



Introducing Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis in an EFL Undergraduate Classroom: Early Implementation, Opportunities, and Challenges

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Abstract

Despite various formal and informal initiatives at national, institutional, and program levels, integrating critical thinking and advanced English communication skills in Thai EFL higher education contexts remains a challenge. Drawing on my teaching experience and curriculum development work at a Thai university, this paper discusses a recurring issue: the difficulty English major students encounter when performing complex analytical tasks in upper-level courses. This challenge persists despite a curriculum structured to equip students with necessary linguistic and academic foundations in the first two years, thereby postponing the development of analytical thinking to the later stages of study. Thus, the paper advocates for a shift in instructional approach, proposing the earlier integration of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), an approach that examines meaning-making across verbal, visual, and multimodal texts, into lower-level courses. Using the International Cultures course as a case, I argue that early-year exposure to MCDA not only helps bridge the gap between (meta)language development and critical thinking, but also scaffolds students' analytical competencies, which, in turn, effectively prepares them for critical engagement in advanced coursework.

Keywords: Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), EFL Pedagogy, Critical Literacy, English Major, EFL

1. Introduction

As an educator teaching English major students, I have, for years, witnessed the persistent frustration experienced by both instructors and learners in their efforts to develop students' critical and analytical capabilities while simultaneously improving their advanced English communication skills. In the context of Thai higher education or more specifically, at a Thai university where over half of the English major students enter with low to lower-intermediate English proficiency (as evidenced by program records of standardized English test scores such as TOEIC, TSU-TEP, etc.), several courses requiring higher critical and analytical abilities often yield not-so-ideal academic results (as also reflected in program implementation reports, specifically the Thai Qualifications Framework for Higher Education 5, or TQF5). Resonating with this concern, previous studies have confirmed the difficulty of

integrating critical thinking with language development among English major undergraduates, regardless of program level (e.g., Namsaeng & Sukying, 2020; Sriwantaneeyakul, 2018).

This situation has led my colleagues (both Thai and non-Thai) and myself to reflect: What has gone wrong? Why have things turned out this way? And how can we address this challenge? In our case, the issue becomes particularly apparent in upper-level courses (e.g., English for Media Literacy, Linguistics, Sociolinguistics, Academic Reading and Writing, Research Methodology), where students are expected to demonstrate critical/analytical skills, the ability to evaluate, interpret, and construct arguments based on evidence while recognizing underlying perspectives and assumptions (Paul & Elder, 2020). At some point, many students struggle to express complex ideas or deliver critical arguments in English without extensive instructor support and guidance. Contributing to this issue are multiple factors (Kirkpatrick, 2012; Wiriyaichitra, 2002); however, the disconnection between language acquisition and the development of critical thinking has been cited as a key element (e.g., Rashid & Hashim, 2008; Liaw, 2007; Choy & Cheah, 2009). This reasoning aligns with my observations and pedagogical experiences. That is, in our current B.A. (English) curriculum (revision 2021), first- and second-year students are expected to build sufficient linguistic and academic skills before engaging in more demanding analytical tasks in advanced courses. Put differently, the program structure delays the development of analytical thinking until the third or fourth year, which, from my perspective, leads to the concern outlined above. Because by this stage, students may be overwhelmed by complex theories, abstract concepts, and deep academic content, making the learning process difficult for both learners and instructors. Previous research conducted in English as a second language (ESL) classroom settings has identified this similar phenomenon and described it as a lack of adequate scaffolding at critical stages of academic development (e.g., Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Samson & Collins, 2012).

To put this into perspective, I experienced this firsthand while teaching English for Media Literacy to third-year EFL major students. I observed that while some students gradually grasped core concepts as their English proficiency improved, most struggled to articulate arguments related to the socio-cultural, political, and economic dimensions of media messages until the later weeks of the course. This observation, together with extensive discussions with colleagues who reported similar experiences, suggests that foundational preparation should be introduced beforehand, ideally through preceding courses such as International Cultures, the course that explores English-speaking cultures, international cultures, and engages students in the comparison, analysis, and critique of diverse cultural issues. International Culture is highlighted here because students are required to complete it before enrolling in English for Media Literacy according to the program structure. While International Cultures is more content-driven than English for Media Literacy, it nonetheless offers an opportunity to build the groundwork for critical thinking earlier in students' academic journey.

