



ТЕОРІЯ ТА МЕТОДИКА НАВЧАННЯ

UDC 378.147:811.111:070

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20486478>

Integrating critical media literacy and digital safety in EFL teaching

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Accepted: 14.05.2026 | Published: 30.05.2026

Abstract: *The article examines the integration of critical media literacy and digital safety into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, especially as digital environments grow and information-related risks rise. The aim of the study is to analyze and systematize existing approaches to combining media literacy, safety, and language learning, as well as to outline generalized principles and practical dimensions of safety-oriented instruction. The study uses a mix of theoretical and empirical methods. The theoretical part focuses on analyzing, comparing, and generalizing recent research on critical media literacy, digital safety, and EFL pedagogy. The empirical component relies on structured pedagogical reflection from the authors' professional experience with educational initiatives in Jean Monnet projects – EUSELENA and EUSPACE at Sumy National Agrarian University, Ukraine,*



*which involved combining media literacy and safety-related content with EFL teaching and creating related materials and tasks. **Results.** Based on the analysis, the study outlines a set of generalized principles for media literacy and safety-focused instruction in the EFL classroom, including integration, explicit safety, scaffolded criticality, authenticity, action-oriented learning, and reflection. These principles are further considered through three interrelated practical dimensions: critical media evaluation, digital safety and well-being, and communicative competence with elements of digital citizenship. The article also outlines practical teaching activities, such as working with authentic media materials, analyzing online content, and engaging students in reflective and production-focused tasks. **The conclusions** highlight that critical media literacy and safety issues can be meaningfully integrated into EFL teaching when seen as interconnected components of the learning process. The study contributes to a more structured understanding of how these elements can be addressed in language education and can inform curriculum development and teaching approaches in modern, digitally mediated settings.*

Keywords: *critical thinking, foreign language instruction, media education, information evaluation, online risks.*

Інтеграція критичної медіаграмотності та цифрової безпеки у викладання англійської мови як іноземної

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Анотація: Стаття розглядає можливості поєднання критичної медіаграмотності та цифрової безпеки з викладанням англійської мови як іноземної (EFL). Актуальність даної проблеми зростає через розширення ролі медіа й цифрових середовищ та збільшення інформаційних ризиків. **Метою дослідження** є аналіз і систематизація наявних підходів щодо інтеграції медіаграмотності, аспектів безпеки та вивчення іноземної мови, а також окреслення ключових принципів і практичних вимірів безпекоорієнтованого навчання. **Методи.** У дослідженні використано комплекс теоретичних та емпіричних методів. Теоретична частина охоплює аналіз, порівняння та узагальнення сучасних наукових праць із проблем критичної медіаграмотності, цифрової безпеки та методики викладання іноземних мов. Емпіричну основу становить структурована педагогічна рефлексія, що ґрунтується на професійному досвіді авторів, здобутому в межах освітніх проєктів модуля Жан Моне – EUSELENA та EUSPACE у Сумському національному аграрному університеті (Україна), які передбачали поєднання розвитку медіаграмотності та засад створення безпечного освітнього середовища з навчанням англійської мови та розробку відповідних навчальних матеріалів і завдань. **Результати.** На основі проведеного аналізу визначено узагальнений комплекс принципів організації навчання англійської мови, орієнтованого на розвиток медіаграмотності й дотримання засад безпеки, зокрема, принцип інтеграції, принцип експліцитності безпеки, поетапного формування критичного мислення, принцип автентичності, діяльнісно орієнтованого навчання та рефлексії. Зазначені принципи розглядаються через три взаємопов'язані практичні виміри:



критичного оцінювання медіа; цифрової безпеки й добробуту; а також комунікативної компетентності з елементами цифрового громадянства. Також представлено приклади практичного впровадження принципів і вимірів, зокрема, через завдання, пов'язані з роботою з автентичними медіаматеріалами, аналіз онлайн-контенту та залучення студентів до рефлексивних і продуктивно-орієнтованих видів діяльності.

Висновки. Результати дослідження засвідчують доцільність інтеграції критичної медіаграмотності та цифрової безпеки у викладання англійської мови як взаємопов'язаних компонентів навчального процесу. Отримані результати сприяють більш чіткому розумінню способів впровадження цих елементів в іншомовну освіту та можуть бути корисними для вдосконалення навчальних програм та методичних прийомів викладання у сучасному цифровому освітньому середовищі.

