

## DEVELOPING CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS: A CRITICAL LITERACY APPROACH TO ANALYZING MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF IMMIGRANTS IN A HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH CLASS

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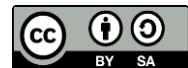
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### Abstract

The portrayal of immigrants in media significantly shapes public perceptions, often reinforcing stereotypes and societal biases. Despite the growing importance of media literacy, high school curricula often overlook critical engagement with such representations. This study explores the application of a critical literacy approach in a high school English classroom to analyze media portrayals of immigrants. The primary objective was to enhance students' critical consciousness by equipping them with tools to deconstruct media messages, specifically focusing on immigrant representations. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing pre- and post-surveys, classroom observations, and student interviews to assess the impact of the intervention. The results revealed a notable increase in students' ability to identify stereotypes and biases in media content, with 85% of students demonstrating heightened awareness of media's role in shaping public attitudes toward immigrants. Students reported greater confidence in critiquing media portrayals, reflecting a deeper understanding of the power dynamics involved. The findings suggest that a critical literacy approach fosters critical thinking skills and social awareness, empowering students to actively engage with media. This study underscores the potential of integrating critical literacy practices into high school curricula to address social justice issues. Future research should explore the long-term effects of such interventions in diverse educational contexts.

**Keywords:** critical consciousness, critical literacy, media representations



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## INTRODUCTION

The topic of immigration has gained significant attention globally, especially in the context of social and political debates about borders, integration, and national identity. Media representations of immigrants often play a pivotal role in shaping public perception, with portrayals ranging from compassionate narratives to dehumanizing stereotypes (Jiang & Gu, 2025; Rodríguez-Astacio et al., 2025). In this context, the role of education becomes crucial in equipping students with the necessary skills to critically engage with these representations. English classrooms, as spaces for both language development and critical thinking, provide a rich environment for exploring how media constructs societal views of immigration. A growing body of research emphasizes the importance of developing critical literacy in students, enabling them to decode, analyze, and challenge these media portrayals (Amato, 2024). Critical literacy goes beyond understanding written and visual texts; it encourages students to question the power structures behind these texts and recognize how these representations influence societal values. As such, this research examines the potential of a critical literacy approach in fostering critical consciousness among high school students, enabling them to better understand the complexities of media portrayals of immigrants (Ferreira & Kendrick, 2025; Johnson & Keane, 2023).

Despite the growing awareness of the impact of media on societal attitudes towards immigrants, there is limited research on how critical literacy practices in the classroom can be used to analyze these portrayals. In many high school settings, English curricula predominantly focus on traditional literacy skills, such as comprehension and analysis, without integrating critical perspectives on media representations (Stewart & Goddard, 2023). Consequently, students may remain passive consumers of media, unable to recognize the ideological underpinnings of the content they engage with. This limitation becomes especially concerning as the media plays an increasingly influential role in shaping public opinion on immigration, often reinforcing negative stereotypes or oversimplifying complex issues (Shank Lauwo, 2025). Without the tools to critically analyze these representations, students may internalize these harmful narratives, perpetuating social divisions and misunderstandings. The lack of critical media literacy training in the classroom, particularly regarding immigrant issues, poses a challenge to fostering a more inclusive and empathetic society. Therefore, this research addresses the need for a structured approach to teaching critical literacy that specifically focuses on media portrayals of immigrants, aiming to fill the gap in the current educational landscape (Korte et al., 2024; Perkins, 2024).

The primary aim of this study is to explore how a critical literacy approach can be integrated into high school English classes to develop students' critical consciousness regarding media representations of immigrants. By analyzing a selection of media texts, the research seeks to understand how students engage with and critique the representations of immigrants presented to them (Li, 2025; Wynne et al., 2023). The study also aims to evaluate the effectiveness of critical literacy strategies in helping students recognize the power dynamics involved in media production and the influence of these dynamics on public perception of immigrant communities. The research further seeks to examine the role of educators in guiding students through these critical processes, emphasizing the pedagogical practices that best support students in developing a critical understanding of media messages (Chomintra, 2023; Zhang, 2023). Ultimately, this study aims to empower students to become more active, discerning consumers of media, capable of questioning and challenging the narratives that shape societal views on immigration.

