Developing critical literacy practices of tertiary learners in the ESL classroom

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Abstract*: - A major concern is that students are not critical when they read in school and this practice is carried to university. Tertiary reading necessitates students read more than one text and then synthesizes the information before presenting their understanding of a topic either in a written or oral form. This means they have to effectively interact with the text and construct meaning based on their knowledge and students struggle to do this. This paper will show how students can be guided to develop critical perspectives and a better understanding of how texts position and even marginalize readers. Using a case study method data comprised observation notes, student assignments and student reflections. The findings highlight that students can move beyond passively accepting the text's message to understand ideologies, injustices and power struggles which shape texts. This shift is further evident when students become text producers at the end of the fourteen weeks.*

Keywords*: - critical literacy, ideologies, power, reading, critical perspectives*

1. Introduction

Reading is a very important skill as it is the conduit for learning and gathering of knowledge and ultimately leads to improved academic success (Puteri Rohani 2017)The reading skill is taught at all levels in school, both primary and secondary and much of the reading is graded and developmental. At these levels the focus is very much on the cognitive processes of reading and the ability to answer comprehension questions and even synthesize information from multiple sources. To this end the inclusion of higher order thinking skills (HOTs) into the curriculum to develop students who can think critically and creatively (Noraini and Khairul 2014) began in 2013 and is also included in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025).

While national efforts have been implemented to help mould students into critical and thinking individuals (Vijayaratnam 2012) who can decipher texts and messages accurately (Sarjit 2013), the reality at the grassroots reveals a different picture. A 2011 research undertaken by AKEPT indicated that the incorporation of HOTs into teaching and learning in schools across Malaysia was largely unsatisfactory (MEB 2012). At the primary level the questions asked during examinations (Randip Kaur

and Azianura Hani 2019) were found to have not reached the level of HOTs and teachers' ability to apply HOTs in their classes was also lacking (Masran Md Nasir and Esha Asna Zainatulnufus 2018, Zulkarami 2011, Sukiman et al 2013). This is also the trend among secondary level students where assessments of HOTs revealed students' ability to answer such questions were unsatisfactory (Si 2015). Teachers too were found to be unclear on how to promote HOTS in their classrooms (Azian et.al 2017) and preferred to focus on students' ability to answer comprehension questions (Dwee et al 2016) in preparation for the national examinations

It is evident that when students leave school and enter university they have been trained to read texts and answer comprehensions questions and write summaries. Reading in the university demands more than understanding and summarizing as students will also need to be able to synthesize information from two or more texts and present this information in either an oral or written form (Author 2007). This necessitates students being able to interact with and make meaning from texts using their schema or background knowledge and this is a struggle for many students (Zaira Abu Hassan 2008). The

absence of questions to guide them to the main points in the texts leaves them to make sense of the texts independently and their lack of critical ability hampers them (Wong & Kemboja Ismail 2012, Normazidah et al 2012). It is therefore important to develop the ability to read critically among our students so they can interact with texts in a more transformative way.

Being active participants in the reading process (Freire 1970) readers are encouraged to question, explore, reflect, transform and see beyond the familiar and comfortable and recognize that texts contain ideologies and perspectives (Jones 2006).

Reading from a critical perspective involves thinking beyond the text to understand issues such as why   the author wrote about a particular topic, wrote from a particular perspective, or chose to include some ideas about the topic and exclude others.(McLaughlin & DeVoogd 2004,13)

Engaging in such reading is akin to critical literacy which views text meaning making as a social construction (Norris et al 2012). Critical literacy is an on-going learning process that allows students to use reading, writing, and thinking, listening, speaking, and evaluating to effectively interact, construct meaning and communicate for real-life situations. It is especially important for an active literate person to think, learn, reflect and assume responsibility for continued literacy development. While the importance of making meaning from texts cannot be underplayed, it is also equally necessary for students to understand the ideologies, social injustices, inequalities, and power struggles which shape the form of texts.

The focus of this paper is to show how students can be taught to question societal issues and institutions and develop a better understanding of how texts position and even marginalise readers by questioning issues of stereotyping and discrimination, marginalization, power and violence by producing counter texts.

2. Four Resources Model

Luke and Free body (1999) posit that it is important to develop social, cultural and economic practices when reading and created the Four Resources Model

that focuses on literacy practices that students should learn to function in society. They highlight four basic roles for readers and these are code breaker, meaning maker, text user and text analyst.