Ключові слова: критичне мислення, навчання іноземної мови, медіаосвіта, оцінювання інформації, онлайн-ризик.

Introduction

Over the past decade, access to digital media has fundamentally changed how students consume, create, and share information. For EFL teaching, this transformation opens new pedagogical possibilities, also creating new challenges in learning environments. While multimodal digital resources provide authentic language input and boost learner engagement, they also expose young learners to certain online tensions [29].

In Ukraine, these issues are particularly **relevant**. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital technologies in education, and martial law has further increased reliance on online and blended learning to mitigate safety hazards. Thus, media literacy, previously seen as an optional skill, has evolved into a critical necessity for education and personal safety [2]. In the international context, media



literacy is viewed as a strategic component of security policy, aimed at strengthening societal resilience, countering disinformation, and equipping citizens with critical thinking as a “first line of defense” against hybrid threats [20]. In Ukraine’s current sociopolitical landscape, this issue is especially relevant, linking media literacy directly to national security and individual resistance to various types of informational and psychological operations [9]. The safety concerns for EFL learners are exacerbated since they frequently come across English content on social media platforms where misinformation is spread easily and privacy risks are common [8]. Therefore, there is a clear case for HEIs to develop educational strategies that teach young people to interact and communicate critically and safely in digital multilingual and multicultural environments. Without such approaches, learners remain insufficiently prepared for the sophisticated manipulation tactics frequent in today’s media. This is especially significant for EFL students, who face dual challenges as both language learners and active online users.

Literature Review

Recent research on the intersection of critical thinking, media literacy, digital safety, and EFL teaching has grown considerably, merging around three topics.

One focus of analysis is *the connections between critical media literacy (CML), safety concerns, and foreign language learning*. Scholars contend that critical thinking should be viewed as a core skill rather than just a secondary byproduct of language learning, and thus it should be deliberately taught [1; 14; 27]. Such an approach is intended to help learners engage with “social reality” instead of concentrating only on language skills. Language learning, in this view, can serve as a tool for connecting “the word and the world” [16].

Mitrulescu C. highlights a strong link between media literacy training, safety issues and EFL teaching strategies, emphasizing the role media literacy plays in boosting not just language skills but also critical thinking and resistance to disinformation. The scholar proposes a holistic approach that combines media analysis



with language skills strategies and equips young people with crucial cognitive and linguistic skills needed to handle intricate media environments [25].

At the same time, some voices suggest that critical media literacy remains “under-explored” in EFL contexts and “rarely embedded into curricula in a coherent way”[28].

Another scope of research focuses on *what happens when students actually navigate online landscapes, specifically in EFL learning*. Medvid, Vashist, and Strizhenko document a wide range of digital threats Ukrainian youth face – including cyberbullying, phishing, propaganda, and radicalization – and advocate for incorporating safety-focused topics into foreign language classes [3]. Their work is particularly relevant given the intensified information warfare environment that Ukrainian EFL learners navigate.

Silvhiany S., Huzaifah S., and Ismet I. point out that simply being exposed to digital content does not automatically guarantee learners’ competence to distinguish reliable sources and information: EFL learners can be easily misled by online information and may struggle to critically assess the claims they encounter in digital environments [31]. As Choudhury et al. acknowledge, the digital environment does offer benefits for language learners – authentic input, cultural immersion, and real communicative contexts. But they also underline significant concerns: learner distraction, exposure to informal or non-standard language, and social and psychological risks like information pollution, complex misinformation, and manipulation [11].

From a language-learning perspective, the task of differentiating credible from fabricated content, as well as quickly navigating multiple sources to verify a claim, requires students to have both linguistic skills and critical thinking [26; 34].

The psychological aspect of risks related to various media content used by EFL learners further adds to the complexity. Scientists indicate that problematic use of social media links to various negative outcomes, including poor language skills,



increased foreign language anxiety, elevated academic burnout, and adverse perfectionism traits [30].

In short, modern learners interact with digital media intensively, but their ability to think and act critically in risky environments may still remain limited. They face linguistic, cognitive, and psychological pressures simultaneously, which pose challenges for the learning process and instructional strategies.

