation was a limited number of critical cultural awareness having been reviewed by the researcher. To compensate for the aforementioned shortfall, there is a paramount mission for the approaching researchers to replicate this present investigation with a great number of scientific studies.

This further action will matter most for the forthcoming research results that may emerge in future investigations, particularly concerning its eligibility, generalizability, and applicability. Apart from these above-expounded weaknesses, the already-obtained research results imparted by this library study are influential in that they may shed a glimpse of hope and illumination for worldwide ELT stakeholders wherein EFL learners can potentially suffice their target language proficiency levels with more accurate, appropriate, and exhaustive understanding of the newly-acquired foreign language cultural values.

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