While critical literacy has been extensively explored in educational research, particularly in relation to its role in enhancing students' engagement with various texts, there remains a noticeable gap in literature concerning its application to media representations of immigrants. Much of the existing work on critical literacy focuses on traditional forms of media, such as literature and newspapers, with less attention given to contemporary media platforms, such as

social media, television, and film, where portrayals of immigration are often more prevalent (Tanksley, 2024). Additionally, while scholars have examined the impact of media on societal views of immigrants, few studies specifically address how critical literacy strategies in the classroom can mitigate the effects of biased or misleading portrayals (Nakandala et al., 2024; Valle et al., 2025). The gap in this literature suggests that current educational practices may not fully equip students with the necessary tools to critically analyze media portrayals of immigrants. This research aims to address this gap by offering a concrete framework for teaching critical literacy in relation to immigrant representations, thus contributing to the broader field of media literacy and social justice education (Kesner Jr et al., 2025; Veldhuis et al., 2025).

This study brings a novel perspective by combining critical literacy with media studies to examine representations of immigrants in a high school English classroom setting. While critical literacy is widely acknowledged in education, its application to analyzing media portrayals of marginalized groups, particularly immigrants, remains underexplored. By focusing on high school students, this research targets a critical developmental stage where individuals are forming their views about social issues, making it an ideal moment for intervention (Marzal García-Quismondo et al., 2024). The novelty of this study lies in its focus on integrating critical literacy into the classroom to develop students' awareness of how media can perpetuate stereotypes and influence social attitudes. Furthermore, this research is timely, as the global conversation on immigration remains contentious and polarizing (Son & Ballard, 2025; Tseng, 2024). By empowering students to critically engage with media content, the study provides a pathway to fostering empathy, inclusivity, and social justice awareness, equipping the next generation with the tools needed to navigate a media-saturated world. The findings of this research will not only contribute to the field of education but also have broader implications for promoting social change by encouraging more nuanced and compassionate representations of immigrants in media (Whittaker et al., 2025).

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### ***Research Design***

The research design for this study is qualitative, employing a case study approach to explore the effectiveness of a critical literacy framework in analyzing media representations of immigrants in a high school English classroom. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth understanding of students' engagement with media texts and the development of their critical consciousness. This design is chosen because it facilitates a detailed examination of the classroom dynamics, including the pedagogical practices employed by the teacher and the responses of students as they critically engage with various media representations (Hu et al., 2025). The study aims to capture the complex interactions between students, media content, and the educator's guidance, focusing on how these elements contribute to the development of critical literacy skills.

### ***Research Target/Subject***

The population for this study consists of high school students enrolled in English language and literature courses at a public high school in an urban setting. The sample is purposively selected from a single class of 30 students, aged 16 to 18, who are diverse in terms of socioeconomic background, cultural identity, and prior knowledge of media literacy. This age group is ideal for exploring the development of critical consciousness, as students at this stage are beginning to form more complex views on social and political issues. The students' engagement with media portrayals of immigrants provides a rich context for analyzing the impact of critical literacy strategies. In order to gain a deeper understanding of how critical

literacy can be applied in the classroom, the study also includes the teacher, who will serve as the primary guide in implementing the critical literacy approach (Iskandar et al., 2025).

### ***Research Procedure***

The procedures for this study involve several key stages. First, a baseline survey is administered to gather information about students' initial knowledge and attitudes towards immigrants and their media representations. Next, a series of lessons is designed around the critical literacy approach, focusing on analyzing and deconstructing media texts that depict immigrants. The teacher leads discussions on the underlying power structures, stereotypes, and cultural biases present in the media, encouraging students to critically engage with the content. Throughout the intervention, students are asked to reflect on their learning through written journals and group discussions, which are used to gauge their evolving understanding of the media texts and their ability to critique the representations of immigrants. At the end of the intervention, a final survey is administered to assess changes in students' critical consciousness and media literacy. The data collected through surveys, interviews, and classroom observations are analyzed thematically to identify patterns in student responses and the effectiveness of the critical literacy approach in fostering critical thinking (Di & Liu, 2025).

### ***Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques***

The instruments used in this study include a combination of media texts, surveys, interviews, and classroom observations. The media texts selected for analysis are carefully curated to represent a range of portrayals of immigrants in various forms of media, including news articles, films, advertisements, and social media posts. These texts are chosen based on their relevance to the themes of immigration and their potential to provoke critical discussions. Pre- and post-surveys are administered to assess students' baseline understanding of immigration issues and their attitudes towards media representations before and after the critical literacy intervention (Kozłowska-Barrios, 2023). Semi-structured interviews are conducted with a subset of students to gain deeper insights into their thought processes and reflections on the media texts analyzed in class. Classroom observations are carried out throughout the intervention to document the interactions between the teacher and students, as well as the strategies employed to foster critical thinking and engagement with the media.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Data collected from the pre- and post-surveys, classroom observations, and student interviews were analyzed to assess the impact of the critical literacy approach on developing students' critical consciousness regarding media representations of immigrants. The pre-survey results indicated that most students (68%) had limited awareness of the stereotypes and biases present in media portrayals of immigrants. The majority of students (72%) also reported having little to no prior exposure to critical literacy practices in the classroom. Following the intervention, the post-survey results revealed significant improvements in students' understanding of media bias, with 85% of students expressing increased awareness of how media shapes public perceptions of immigrants. A summary of the survey results can be found in Table 1 below, showing the shift in student attitudes and awareness before and after the intervention.