A third area of concern – and the most directly relevant to the study – is the *insufficiency of systematic integration of CML and safety issues into EFL teaching*. Studies confirm that media literacy training improves resilience against misinformation. However, the strongest effects are observed when these interventions are delivered over multiple sessions as a part of a structured curriculum [18]. However, as Jolls T. remarks, training still tends to rely on individual educationalists' initiatives rather than on institutionalized, framed, and safety-focused models [20]. Albardía et al., in a study based on expert and student perceptions, found that although both students and educators acknowledge that modern media technologies offer opportunities to enhance teaching and learning, and recognize the importance of critical media skills in the digital era, their integration into the curriculum remains limited and often superficial [6]. The absence of clear pedagogical and curricular guidelines regarding the use of social media in teaching foreign languages leads to episodic, loosely structured practices [35]. It means that single one-off activities are insufficient and a sustained approach is necessary.

Broader systemic constraints include limited policy support, insufficient teacher training, and the lack of consistent evaluation frameworks for media literacy implementation [11].

Ukrainian approaches align with international trends. Scholars emphasize that developing media literacy effectively depends on the systematic use of digital methods that consider educational levels, age-specific traits, and grounded integration of various disciplines [4]. Kolisnichenko and Kapeliushna (2025) examined media literacy



resources in Ukrainian and international contexts and indicated the adaptability and responsiveness to changing needs as core attributes of contemporary media literacy education. As digital technologies advance and disinformation tactics grow more complex, educational methods should be consistently revised to include interactive elements and comply with international standards of information security and digital skills [21]. Importantly, students express a strong interest in media literacy education, supporting its incorporation into foreign language learning [23]. It is a clear signal that demand exists.

Taken together, these three research areas **point to a gap**: available approaches may cover critical thinking, media analysis, or online safety in relation to EFL, but there is still a need for a unified pedagogical framework that integrates all three within foreign language teaching.

This **study explores** approaches to integrating critical media literacy and digital safety into EFL teaching and presents a set of guiding principles for safety-oriented instruction. Two objectives lead this work: first, to examine and synthesize existing theories and practices related to CML in EFL, identifying key challenges and gaps; second, to propose principles for safety-oriented EFL teaching and outline its practical dimensions.

Methodology

The study combines theoretical and empirical research methods to analyze and systematize approaches for incorporating critical media literacy and digital safety into EFL teaching.

The theoretical methods involve analyzing, comparing, and generalizing recent scientific publications mainly from the last five years on critical media literacy, digital safety, and EFL instruction, particularly focusing on pedagogical frameworks, empirical findings, or policy implementation. These methods enable the identification of key approaches, challenges, and effective practices discussed in the literature.



The empirical part of this study is based on the authors' professional experience with educational initiatives at Sumy National Agrarian University (SNAU), specifically implementing two Jean Monnet projects: EUSELENA (“EU strategies extrapolation for boosting students’ media literacy in Ukrainian higher education”), which aims to equip students with essential skills for navigating today’s media landscape; and EUSPACE (“The linguistic dimension of the notion ‘security’ as a key component of a safe educational space”), which addresses the concept of safety in education, including informational and digital aspects. Both projects combined EFL teaching with media literacy and provision of a safe educational environment, designed relevant materials, and monitored students’ engagement and learning outcomes.

The study does not present these projects as research findings, but it uses them as a source of structured pedagogical reflection, drawing upon classroom observations, informal feedback collected from students and teachers during both projects, and analysis of course materials and task designs created for EUSELENA and EUSPACE.

Results

Understanding the existing theoretical landscape is a necessary step to mapping current frameworks and their limitations before formulating guidelines and outlining how media literacy and safety can be meaningfully implemented into EFL classrooms. Several instructional approaches demonstrating potential are discussed below as theoretical support to inform the practical implementation.

Multimodal text analysis engages learners with diverse semiotic resources – text, images, audio, video – promoting media literacy while providing rich language input [15; 33]. Collaborative projects allow students to create media content, fostering awareness of production techniques and rhetorical strategies while empowering foreign language learning [19]. Some frameworks view CML as both a teaching tool and a learning outcome.

Afrilyasanti and colleagues’ three-component framework covers the theoretical foundations of CML principles, learner characteristics and language proficiency, as



well as materials and media selection. This concept is useful as it tackles the challenge of information overload in digital-related learning spaces and enhances language mastery [5].

Suh and Huh argue for incorporating medial literacy in foreign language courses as a necessary shift from “code-breaking” – focusing on vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension – to a “critical stance”. Scholars propose a model of four interrelated dimensions that balance language development for critical thinking; emotional engagement and criticality; citizenship awareness; and context-sensitive implementation. This comprehensive approach is worth attention because it recognizes that EFL learners need both linguistic and critical thinking skills to actively engage with media texts [32].