Based on the above, I therefore propose the earlier integration of analytical frameworks of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) into second-year courses to bridge the gap between students' linguistic development and their capacity to engage critically with complex academic content. Although various instructional strategies, such as problem-based learning (Zhou, 2018), literature-based activities (Kaowiwattanakul, 2021), and debate formats (Cuong, 2023), have been employed to promote critical thinking in EFL contexts, these approaches are often introduced in later years or require a higher level of language proficiency from the outset. My aim is not to replace these strategies, but rather to

support them through an earlier introduction to MCDA. By doing so, this paper addresses a curricular challenge by examining the benefits of introducing complex analytical concepts earlier in the EFL curriculum. Specifically, it proposes the implementation of MCDA, an approach that examines how meaning is constructed through various semiotic resources, including language, visuals, and design elements (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Machin & Mayr, 2012), within a second-year undergraduate course. It argues that early exposure to MCDA frameworks can better prepare students for advanced coursework requiring critical analysis.

2. Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) as a Theoretical Foundation and Its Analytical Adaptation to EFL Classrooms

The theoretical foundation of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) has been shaped by contributions from systemic functional linguistics (SFL), social semiotics, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and multimodality studies over the past decades. Rooted in Halliday's exploration of language within social contexts, Kress and van Leeuwen's work on visual grammar, and Fairclough's model of CDA, MCDA extends traditional discourse analysis (DA) by examining how meaning is constructed across multiple semiotic modes, including images, layout, color, and text (Fairclough, 2013; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, 2006). Despite the growing body of research in these areas, there remains a notable gap in the application of MCDA within undergraduate EFL classrooms, particularly in the Thai context, where many students enter with low to lower-intermediate English proficiency. Existing studies often focus on CDA and multimodality separately, rather than considering how these multilayered frameworks can be introduced to (beginning) learners who are simultaneously developing their linguistic competence.

Further to the MCDA, the concept of scaffolding, as introduced by Hammond and Gibbons (2005), offers a framework for understanding how this gap might be bridged by highlighting the importance of structured support at critical developmental stages. Such scaffolding becomes even more vital in Thailand's EFL context, where students often face difficulties articulating complex ideas in English (Wiriyaichitra, 2002). Gibbons' (2015) research further supports this approach by confirming that effective scaffolding can simultaneously promote both language development and deeper content understanding, a point that has informed my attempt to integrate MCDA into the International Cultures course. In response to the need for a structured sequence, Serafini's (2011) three-tiered model of multimodal analysis offers a particularly useful scaffold for EFL learners. This model suggests that students first engage in perceptual or descriptive analysis (identifying elements, such as colors, fonts, images, and layout, without interpretation), then move to structural or interpretive analysis (examining how elements interact and what they suggest or imply), and finally progress to ideological analysis (questioning underlying assumptions, power relations, and the broader social, cultural, and ideological meanings constructed within the text). This staged approach allows EFL students to gradually build confidence, beginning with accessible descriptive tasks and advancing toward more complex interpretive and critical engagement as their linguistic resources develop.

As outlined above, MCDA also lies in critical literacy (CL), the ability to read texts beyond surface meanings and to interrogate the ideologies, power dynamics, and social assumptions embedded within. To Janks (2010), critical perspectives should not be reserved solely for advanced students but should instead be implemented throughout the curriculum from the early stages. This view resonates strongly with my belief that introducing analytical frameworks earlier, even for students with emerging language skills, is essential. It also

supports scholarly critique that EFL education in Thailand has long prioritized grammatical accuracy over critical engagement (Inpanich & Somphong, 2022; Kampookaew, 2020; Srichanyachon, 2001), a trend that my classroom experiences and discussions with colleagues have similarly confirmed.

Taken together, these insights make it clear that simply introducing established MCDA models into Thai EFL classrooms would be insufficient. What is needed is a sensitive, context-aware adaptation, one that considers students' language proficiency while still nurturing their critical thinking competence. The integration of MCDA into courses like International Cultures must, therefore, be guided by principles from Content-Based Instruction (CBI) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). As supported by empirical studies, effective CBI balances content learning with language development through structured pedagogical approaches (e.g., Arulselvi, 2016; Sunarwan, 2013; and Rohmah, 2016). Considering these theoretical foundations, the next section proposes a framework, specifically designed for the International Cultures course. It is an adaptation that draws on these theories and is also grounded in my own classroom observations and teaching experience. The adaptation aims to provide a practical and realistic approach for early critical engagement with multimodal texts in EFL classroom.