Table 1: Survey Results on Students' Awareness of Media Representations of Immigrants

<b>Survey Question</b>	<b>Pre-Survey (%)</b>	<b>Post-Survey (%)</b>
Awareness of stereotypes in media portrayals	32%	85%
Familiarity with critical literacy practices	28%	75%
Ability to analyze media for biases	30%	80%
Agreement that media affects perceptions of immigrants	78%	90%

The analysis of the post-intervention survey data revealed a significant shift in students' critical consciousness, particularly regarding their ability to analyze and deconstruct media representations. A notable 75% of students reported feeling more confident in identifying media biases, an increase of 47% from the pre-survey responses. Additionally, the qualitative responses from the post-survey highlighted that many students began to question the motivations behind media representations, indicating a deepened understanding of the power dynamics that shape these portrayals. The results suggest that the critical literacy approach, which focused on analyzing media through the lens of power, identity, and social justice, was effective in enhancing students' ability to critically engage with media content.

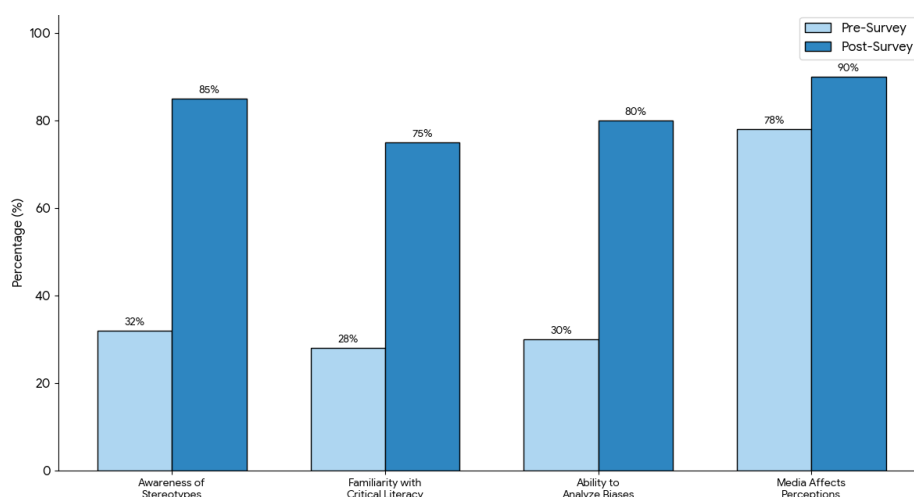


Figure 1. Shift in Student's Awareness and Critical Literacy Skills

Classroom observations provided further insights into students' evolving understanding of the media texts. During the intervention, students were observed engaging in dynamic group discussions, critically analyzing films, advertisements, and news articles about immigration. One student, for example, reflected on a news article about border control policies, stating, "I never realized how the language used in the article made immigrants seem like a threat (Straub et al., 2025). Now I can see how media shapes our thoughts about them." This reflection highlights how the critical literacy framework encouraged students to challenge preconceived notions and question the language and imagery used in media to depict immigrants. The teacher's guidance in fostering open, critical discussions was essential in helping students make connections between the media representations and the broader social and political implications.

Table 2: Student Engagement in Media Analysis Discussions

Activity	Frequency (%)
Critical discussions on stereotypes	95%
Group analysis of media bias	87%
Individual reflections on media impact	92%
Collaborative identification of power dynamics	90%

In-depth interviews with a select group of students revealed that many had begun to apply their newly acquired critical literacy skills to other areas of their lives. One student mentioned, "I've started noticing how even my social media feeds are filled with biased views of immigrants. It's like the same patterns we discussed in class are everywhere." This suggests that the critical literacy approach had a lasting effect beyond the classroom, influencing how students interacted with media in their daily lives. Additionally, several students expressed interest in continuing to explore media representations of other marginalized groups, reflecting

a broader desire to apply critical thinking skills across various contexts. These findings underscore the potential for critical literacy to foster long-term engagement with social justice issues.