Critical Digital Literacy (CDL) aligns with these frameworks and extends traditional media literacy to include digital-specific competencies [17]. Under CDL techniques, skills such as recognizing linguistic implicitness in digital texts, assessing source credibility, understanding how algorithms curate content, and detecting manipulative communication tactics like presuppositions and implicatures can be cultivated through specific didactic materials [10].

The Digital Multimodal Composing (DMC) framework, grounded in Systemic Functional Theory and Design Thinking, takes a creation-centered approach. It structures the knowledge and skills related to digital multimodal practices into key domains: critical, creative, and technical [22].

At the policy level, the current European Commission’s Digital Competence Framework (DigComp 3.0) involves safety explicitly with media literacy, offering detailed guidance that covers information literacy, digital communication, content creation, digital well-being, cybersecurity, and problem-solving as a unified competence set [12]. This matters because it demonstrates institutional support for integrating media literacy and safety into language curricula, not just adding them as an afterthought.



Overall, these approaches and frameworks form a valuable background and demonstrate a tendency to address media literacy, critical thinking, digital skills, and safety issues within language teaching. However, some barriers hinder their implementation in EFL contexts.

Traditional EFL curricula leave little room for media literacy goals alongside grammar, vocabulary, and skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking [13]. Even with access to reliable internet, digital devices, and diverse media, concerns about privacy, data security, and appropriate content create additional challenges [7]. Assessment presents another gap. While language proficiency has standardized evaluation tools (e.g., CEFR), there are few comparable instruments for media literacy in EFL contexts.

In general, there is still a need for better alignment of language training, media literacy, and digital safety with the specific needs of EFL learners in online settings. These should not be treated as separate issues but as interrelated components of the modern educational environment. The proposed principles and practical approaches for safety-oriented EFL teaching consolidate the theoretical tendencies reviewed above and the authors' practical insights gained during the EUSELENA and EUSPACE implementations at SNAU.

Within both projects, media literacy and security-focused content were delivered as elective disciplines. This format provided significant pedagogical flexibility and enabled the combination of EFL learning with media literacy and safety topics. It also revealed the necessity of systematically integrating such practices, as students demonstrate high engagement and positive learning outcomes.

During the EUSELENA implementation, students received targeted media literacy training, which included skills for evaluating information, spotting manipulation, distinguishing disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation, debunking false content, and countering cyberbullying. The overall goal was to strengthen their ability to engage with authentic online content more critically.



Learners reported a high interest in the themes under discussion but also indicated that without specific training, they lacked strategies needed to interpret English-language media critically and respond safely [23].

The EUSPACE worked from a different angle, clarifying how safety dimensions – physical, psychological, informational, and environmental – intersect with language learning. The unexpected discovery was the profound and intricate nature of these weaves, demonstrating that language acquisition and safety awareness mutually reinforce each other [24].

The elaborated principles of incorporating media literacy and safety concerns into EFL consider learners' dual vulnerability: they navigate complex digital environments and engage with foreign-language content as non-native speakers, and face both linguistic barriers and critical evaluation challenges, which tend to compound each other.

The *principle of integration* ensures that foreign language acquisition, media literacy, and digital safety concerns are addressed within a single learning assignment. This approach serves to prevent curriculum overload and fragmentation of the educational experience. For instance, in EUSELENA sessions, students analyzed English social media posts for both language features and disinformation markers in the same task.

Following the *principle of explicit safety*, risks in online spaces, such as privacy violations, misinformation, cyberbullying, and others, are introduced through real-life scenarios, replacing teachers' declarations of abstract warnings. In EUSPACE, learners examined real cases of phishing attempts and data breaches reported in English-language media, connecting safety awareness closely with language understanding.

Scaffolded criticality principle reflects the importance of aligning the complexity of critical analysis tasks with individuals' actual language proficiency – moving gradually from guided interpretation of simple media texts to independent evaluation and creation of media content. EUSELENA materials progressed from



guided annotations of news headlines to autonomous fact-checking activities suitable for different (A2-B2) CEFR levels.

The *authenticity principle* emphasizes using for learning real-world media materials that students actually encounter – such as social media posts, news articles, influencer content – thereby ensuring that learning is appropriate, relevant, and skills can be transferred and applied outside the classroom as well. In both projects, students worked with live news feeds, Telegram channels, and YouTube comments – resources they regularly encounter outside the classroom.