Breaking the code is about knowing and using the linguistic and discoursal features and structure of texts. Good readers decode the words and their meanings by using strategies to read and find meanings of unknown words. These readers have a repertoire of strategies to make sense of difficulty concepts and this helps them understand texts. Code breakers are generally good with the technical aspects of reading.

The reader as meaning maker engages with the text by making meaning using background knowledge, interpreting verbal and non-verbal cues and recognizing how text structure contributes to meaning. These readers interact with text to make meaning and can monitor comprehension by making predictions and inference while reading. The reader as text user knows how to use texts appropriately and what meanings the text carries in different contexts. These readers understand texts can be interpreted differently depending on context and situation. The text analyst can identify the purpose of the text and points of view by reading with a critical eye. These readers come with vast background knowledge and use this to interpret the text accordingly.

This study applied a fifth role – that of a text producer. Readers use the knowledge gained from the texts to arrive at their understanding of an issue and create a suitable text that represents their understanding. Here the ultimate meaning making in a specific context and the readers' view points and opinions will matter and this represents the highest form of critical literacy. Shannon (1995) posits critical perspectives become the means for understanding our history and culture, to recognize the connections between our lives and social structures, to believe that change is possible and desirable and with this knowledge we can make just decisions.

3. Context of the Study

The School of Language Studies and Linguistics offers a number of electives to third year

undergraduates and Critical Literacy is one such elective. This course aims to improve learners' ability to read and understand the meaning within a wide range of informative, persuasive and entertaining texts from a variety of and genres and disciplines. The course draws on the Four Resources Model to teach learners how to develop a better awareness of critical literacy. The approach taken is to highlight the role of the reader in bringing meaning to a text in a critical and social context. Students are encouraged to question and critique current issues in society like poverty, discrimination, gender roles, education, equity and equality to show the imbalance in society.

They are exposed to multiple representations of similar issues using multi-media and multi-modalities and learn to draw out biasness, similarities and differences in these representations and to recognize hidden ideologies. This is done through arguing and debating their viewpoints and informed opinions. Students are given the opportunity to practice the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. The philosophy behind the approach is the recognition that when students develop the ability to read critically they recognize writer stance, whose knowledge is privileged, whose voice is silenced and their roles in making sense of these texts (Knobel and Lankshear 2002)

The course adopted Behrman(2006) recommendation on common practices to teach critical literacy and these included reading supplementary texts, reading multiple texts, reading from a resistant perspective, conducting research about topics of personal interest and challenging students to take social action and producing counter-texts. Examples of how these were carried out in class and described below.

➢ Reading supplementary texts – students were given the opportunity to source the Internet and other sources for texts on gender stereotyping to understand the issue better after it was discussed in class.
➢ Reading multiple texts – In discussing global warming students were shown photographs of

glaciers retreating and also read reports and poems on the phenomena.
➢ Reading from a resistant perspective – Students read an Indian newspaper report about a rape and compared this to reports from other countries to better interpret ideologies behind texts.
➢ Conducting research – Students have to choose a topic for research by evaluating problems in their environment and society. They are encouraged to select issues they are interested in and want to make some improvement to.
➢ Challenging students to take social action – This is attached to the research students conduct in that they engage in projects to improve the problem they have researched.
➢ Producing counter texts – Students produce counter texts that represent their points of view, opinions and ideologies.

3. Method

Using a case study approach fifteen 3rd year undergraduate students who registered for the Critical Literacy course offered by the School of Language Studies and Linguistics participated in the study. Phenomenological methodology was employed as it draws exclusively on the personal reflection of the students. Students' final magazine covers and their reflections on their covers were analysed thematically. The lessons were taught using the three phase action research model shown below.

3.1 Three Phase Action Research Model

The first phase (Observe and Plan) involved getting learners to demonstrate how they read and understand multiple representations of a text. Here they were given different accounts of an incident and asked to respond to the accounts. The researcher observed how they carried out the activity and took notes to plan for the next session. The second phase (Act and Observe) involved learners using specific guiding questions to analyse texts. These questions range from questions on composer, meaning and purpose; structure and feature of text; construction of characters and objects; issues of power and interest and views and reality represented. The third phase (Reflect and Plan)

involved learners reflecting on how they comprehend and bring meaning to the texts in a more critical manner. Here they reflected on the social issues they could identify in the text and discuss how this impacts their understanding and enjoyment of the texts.