Building on these theoretical foundations, the adaptation of MCDA for undergraduate EFL students must simplify complex frameworks while maintaining their critical focus/stance. The model I propose draws from Halliday's systemic functional linguistics (which explores how language operates within social contexts), social semiotics (the study of meaning-making through different signs and modes), and critical discourse analysis (which examines how semiotic resources construct power relations and ideologies) (Machin & Mayr, 2012). To ensure accessibility for learners with low to intermediate English proficiency, the framework is structured around five interconnected dimensions: Perceptual, Representational, Interactional, Compositional, and Critical-Ideological. Each dimension is aligned with specific scaffolding stages to support students' gradual development from surface-level description to deeper critical analysis. Table 1 below summarizes these dimensions, their theoretical foundations, pedagogical purposes, and sample activities designed specifically for the International Cultures course.

Table 1: Adapted MCDA Framework for Undergraduate EFL Students in the International Cultures Course

Dimension	Theoretical Basis	Focus	Scaffolding Stage	Purpose for Thai EFL Students	Example Activities and Questions
Perceptual	Social Semiotics, Serafini's Perceptual Analysis	Identifying and describing multimodal elements (images, colors, layout, text features)	Initial scaffolding (concrete identification tasks)	Builds vocabulary and confidence through accessible entry points; connects visual literacy with language development	- What people, objects, and settings do you see? - What colors are dominant? - List the key visual and textual elements - Complete sentence frames: 'The image shows...'
Representational	Halliday's Ideational Function, Critical Discourse Analysis	Who/what is represented; actions and relationships; presence and absence	Guided scaffolding (analysis with support)	Develops analytical language to describe representation; introduces	- Who is shown/missing in this representation? - What actions are depicted and by whom? - How are different cultures portrayed?

				cultural context considerations	- Compare representations with your own experience
Interactional	Halliday's Interpersonal Function, Social Semiotics	Relationship between viewer and content (gaze, angle, distance); positioning and power	Transitional scaffolding (moving toward interpretation)	Connects visual features to meaning-making; introduces concepts of power and positioning	- Where is the gaze directed and why? - How does camera angle affect your feelings? - Who has power in this image and how can you tell? - How does the text address the reader?
Compositional	Kress & van Leeuwen's Compositional Structures, Social Semiotics	Organization and integration of modes; salience; framing; information value	Advanced scaffolding (synthesis tasks)	Builds meta-awareness of design choices; encourages integration of multiple analytical perspectives	- What stands out first and why? - How do images and text work together? - How does layout guide your reading path? - Which elements are emphasized through size/position?
Critical-Ideological	Critical Discourse Analysis, Janks' Critical Literacy	Underlying assumptions; cultural values; power dynamics; alternative readings	Self-directed investigation (supported independence)	Promotes higher-order thinking while providing language support; connects analysis to personal and social contexts	- Whose interests are served by this text? - What cultural values are promoted? - How might people from different cultures interpret this? - Design an alternative representation that challenges assumptions

As shown in Table 1, the perceptual dimension serves as the entry point for EFL students, focusing on the concrete identification of multimodal elements such as images, colors, layout, and text features. This dimension builds vocabulary and confidence through accessible tasks, connecting visual literacy with language development for EFL students who may be at lower proficiency levels. The representational dimension encourages students to analyze who and what is portrayed in cultural texts, examining presence, absence, and relationships between elements. Drawing from Halliday's ideational function and CDA, this dimension provides a solid foundation for moving toward more abstract interpretations of power and ideology while developing analytical language skills in a cultural context.

The interactional dimension, based on Halliday's interpersonal function and social semiotics, focuses on how the viewer is positioned by the text. Here, students explore elements such as gaze, angle, and distance to better understand how relationships of power and positioning are constructed between the text and its audience. These concepts are introduced through transitional scaffolding that moves students from description toward interpretation.

The compositional dimension examines how layout, color, and the arrangement of visual and verbal elements work together to create meaning. Drawing from Kress and van Leeuwen's compositional structures, this dimension helps learners recognize the interaction of different modes of communication and supports the development of a basic metalanguage for analyzing multimodal texts through advanced scaffolding activities. The critical-ideological dimension completes the framework by engaging students with underlying assumptions, cultural values, and power dynamics embedded in texts. Aligned with Janks' critical literacy approach, this dimension promotes higher-order thinking while providing language support, encouraging students to consider alternative perspectives and connect analysis to personal and social contexts.

By structuring these dimensions in a progressive sequence that matches students' language abilities, the adapted MCDA framework becomes a feasible analytical tool for Thai

EFL students. It creates a bridge between Serafini's three-tiered model, Hammond and Gibbons' scaffolding principles, and the critical literacy goals articulated by Janks. Moreover, it links to broader themes explored in the International Cultures course, making it highly compatible with both the linguistic and CBL goals inherent in CBI and CLIL approaches.