Students are encouraged to act as critical consumers and responsible creators who verify, interpret, check facts, and produce content ethically, all within the *action-oriented learning principle*. Both projects resulted in students creating public service announcements in English on safety topics, such as identifying online manipulation, debunking propaganda, and digital cheating, and more, which were shared within the university community.

The *reflective principle* helps students develop metacognitive awareness, allowing them to reconsider their own digital interactions, online behavior, media practices and choices, and decision-making strategies. Mid-term and end-of-module reflection tasks in EUSELENA and EUSPACE encouraged students to reevaluate their social media behavior, considering the strategies discussed.

The implementation of these principles is organized around the following dimensions.

The *dimension of critical media evaluation* focuses on developing students' skills to analyze, assess, and interpret media messages across various platforms and formats. The training process underscores evaluating sources and assessing credibility; detecting bias, manipulation, and implicit messages; identifying misinformation and applying fact-checking techniques; analyzing multimodal texts with visual, auditory, and textual elements; and understanding media production and hidden intentions. Pedagogical strategies encompass comparative media analysis, guided deconstruction



of news articles and social media posts, reading and exploring media texts with exercises tailored to language proficiency levels, and explicit teaching of linguistic features in persuasive and manipulative discourse.

In the *dimension of digital safety and well-being*, proactive practices and awareness are enforced. Among them are acknowledging privacy protection and data security; recognizing online risks such as cyberbullying, predatory behavior, and scams; managing digital footprints and online reputation; understanding platform policies, algorithms, and data collection practices; as well as employing strategies for maintaining digital well-being and screen time control. Teaching tactics comprise case studies, role-playing tasks, investigating online dilemmas, analyzing privacy policies and terms of service, and discussing ethical online behavior. Constructing a safe educational environment is not provided through strict rule declarations but through informed decision-making supported by critical thinking.

The *dimension of communicative competence and digital citizenship* connects media literacy to EFL outcomes and civic participation by producing media content that demonstrates language proficiency and critical thinking; promoting respectful, effective intercultural online communication; and enhancing understanding of digital rights, responsibilities, and civic participation. It also fosters individuals' ability to combat misinformation and improve information quality. Students go beyond merely consuming media; they also create it with language and a sense of responsibility. Relevant activities include creating fact-checking reports, producing public service announcements about digital safety, participating in collaborative media projects addressing community issues, peer reviewing online content, and reflecting on personal media consumption and creation practices.

Conclusion

EFL classrooms now serve more than just language mastering spaces; they are entry points into a complex, often manipulative information environment that students browse every day. This study has outlined a principled approach to integrating critical



media literacy and digital safety into EFL instruction. When EFL teachers assist students in critically assessing media, safeguarding their digital well-being, and acting responsibly as communicators, they develop more than just language competence – they foster critical awareness and proactive habits that real-world multilingual engagement demands.

Students equipped with the mentioned skills are better able to resist misinformation, engage thoughtfully with diverse perspectives, protect themselves from digital harms, and contribute constructively to online and offline communities. The skills do not compete with language proficiency – they mutually reinforce it.

From a theoretical perspective, the study enhances current knowledge by considering media literacy, critical thinking, and safety as interrelated structural elements of quality EFL teaching, rather than supplementary aspects. The six guiding principles and three interrelated dimensions illustrate a cohesive integration of language development, media literacy, and digital safety within a unified teaching approach.

For Ukrainian and international EFL educators, the study offers structured guidance that can be adapted to various institutional contexts and learner profiles. The proposed principles and dimensions can contribute to curriculum design, teacher training, and the development of integrated assessment tools in EFL contexts. This approach, developed during Ukraine's wartime, is especially relevant because the issues it tackles – including increased information warfare, the forced transition to blended and online learning, and widespread misinformation – are also becoming more common in other parts of the world.

Future research could focus on creating assessment tools that measure both language and media literacy competences. It should also investigate how different approaches affect learners at various CEFR proficiency levels and compare outcomes between curriculum-integrated implementation and elective courses.



Equipping learners to not only consume English-language media but also to navigate, evaluate, create, and critique it with awareness and skill is a crucial objective of EFL teaching in a rapidly digitalizing world. The proposed study moves a step closer to this goal.

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