

## Portrait of Critical Literacy Skills of New Students of the Universitas Muhammadiyah Kolaka Utara in the Academic Year 2025/2026

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**Abstract:** This study described the level of critical literacy ability of first-year students of the Universitas Muhammadiyah Kolaka Utara (UMKOTA) in the academic year 2025/2026. Critical literacy is seen as an important competency in 21st-century higher education because it plays a role in shaping reflective, analytical, and transformative thinking skills. This study used a quantitative descriptive design involving 154 students from three faculties as respondents, who were selected through *proportional stratified random sampling* technique from a population of 250 students. The research instrument uses the Critical Literacy Skills Questionnaire (CLSQ) adapted from the framework of Luke and Freebody, covering four dimensions: understanding, interpretation, evaluation, and reflection. Data analysis was carried out with descriptive statistics using SPSS 26. The results showed an overall average score of 3.42 (medium category), with the highest dimension in comprehension (3.65) and lowest in reflection (3.25). These findings show that UMKOTA students are quite capable of understanding the text, but are still weak in evaluating and reflecting on the social and ideological meaning of information. The novelty of this research lies in the initial empirical mapping of students' critical literacy skills in Muhammadiyah universities based on the values of Progressive Islam. The practical implication is the need to integrate critical literacy in the general education curriculum and lecturer training so that students are more active in critical and reflective thinking. This research contribution provides an empirical basis for the development of contextual critical literacy learning models in Indonesian higher education.

**Keywords:** Critical Literacy, First-Year Students, Higher Education, Learning Based on Values, Universitas Muhammadiyah Kolaka Utara

### A. Introduction

Critical literacy is one of the fundamental competencies in 21st century education that emphasizes the ability of students to interpret, question, and transform information from various sources in a reflective and contextual manner. In the context of higher education, critical literacy develops not only as reading and writing skills, but also as a form of analytical reasoning, argument construction, self-regulation in learning, and

students' reflective engagement with social and cultural realities (Morales Carrero, 2020; Mirmoadi & Satwika, 2022). This ability is becoming increasingly important as the complexity of digital information increases and the demands of independent learning in higher education (Angeli, 2024; Zhou & Schofield, 2024).

Conceptually, critical literacy is rooted in the critical *pedagogy* theory of Paulo Freire (2000), which views the educational process as an effort to liberate through the ability to read "the word and the world". In this framework, students are expected to be able to interpret texts not only literally, but also understand the power relations, ideologies, and values that underlie the production of texts. Morales Carrero (2020) emphasized that critical reading is an inherent process in a competent and meaningful university education because it encourages students to relate texts to their social context. In line with that, Chan and Lee (2021) place reflective skills at the core of critical literacy that bridges learning experiences with students' social awareness. Continuous pedagogical reflection practices have been proven to contribute to the development of students' critical thinking from the level of reflection to deeper critical awareness (Mina Urrutia, 2024).

Various international studies show that critical literacy has a positive influence on *higher-order thinking skills* and students' readiness to face global socio-information complexity. Khatib et al. (2024) in their study in *the Educational Research Review* found that critical literacy is a key competency that facilitates students to understand ideological biases and power structures in academic texts. Mendelowitz and Govender's (2024) research expands on these findings by showing that critical literacy is also affective and transformative, as it is able to encourage students to reconstruct understandings of identity, race, and gender through imaginative and reflective engagement in higher education learning. Thus, critical literacy does not only function in the cognitive realm, but also in the formation of students' social and ethical awareness.

In the context of language learning, Johnson and Keane (2023) emphasized that the application of critical literacy instruction can improve students' reflective and empathic abilities, although they still face institutional constraints and hierarchical academic culture. In Indonesia, Adiantika et al. (2025) showed that the implementation of critical literacy in EFL learning in higher education is able to help students reconstruct the meaning of narrative texts critically and contextually. However, these studies still focus more on foreign language learning, while Indonesian learning as a general education course in higher education has not been widely studied from a critical literacy perspective.