3.2 Procedure

At each point along the cycle the learners were given tasks which began with them playing the role of code breaker then meaning maker before moving to text user and text analyst and arriving at text producer. So throughout the semester students had to respond to different critical literacy assignments using different approaches like reading multiple representations of the same event, exploring multimodal representations of a phenomena, deconstructing magazine cover and advertisements and finally reconstructing a magazine cover using their own ideologies. This paper will focus on the final assignment which represents the students understanding of the various issues discussed throughout the semester and showcases their awareness of critical literacy. For the assignment students had to create a magazine cover that embodied all the various issues discussed throughout the semester. Students could also create a parody of a magazine cover to represent their own ideology of the issue being displayed.

4. Findings

Selected students representations of their understanding of issues discussed over fourteen weeks will be presented here. The selected issues discussed here focus on stereotyping and discrimination, marginalization, power and violence.

4.1 Stereotyping and Discrimination

Student A designed a parody of Time magazine using the image of an unknown lady instead of featuring a powerful person, famous icon or celebrity. She chose this image of a Muslim women donning a veil and feeding stray dogs. In the Islamic religion dogs are controversial animals because the saliva of the dog is considered unclean and a person who comes to contact with it has to undergo the proper method of cleansing. She wants to highlight the stereotype that is predominant about Muslims not being allowed to touch dogs. She particularly wants to highlight the more important act of feeding the strays which needs to be seen as an act of kindness. Hence the image illustrates kindness can be done without any exception as a Muslim feeding dogs is not a familiar image. She designed this over to break the stereotypical representations about Muslims and dogs and to drive home the message that kindness should be done without any exception. She included 20 random acts of kindness stories involving Muslims to break the barrier of discrimination and stereotyping.
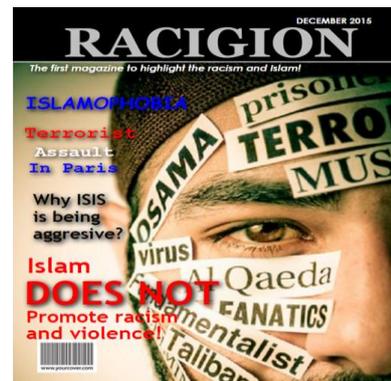
Student B designed 'Racigion' a new magazine, a hybrid of race and religion to highlight racism and Islam. The main cover story is titled 'Islam DOES NOT promote racism and violence' and this is the thrust of the entire magazine. The words 'does not' are in bold, capital letters to show the power to shape public opinion. The image on the cover is labelled with words like Al Qaeda, Taliban, Fundamentalist, Prisoner, Osama, Terrorist, Muslim, Virus to depict stereotyping and Islamophobia. The various cover stories are also symbolically illustrated to carry this message of stereotyping and Islamophobia. The colour black is chosen because it is the colour associated with power

4.2 Marginalization

Student C parodied the Vogue magazine which has had a long history as a fashion magazine that has influenced women around the world. She designed a cover using a modern Muslim woman to represent the majority of Muslim women worldwide. This was to raise awareness on the fact that Muslim women do not only wear black clothes, abayas, hijabs and burkas but also like fashion like other women. The cover image illustrates a decently attired yet fashionable young woman who is clothed according to the Islamic faith. The student is making a statement that such women do not get to grace the covers of fashion magazines and are often marginalized instead. The cover stories of the magazine are focused on empowering Muslim women and how these women can hold better positions in society. The student has merged religious principles and being successful in society with her cover.

Student D designed a magazine entitled Twenty-two to refer to women of a size 22 or plus size women. The tagline is Rediscover your inner beauty because she contends plus size women tend to be less confidence because of their appearance. This magazine is meant to be conforting for plus size women who may find it hard to relate to magazines that feature skinny models on their covers. This is a magazine for women to be fit and healthy despite being plus size. The cover stories focus on dressing to impress, staying fit, keeping healthy and reiterates the fact that they are normal. This is definitely a magazine that does not marginalize women because of the way they look, dress or feel.