3. Pedagogical Applications and Strategies

Implementing the adapted MCDA framework within the International Cultures course requires pedagogical strategies that scaffold both content knowledge and analytical thinking. Drawing on my teaching experience and aligned with principles from Hammond and Gibbons (2005) and critical literacy (Janks, 2010), I outline four approaches that support intermediate EFL learners in engaging with multimodal discourse.

3.1 Progressive dimensional implementation

Rather than overwhelming students with full theoretical explanations, I suggest introducing components of MCDA progressively through the five dimensions outlined in Table 1. For instance, when exploring Japanese culture, students begin with perceptual analysis of manga or anime, identifying concrete visual elements and vocabulary. Once confident, they move to representational aspects, analyzing who is present or absent, followed by interactional dimensions such as gaze and perspective. As their analytical capacity develops, they engage with compositional structures, finally progressing to critical-ideological questioning. This layered approach mirrors Serafini's tiered model and exemplifies pedagogical scaffolding, allowing students to build confidence while internalizing analytical categories. That said, some learners may initially rely heavily on surface features. This signals the need for explicit demonstrating of deeper interpretation through teacher-guided examples.

3.2 Multimodal text selection

Choosing appropriate multimodal texts is also critical. In line with social semiotic theory (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), I recommend beginning with texts rich in visual meaning but low in linguistic complexity, such as posters or still images that clearly demonstrate elements from the perceptual and representational dimensions. As students gain analytical fluency, more complex materials (e.g., film clips, advertisements, public service announcements) should be introduced to explore interactional and compositional dimensions. These materials help expose learners to how cultural assumptions are encoded across modes. For the critical-ideological dimension, using texts that show different perspectives on the same cultural issue can be helpful. However, their effectiveness depends on students' ability to decode not just what is shown, but why it is shown (purpose), and for whom (target audience).

3.3 Collaborative meaning-making

Small-group analysis tasks can reduce language anxiety and promote shared meaning-making. Groups may focus on different MCDA dimensions and later combine their findings. This approach fosters peer learning, while the teacher facilitates rather than dictates. For example, in analyzing representations of Thai culture in tourism materials, one group might examine perceptual elements, another interactional aspect, and a third compositional features, before collaboratively addressing critical-ideological implications. While effective overall, quieter students may rely more on confident peers. In such cases, assigning rotating roles (e.g., speaker, recorder, questioner) helps distribute participation more equitably, reinforcing both confidence and analytical responsibility. As Namsaeng and Sukying (2020) posit, "collaborative learning is suggested as a mechanism to promote critical thinking in Thai...university learners" (p. 185).

3.4 Scaffolded analytical templates

To help students structure their thinking across all five dimensions, I suggest providing



templates with guiding questions, sentence starters or frames, and key vocabulary for each MCDA layer. For the perceptual dimension, simple identification tasks (“*I can see...*”) help build foundational vocabulary. For representational analysis, frames like “*This image shows ____ doing ____, which suggests/implies ____*” support both linguistic development and analytical reasoning. Interactional and compositional dimensions employ more complex sentence frames that connect visual features to meaning-making. By the critical-ideological dimension, templates include prompts such as “*This representation might reinforce ____ stereotype because ____.*” are recommended.

4. Implications and Future Directions

The integration of the expanded MCDA framework into the International Cultures course carries constructive implications for EFL curriculum design, pedagogical practice, and program-level innovation. Based on my reflective teaching experience, I propose the following directions for ongoing development and research:

4.1 Progressive integration of critical frameworks

Critical analytical tools should not be limited to upper-level courses. Rather, EFL programs could adopt a progressively integrated model, embedding simplified versions of frameworks like MCDA at gradually challenging stages throughout the curriculum. The perceptual dimension could be introduced in beginning courses, with representational and interactional dimensions in intermediate courses, and compositional and critical-ideological dimensions in more advanced courses. As argued by Janks (2010), critical literacy is not an endpoint but a developmental process. Courses in reading, writing, and speaking can introduce students to critical concepts early on, helping them build a foundation for more independent and deeper analysis in advanced courses.

4.2 Program collaboration and development

It is important to maintain courses connected when introducing interdisciplinary frameworks. Collaboration between instructors in courses like International Cultures, English for Media Literacy, Academic Reading and Writing, and Research Methodology helps ensure that analytical terms, tasks, and expectations are consistent across the five dimensions of the adapted MCDA framework. Workshops at the program or faculty level can also be useful for sharing ideas about how to turn complex theories (like semiotics and discourse analysis) into practical teaching tools for intermediate learners, with a focus on keeping scaffolding consistent across courses.