In addition, the development of digital literacy and learning technology also strengthens the urgency of critical literacy in higher education. Mirmoadi and Satwika (2022) found that digital literacy has a significant relationship with *students' self-*

*regulated learning*, which is an important prerequisite for the development of critical and reflective thinking skills. Angeli's research (2024) also shows that project-based learning is able to significantly increase students' digital literacy, which in turn requires evaluative and reflective skills in managing information. In a more up-to-date context, Zhou and Schofield (2024) emphasize that AI literacy in higher education must be built on a foundation of critical literacy so that students are able to assess, question, and use technology ethically and responsibly.

However, there are a number of research gaps that have not been fully revealed in the literature. First, most critical literacy research in higher education still focuses on the context of Western countries, with limited exploration in Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia. Studies that map the empirical profile of critical literacy of first-year students of Indonesian universities are still very limited (Hardianti, 2024). Second, although critical literacy has become part of the National Literacy Movement (Kemendikbud, 2019), research linking critical literacy with the values of Pancasila and Progressive Islam as a characteristic of Muhammadiyah higher education is still minimal. Third, research that specifically maps students' cognitive reflection skills in the early phase of lectures is still rarely conducted, even though cognitive reflection has been proven to contribute to the development of critical and creative thinking (Cifre Herrando et al., 2025).

The current situation shows that there is an increase in attention to the integration of critical literacy in the higher education curriculum. Johnson (2023) shows that although many universities have begun to adopt critical literacy, its implementation is still constrained by the limitations of lecturer training and the dominance of *the rote learning* approach. In Indonesia, Afrilyasanti et al. (2025) emphasized that project-based learning and digital media have the potential to increase students' creativity and social awareness, but their effectiveness depends heavily on institutional readiness and systematic pedagogical support. Therefore, empirical mapping of students' critical literacy skills, especially in the first year of lectures, is an urgent need. In terms of novelty, this research occupies a strategic position because it focuses on the local context of first-year students of the Universitas Muhammadiyah Kolaka Utara (UMKOTA), which represents the social, cultural, and religious characteristics typical of Muhammadiyah universities in areas outside Java. The main novelty of this research lies in the descriptive approach to map students' critical literacy skills based on four main dimensions, namely *comprehension, interpretation, evaluation, and reflection* (Luke & Freebody, 1997).

Theoretically and empirically, this research is expected to make a significant contribution to the development of critical literacy in Indonesian higher education. Academically, this research expands the international literature by presenting empirical evidence from non-Western contexts and Islamic universities. Practically, the results of the research can be the basis for curriculum development, lecturer

training, and critical literacy-based Indonesian learning strategies that are contextual with Muhammadiyah values. Socially, this research supports the agenda of the National Literacy Movement and strengthens students' capacity to deal with global information dynamics critically and ethically.

## **B. Methods**

This study uses a quantitative descriptive approach with the aim of empirically describing the level of critical literacy ability of first-year students of the UMKOTA in the academic year 2025/2026. This design was chosen because it is suitable for mapping educational phenomena based on numerical data without variable manipulation, as explained by Johnson and Christensen (2020) in *Studies in Educational Evaluation* that descriptive research allows researchers to obtain a factual picture of student competencies through standardized measurements. The research was carried out in the UMKOTA environment which contextually represents Islamic-based universities with religious and social literacy characters.

The research population includes about 250 first-year undergraduate students from three faculties, namely the Faculty of Engineering, the Faculty of Economics and Law, and the Faculty of Science and Education. The research sample was determined by proportional stratified random sampling technique to ensure the representativeness of each faculty, so that 154 respondents were obtained. This technique is in line with the view of Etikan and Bala (2017) in *Biostatistics and Epidemiology* who affirm that proportional stratification sampling improves reliability and reduces data bias in heterogeneous populations. The main instruments used are the Critical Literacy Skills Questionnaire (CLSQ) adapted from the *Four Resources Model* framework by Luke and Freebody (1997) which has been widely used in critical literacy research in higher education (Ospina Rodríguez, 2024); Chan, 2021). This instrument consists of 20 statements that measure the four dimensions of critical literacy, namely *comprehension*, *interpretation*, *evaluation*, and *reflection*, with a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The validity of the questionnaire content was tested through *expert judgment* by three language education experts, while the reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient which resulted in a  $\alpha \geq$  value of 0.80, indicating high internal consistency as suggested by Creswell and Guetterman (2021).