4.3 Power and Violence

Student E designed a magazine entitled Exposed with the tagline the truth is never pretty. The title is highlight issues happening around us in society which we either choose to ignore or are unaware of and hopes to bring these to the fore. This issue highlights domestic violence and raises awareness on the fact that it can happen to anyone – women, men and even children. The main cover story is in bold red to illustrate the importance of stopping domestic violence. The toddler's statement on how her mother asked her to Shhhh illustrates how victims of domestic violence tend to conceal the event from others for some reason or another. The student has cleverly used a darker font colour to show this on the cover page. Another cover story highlights the effect of domestic violence towards children using two colours white and red. White symbolizes the innocence of a child while the dark shade of red symbolizes blood in a warzone. The play with colours shows how detrimental domestic violence is to children. Two articles that focus on signs of domestic violence and reasons to help a victim are in blue colour to show these are guides.

Student F produced a brand new magazine named 'Disclosure" to raise awareness on particular issues concerning migrant and domestic labour people may not really know or understand. The tagline is where we disclose what you don't know. She wants to use this magazine to expose what is unknown, unacknowledged or hidden from community and covered up with propaganda. She specifically chose to use black for her title 'to emphasize the darkness of the world kept from us, the world that is dark for the victim who has been mistreated, the feelings of hopelessness and misery experienced by the victims. The tagline is in bright yellow to illustrate there is hope and telling their stories will raise consciousness and feelings of empathy to ensure the cycle does not persist. The cover image is that of a hand that is badly injured, full of scrapes and uncleaned to illustrate the hardship and difficulties these foreign labours endure to earn a decent living for their families.

5. Discussion

This fourteen work course allowed students to select texts they want to deconstruct and make meaning from and this is a form of personalized learning. In addition students were able to reproduce texts using their ideologies and world views. This helped them to look at texts critically and to recognize when they were being positioned in a particular way by texts. The counter texts produced by selected students clearly depict students have thought about the issues and how they want to address them. Students completed the covers independently by researching the issues and looking for relevant images to use and colour schemes to adopt and then justified their selection in their essays.

In handling the issue of stereotyping and discrimination one student chose to focus on pushing the boundaries of understanding what religion prescribes and connects this to humanity and acts of kindness. She chose an image from a local daily that reported on a Muslim woman who feeds stray dogs to show the misconception associated with this act of kindness. She is trying to break down the stereotyping of such actions and highlights the humane act instead. The issue of Islamaphobia is the focus of the second magazine

and the student is focusing on the stereotyping of anything bad and harmful with religion that often leads to senseless discrimination. It is interesting that these students are addressing the issue in relation to religion and in this way helping raise awareness and remove the veil of injustice surrounding it.

The issue of marginalization is one that is often not given the attention it should receive and by portraying a modern Muslim women not dressed in the usual drab, loose dark coloured garments the student has drawn attention to this issue. She maintains these women are as vogue as women anywhere else and can grace the covers of international fashion magazines. Being plus sized is often viewed as a disadvantage and something to be hidden under tent-like clothing and minimal make up. The student has put together a magazine that positions these women in the forefront and helps empower them successfully.

The issue of power and violence is another issue that is so often disregarded in many communities and this is especially so with domestic workers and migrant labour. The students have created magazines aptly named Disclosure and Exposed to indicate the skeletons in the closet with these communities. They have managed to raise awareness about these issues and even offered suggestions on how to address them to help empower these communities.

It can be surmised that the students have developed from the first weeks of the course where they were begin to question their own ideologies and perspectives towards issues they never thought about or even concerned themselves with. Their magazine covers embody their understanding of specific issues and how they wanted to represent them to bring about social awareness and consciousness raising (Norris 2002). They have shown they can recognize silenced and marginalized voices, unfair representations and portrayals of communities and racial and religious discrimination (Knobel and Lankshear 2002)

This paper focused on the creations of six students to showcase their abilities and to illustrate how students can be moved to think actively and

critically about messages in texts instead of simply accepting what they read. By providing the right exposure throughout the fourteen weeks to different ways texts can be viewed and getting students to think about the issues in their context helped create critical individuals. The remaining students did also produce creative covers but in some instances their reasoning was not accurate or revealing so these were not included in the discussion. Overall the students did show the ability to think outside the box and produce insightful perspectives and covers that focused on pertinent issues.

The findings suggest students should be provided such exposure early in their tertiary education to enable them to not just develop but also sharpen their critical literacy ability. Lecturers should also strive to include critical literacy approaches in their classrooms by adopting Berhrman's (2006) critical literacy practices

Acknowledgments

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