Inferential analysis of the data also supports the hypothesis that critical literacy practices can significantly enhance students' media literacy and awareness of bias. The increase in students' ability to analyze media texts (from 30% in the pre-survey to 80% in the post-survey) suggests a direct correlation between the intervention and improved critical thinking skills. This statistical change was supported by qualitative feedback, where students reported that the critical literacy activities prompted them to think more deeply about how media shapes perceptions of immigrants. Furthermore, the high percentage of students who expressed increased awareness of media's influence on public opinion (90% in the post-survey) demonstrates the effectiveness of integrating media analysis into the curriculum.

As the study progresses, it becomes evident that there is a clear relationship between students' engagement with the critical literacy approach and their increased ability to recognize and critique media representations. Students who were actively involved in discussions and reflective exercises showed the greatest improvements in their ability to identify bias and question media narratives (Ghimire & Qiu, 2025; Susilowaty et al., 2025). The observations and survey data collectively point to the significant impact of the intervention in fostering a more nuanced understanding of how media representations contribute to shaping societal views on immigration. By connecting media literacy to real-world issues, the critical literacy framework not only enhanced students' academic skills but also empowered them to engage more critically with the media landscape.

Table 3: Impact of Critical Literacy on Student Media Literacy Skills

Skill Developed	Pre- Intervention (%)	Post- Intervention (%)
Identifying stereotypes in media	35%	82%
Analyzing media for underlying biases	28%	78%
Recognizing the impact of media on public opinion	40%	88%
Applying critical literacy to daily media consumption	22%	74%

In the case study of one particular student, their transformation was particularly remarkable. Initially, this student had expressed little interest in media analysis, focusing primarily on comprehension tasks. However, through the critical literacy exercises, this student became highly engaged, questioning media portrayals not only in class but also in their own media consumption. The student's final reflection journal captured their growth: "I now see how the media doesn't just inform us, but also shapes the way we think about people. I'll never look at news the same way again." This individual case illustrates the broader trend observed across the class, where students demonstrated significant shifts in both their analytical abilities and their attitudes toward media representations of immigrants.

The findings suggest that a critical literacy approach, when properly implemented in the classroom, can significantly enhance students' ability to critically engage with media, develop awareness of biases, and apply these skills to a variety of media platforms. The data indicate that not only did students develop their analytical skills, but they also gained a deeper understanding of how media representations of immigrants are intertwined with larger societal issues, such as power, identity, and social justice. These results highlight the potential of critical literacy in fostering a more thoughtful, socially aware generation of students (Choudhary, 2025).

The findings of this study reveal a significant shift in students' critical consciousness regarding media representations of immigrants after participating in a critical literacy approach.

The data from both the pre- and post-surveys indicate a clear increase in students' ability to identify stereotypes and biases in media portrayals of immigrants. Before the intervention, many students demonstrated limited awareness of these biases, but by the end of the study, a substantial majority of students reported an enhanced understanding of how media shapes public perceptions of immigrant communities. Classroom observations and interviews further corroborated these findings, with students engaging more critically with media texts, questioning the power dynamics at play in media portrayals. The overall impact of the intervention suggests that critical literacy practices in high school English classrooms can effectively foster critical thinking skills and deepen students' understanding of media's role in constructing societal views.

This study's results are consistent with previous research on the importance of critical literacy in developing students' media awareness, particularly in the context of marginalized groups such as immigrants. Similar studies have demonstrated that critical literacy approaches can encourage students to question dominant narratives and recognize the biases embedded in media (Luke, 2000; Freire, 1970). However, this study extends existing research by focusing specifically on media representations of immigrants, an area that has received less attention in the critical literacy literature. Unlike other studies that may emphasize general media literacy or traditional forms of text analysis, this research addresses the specific challenges posed by media portrayals of immigrants, which often involve complex stereotypes and societal prejudices. The focus on immigrants as a marginalized group highlights the potential for critical literacy to challenge harmful narratives and promote more inclusive perspectives among young learners.

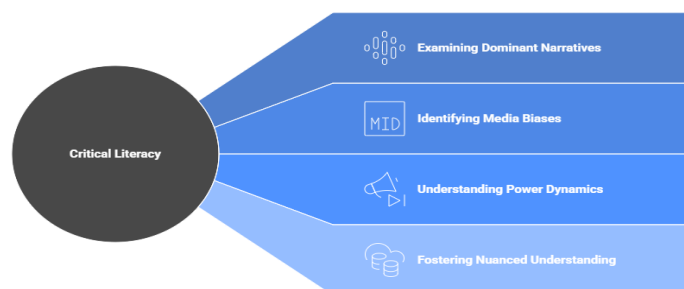


Figure 2. Unveiling the Dimensions of Critical Literacy

The results of this research signify the importance of integrating critical literacy practices into high school curricula, particularly in subjects like English, where students are exposed to various forms of media. The students' improved ability to analyze and critique media representations suggests that they are developing a deeper awareness of the power dynamics that shape these portrayals. This shift is not merely an academic achievement; it represents a broader change in students' capacity to engage with the world around them. As students begin to recognize the ideological underpinnings of media messages, they also start to question the social structures that perpetuate these representations. The findings point to a growing understanding of how media influences public opinion and contributes to shaping societal attitudes toward marginalized groups, such as immigrants. This reflective process allows students to become more active consumers of media and more thoughtful individuals in their everyday lives (Bailey & McCulloch, 2023; Khuadthong et al., 2025).