4.3 Multimodal assessment practices

Traditional written and oral assessments may overlook how students make meaning through different modes. The expanded MCDA framework encourages broader ways of assessing understanding. In this course, students may respond well to tasks focused on each dimension. For example, marking perceptions in images, writing guided reflections for representational analysis, using diagrams for interactional analysis, color-coding for compositional analysis, and creating multimodal critiques for critical-ideological analysis. These activities not only stimulate creativity but also demonstrate students’ conceptual understanding, even when their language skills are still developing.

4.4 Research opportunities

One key limitation of this early implementation is the lack of empirical validation. To address this, future research could include classroom-based studies to examine how effective and adaptable the proposed MCDA framework is across different EFL contexts. Although this article draws primarily on teaching experience, the strategies discussed here provide starting points for systematic investigation. For example, researchers could consider tracking students’

development across the five dimensions of critical analysis over multiple courses. Moreover, comparative action research could investigate which scaffolding methods are most effective in reducing cognitive overload at each stage. Case studies exploring how Thai students progress from perceptual to critical-ideological analysis may also offer valuable insights. Such work would contribute to the still-limited body of research on critical discourse pedagogy, particularly in intermediate EFL settings.

5. Challenges and Considerations

Introducing the expanded MCDA framework in an undergraduate EFL context is not without pedagogical tensions. Drawing from teaching experience and ongoing reflection, I highlight four persistent challenges:

5.1 Balancing language and content

A major challenge is balancing language accuracy with critical thinking across the five dimensions. Students often share strong ideas in their first language (L1) but struggle to express them clearly in English, especially in the more abstract interactional, compositional, and critical-ideological dimensions. Excessive correction may discourage risk-taking, but ignoring language form can lead to confusion. As Cummins (2000) notes, academic language proficiency develops most effectively through cognitively demanding tasks supported by adequate scaffolding.

5.2 Managing dimensional cognitive load

The expanded MCDA framework introduces new vocabulary, concepts, and tasks, often simultaneously. This can overwhelm intermediate learners. For example, when asked to analyze gaze and power (interactional dimension), some students may describe what they saw (perceptual level). Focusing on mastering one dimension at a time before moving on to the next can help students re-engage. To this end, teachers need to remain alert for signs of overload and adjust instruction as needed, even if that means slowing down progress or simplifying tasks temporarily.

5.3 Cultural and critical sensitivity

Thai (educational) culture often values harmony and respect, which can make critical analysis, especially in the critical-ideological dimension, feel uncomfortable. Students, for example, may hesitate to challenge gender stereotypes in a local commercial. To support critical thinking without causing resistance, instructors should build a safe classroom environment where all views are respected. Starting with critical analysis of foreign media, before moving to local examples, can help students build confidence gradually.

5.4 Dimensional assessment considerations

Assessing students' critical analysis skills across the expanded MCDA framework challenges traditional ideas of fairness. Some students may show strong perceptual and representational analysis but struggle with the more complex dimensions in formal writing. Using multimodal assessments, such as like group presentations for interactional analysis, digital posters for compositional analysis, or audio reflections for critical-ideological analysis, can fortify a holistic picture of their understanding. Additionally, the use of rubrics should prioritize critical thinking for each dimension rather than focusing only on grammar accuracy.

6. Conclusion

This article has explored the pedagogical potential of adapting MCDA for undergraduate EFL learners, using the International Cultures course as a focal case. Motivated by the challenges students face in upper-level courses that demand critical analysis, it argues for earlier, scaffolded exposure to simplified analytical frameworks, even at lower-

intermediate language levels. The expanded five-dimensional MCDA framework, which moves from perceptual to critical-ideological analysis, offers a structured approach that reflects both Serafini's tiered model and the linguistic realities of Thai EFL major students.

The practical strategies discussed: (i) progressive dimensional implementation, (ii) multimodal text selection, (iii) collaborative analysis, and (iv) scaffolded templates provide a starting point for integrating this framework. While this approach requires careful attention to language development, cognitive load, and assessment practices, it holds strong potential for improving student critical engagement and academic readiness.

To support students' development of multimodal critical literacy, this paper calls for pedagogical models that introduce critical thinking early on, rather than waiting until learners reach advanced levels of fluency. The expanded MCDA framework outlined here offers one such model. Future curricular innovation and research should continue to explore how complex critical theories can be translated into accessible, empowering learning experiences in diverse EFL contexts.

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