The data collection process was carried out through three stages, namely (1) the preparation stage in the form of licensing and instrument testing for 20 students, (2) the implementation stage of filling out questionnaires online and offline with a guarantee of respondent anonymity, and (3) the verification stage to ensure the completeness of the data. Data analysis was carried out using descriptive statistics through SPSS software version 26, including the calculation of average values, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages of each dimension. This analysis step refers to the approach of Li et al. (2022) in *the Educational Research Review* which

emphasizes the use of descriptive statistics to comprehensively understand the critical literacy competency patterns of students. The results are then interpreted within the *framework of the Four Resources Model* to see the balance between the ability to understand, interpret, evaluate, and reflect on the text. The entire research process is carried out by upholding the ethical principles of social research as described by Cohen et al. (2021), namely through the voluntary consent of respondents, ensuring data confidentiality, and respect for academic integrity. Thus, the steps of this research are designed in a systematic, valid, and ethical manner to gain an in-depth understanding of the critical literacy profile of first-year students at UMKOTA.

### C. Results and Discussion

Based on the results of the study, it was found that the level of critical literacy ability of first-year students of the UMKOTA was in the medium category with an overall average score of 3.42. In more detail, the highest score was found in the dimension of comprehension (3.65), followed by interpretation (3.48), then evaluation (3.29) and reflection (3.25). This finding answers the research question that UMKOTA students have the ability to understand texts and capture explicit and implicit meanings quite well, but are still weak in assessing biases, examining ideology, and reflecting on the relationship between texts and social reality and Islamic and humanitarian values. Theoretically, this pattern shows that students are at the stage of *surface-level comprehension* instead of *deep critical engagement*, which is understanding the text informatively but not yet fully internalizing the process of critical and reflective thinking. These findings are consistent with Freire's (2000) view of *critical consciousness*, which emphasizes that literacy is not just the ability to read texts, but also the ability to "read the world" and participate in social transformation. Thus, a moderate score on the aspects of evaluation and reflection indicates that the learning process in higher education has not fully activated the dimension of critical awareness (*conscientização*) which is the core of critical literacy in higher education.

Empirically, the results of this research are supported by various international studies that confirm that the reflective and evaluative dimensions are the most difficult aspects to develop in first-year students. Chan (2021) in *Higher Education* shows that academic reflection requires the support of a dialogical learning environment and conceptual scaffolding so that students can interpret experiences and texts critically. Similarly, Li et al. (2022) in *the Educational Research Review* found that college students tend to be able to perform both literal and interpretive comprehension, but show significant gaps in the ability to evaluate ideological bias and the credibility of text sources. The study by Liu et al. (2022) in *Thinking Skills and Creativity* also emphasized that problem-based learning can improve students' critical thinking skills, especially in the aspects of analysis and evaluation, although the results are highly dependent on the activeness of lecturers in directing reflection. Meanwhile, (Hamal et al., 2025) through meta-analysis in *Learning and Instruction* found that reflection-based

interventions are able to improve students' academic outcomes and self-awareness, but require a long-term approach that is sustainable. In line with that, (Garbe & Soukup, 2024) in *Computers & Education* shows that *lateral reading* training the ability to assess information sources by comparing credibility across texts is effective in improving evaluative literacy among students, but still requires explicit exercises and periodic evaluations.