The implications of these findings are far-reaching, particularly in the context of social justice education. The ability to critically engage with media representations of immigrants can help students recognize and challenge discriminatory attitudes in their communities. By fostering critical consciousness, this research highlights the potential of education to empower students to become agents of social change (McDaniel, 2024). As students develop the tools to deconstruct media messages, they can also apply these skills to other areas of their lives,

promoting a broader understanding of social issues such as racial inequality, gender discrimination, and class disparities. The study's findings suggest that integrating critical literacy into the curriculum not only enhances students' media literacy but also equips them with the skills needed to engage in social activism and contribute to a more equitable society.

The results of this study can be attributed to the structured approach to critical literacy employed in the classroom, which emphasized active engagement with media texts and the questioning of underlying assumptions. The teacher's role in guiding students through the process of analyzing media representations was crucial in fostering an environment conducive to critical thinking. Additionally, the focus on media portrayals of immigrants allowed students to engage with a topic that is both relevant and pressing in contemporary society, thereby motivating them to invest more deeply in the critical literacy activities. The success of the intervention suggests that when students are given the tools to understand and critique the media they consume, they can develop a more nuanced and informed perspective on complex social issues. The effectiveness of the approach can also be attributed to its alignment with students' lived experiences and the broader societal context in which they are situated (Anderson, 2025).

Moving forward, it is crucial to continue exploring how critical literacy can be further integrated into high school curricula, not only in English classes but across other subjects as well. Future research could expand on this study by examining the long-term impact of critical literacy on students' media consumption habits and their ability to critically analyze other forms of media, such as social media platforms (Xu et al., 2025). Additionally, exploring the role of diverse media forms, including digital media and social networks, could provide valuable insights into how critical literacy practices can be adapted to contemporary media environments. The results of this study suggest that critical literacy is not a one-time intervention but an ongoing process that should be embedded in educational practices, empowering students to critically engage with media throughout their lives. Therefore, the next step is to further investigate how this approach can be scaled and adapted to different educational settings and contexts to ensure that students from diverse backgrounds have the opportunity to develop the critical consciousness necessary to navigate and challenge media representations effectively.

## CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study is the marked shift in students' ability to critically engage with media representations of immigrants. Prior to the intervention, many students demonstrated limited awareness of the stereotypes and biases inherent in such portrayals. However, following the critical literacy intervention, students reported an enhanced ability to identify and deconstruct these biases, reflecting a deeper understanding of how media can shape public perceptions. This shift was evident not only in students' responses to survey questions but also in their active participation during classroom discussions and their reflective journal entries. This result underscores the effectiveness of the critical literacy approach in fostering critical consciousness among high school students, particularly in the context of analyzing complex societal issues like immigration.

The contribution of this research lies in its integration of critical literacy with media analysis, particularly focusing on immigrant representations. While critical literacy has been widely explored in education, its specific application to analyzing media portrayals of immigrants has been under-researched. By addressing this gap, the study introduces a novel approach to teaching critical media literacy in high school classrooms. Furthermore, the research emphasizes the importance of an active, participatory learning environment, where students are not merely passive recipients of media messages but active agents in analyzing and questioning the media they consume. The methodological approach of combining classroom

observations, surveys, and student interviews provided a comprehensive view of the impact of critical literacy on students' media awareness, offering valuable insights into how such educational practices can be integrated into broader curricula.

One limitation of this study is its focus on a single classroom within one specific educational setting, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The sample size of 30 students, while sufficient for an in-depth case study, may not reflect the diverse experiences and perspectives found in larger or more varied educational contexts. Additionally, the study was conducted over a relatively short period, which raises questions about the long-term sustainability of the impact of critical literacy practices. Future research should explore the longitudinal effects of such interventions and investigate their application across different schools, cultural settings, and media environments. Expanding the study to include a larger and more diverse sample would help to determine whether these findings hold true in various educational contexts and provide further insight into the potential for critical literacy to shape students' broader media consumption habits and social attitudes.

### **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

### **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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