The findings of this study are also strengthened by the results of a study by Suryani et al. (2025) in *Learning and Instruction* which examined critical literacy learning in Indonesia and found that although students showed enthusiasm in understanding texts, they still had difficulty doing social reflection due to the lack of critical pedagogical practices in the classroom. A similar thing was stated by (Zúñiga, 2025) who explained that learning that emphasizes reflective dialogue and the integration of human values tends to produce higher critical understanding and awareness than lecturer-centered learning. Meanwhile, List (2024) in *the Journal of Educational Psychology* proves that *critique generation* activities – inviting students to write critical responses to texts – significantly increase evaluative understanding and ideological awareness. Other support comes from (Choi et al., 2025) who in *Computers & Education* highlights the importance of *critical digital literacy* to help students evaluate information in the era of artificial intelligence, and Yim (2024) who proposes an *AI literacy framework* based on the evaluation of digital sources to foster students' critical awareness in the context of digital learning.

From a pedagogical perspective, the results of this study show that the critical literacy ability of UMKOTA students who are still in the moderate category is in line with the global trend reported by (Hà & Huertas April, 2024) in *International Journal of Educational Research* that young readers in higher education tend to be oriented towards informative understanding rather than social reflection. This is also in line with the report (Cortes et al., 2024) in the *Contemporary Educational Psychology* which found that significant improvements in critical thinking skills only emerged after the application of *high-impact tutoring* which focuses on analytical reading and reflective writing intensively. In a broader context, (Herrero Rico, 2022) reaffirms the relevance of the Freirean approach in modern higher education that critical literacy should be directed not only at the reproduction of knowledge, but at transformational awareness that encourages students to be actively involved in social change.

However, there are some research results that do not fully support these findings. A study (Chun & Foo, 2024) in *Thinking Skills and Creativity* shows that brief interventions on critical thinking skills often do not result in significant changes, especially in the aspect of reflection, because critical awareness requires time and a supportive learning context. Similarly, (Blagorazumnaia & Trifonova, 2024) found that improving students' evaluative abilities often depends on institutional readiness and lecturers' capacity to manage learning based on critical discussions, rather than

solely on students' abilities. In addition, research (Jantakun et al., 2025) in *Teaching and Teacher Education* shows that some critical literacy training programs do not have a significant effect on student learning outcomes because of the overly theoretical approach without practical application. Thus, the results of this study emphasize that although the critical literacy of UMKOTA students is moderate, improving the ability to reflect and evaluate cannot be achieved only through the integration of a formal curriculum, but requires an explicit, interactive, and sustainable learning strategy.

Overall, the results of this study confirm that the critical literacy profile of UMKOTA students describes the strength in understanding and interpreting the text, but the weakness in evaluation and reflection that is transformative. This pattern is consistent with global trends and Freirean *critical pedagogy* theories that emphasize the importance of fostering critical awareness as a liberating form of literacy. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the critical literacy-based curriculum at UMKOTA through dialogical learning, social discourse analysis activities, and the integration of Progressive Islam and Pancasila values so that students not only understand the text, but also be able to interpret, evaluate, and reflect on the world they face.

#### **D. Conclusions**

Based on the results of the research conducted, it can be concluded that the level of critical literacy ability of first-year students of the UMKOTA is in the moderate category, with the main strengths in the aspect of understanding and weakness in the aspects of evaluation and critical reflection. This shows that students have a good enough ability to understand and interpret texts, but still face difficulties in assessing biases, identifying ideological perspectives, and relating the content of the text to social realities and religious and national values. This condition illustrates that the learning process at the higher education level, especially in General Education courses such as Indonesian, has not fully fostered critical *consciousness* as idealized in Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy framework. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen a critical literacy-based curriculum that is integrated in cross-disciplinary learning activities, especially through reflective learning strategies, dialogical discussions, social discourse analysis, and *problem-based learning* that encourages students to think analytical and transformative.

Practically, the results of this study provide a basis for the development of lecturer training programs and the preparation of critical literacy-based learning modules in the Muhammadiyah higher education environment, so that learning does not only focus on cognitive aspects, but also on the formation of social awareness, academic ethics, and progressive Islamic values. To strengthen these findings, further research is recommended to use a mixed-method approach to explore the student reasoning process in more depth and test the effectiveness of critical literacy interventions in the long term. Thus, this research not only provides an initial portrait of the critical

literacy skills of UMKOTA students, but also becomes an important foothold for efforts to develop language learning and character education that are critical, contextual, and oriented towards social change.

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