Utilizing Dimensions of Critical Literacy to Improve Active Learning in Teaching English Novels in Lesotho

Mabohlokoa Masunhloane1 and Rantsie Kgothule1

1 Department of Education Foundations, Faculty of Education, University of the Free State, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

English is the language of learning and teaching in many countries, as in Lesotho. This language has a curriculum, and one of its components includes reading English novels. Although English is accorded this prestigious status in Lesotho secondary schools, minimal effort has been made to address the improvement of learners’ reading skills of English novels. With this in mind, this theoretical paper focused on teachers’ use of Critical Literacy (CL) by highlighting some literature perspectives on traditional banking education and CL, the emerging relationship between CL and Active Learning (AL), and the dimensions of CL as enhancers. The methodology used in this article is derived from the experiences of the authors and three English teachers in Lesotho schools related to the dimensions of CL in the teaching of English novels (EN). The study concluded that CL should be re-visited and recognized to enable teachers to act as the driving force in teaching EN.

Keywords: Critical literacy; Active learning, English novels, Dimensions.

INTRODUCTION

English is the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in Lesotho and is also a compulsory subject that remains a ‘pass’ prerequisite.1 One of the components of the English curriculum at the Junior Certificate level is English Literature, which includes reading English novels,2 and the approach to teaching in all subjects should be learner-centred.3 Teachers must use active learning (AL) and consider skills that would be most practical in the future to prepare learners for tertiary studies and the world of work.4 According to Popovska and Kuzmanovska, until now, teaching approaches that emphasize cooperation and effective learning have been inadequate or insufficiently implemented. Minimal effort has been made to improve learners’ reading skills in English novels (EN).5 AL is a unifying term to generate awareness and collaboration among those interested in improving their teaching.6 In simple terms, AL means that learners assume greater responsibility for their

3 Mamonaheng Amelia Matsau, “Investigating the learner-centred approach in language teaching in Lesotho” (Ph.D., Victoria University, 2007).
4 Mina Tsay and Miranda Brady, ”A case study of cooperative learning and communication pedagogy: Does working in teams make a difference?” Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (2010).
learning and the mastery of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This shift towards AL equally targets making teaching more innovative and interactive. Thus, AL enhances teaching methods and improves learners' thinking processes. The teacher provides opportunities for learners to go beyond what is written and explore what is meant, thus targeting learners' independent thinking and analysis skills.

Previous studies on AL, particularly on the learner's role, have proved inconclusive; this is probably because the proposed strategies focused on other stakeholders, such as policymakers, senior officials of the Ministry of Education and those involved in teacher education planning, to the exclusion of teachers, yet the latter plays a significant role in learning. The teaching of EN is usually characterized by learner passivity and a reliance on the teacher reading aloud and then giving their interpretation of the novel. This method disregards learners' interpretation of the novel and disempowers learners. Another challenge is to sustain learners' interest, especially in overcrowded classes in Lesotho secondary schools. Klarer argues that the novel's generally long and complex narration poses a challenge to the impression of unity since the novel cannot be read all in one sitting, unlike a short story. Teaching reading skills can help learners form connections in their set-work novels. Hence, it can be concluded that using English novels can be an alternative way to improve their reading skills in the English learning process. The literature shows that different countries have attempted to address some of the challenges AL poses in teaching EN. For example, in Kenya, attendance of teachers at in-service training seems to be effective for English and Literature teachers. In a study in Uganda, teachers with large classes reported that group work is an essential strategy in AL. It can be assumed that Lesotho may benefit from the above strategy.

Considering the above-identified challenges, this article aims to highlight the emerging relationship between CL and AL in teaching EN, briefly discuss some literature perspectives on traditional banking education and CL, and consider the dimensions of CL as enhancers.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Emerging Relationship Between Critical Literacy and Active Learning**

According to Abdul Aziz and Yeng, "Critical literacy recognizes the world we live in as texts imbued with power dynamics which determines our values and positions in society and deserves to be examined, contested and reconstructed so we may create a more just and equal." It focuses on power and promotes reflection, transformation and action. It encourages readers to actively participate in the reading process, question, dispute, and examine relations. On the other hand, active learning engages learners in learning through activities or discussions in class, emphasizing higher-order thinking and often involving group work. It could be argued from the earlier explanation that critical literacy and active learning involve learners constructing their
knowledge and understanding of English novels through engaging in activities that require higher-order thinking, thus demanding essential thinking.

Moreover, critical literacy and active learning make classrooms inclusive by inviting learners' participation. In the opinion of the authors, the use of banking education in the teaching of English novels could imply passive reading rather than active reading. Passive reading involves silent reading and superficial comprehension questions. On the contrary, active reading includes reading beyond simple meaning; working in groups; reading between the lines; and working on thought-provoking questions. Furthermore, G’ayratovna posits that active reading occurs when students are proactively involved in reading a text. It can therefore be argued that critical literacy and active reading share similar characteristics. The advantages of active reading are summarised as follows: it helps learners to contextualize reading; provides a framework for approaching the text; enables learners to be analytic; interacts with the text, and interacts with other learners to discuss possible perspectives. It can be concluded that active reading is critical literacy. The problem in this study is that teaching and learning English novels in Lesotho may present the teacher as the dispenser of knowledge, which does not encourage learners' critical literacy; thus, learners cannot demonstrate a more profound understanding of the English novel. It, therefore, becomes essential to interrogate how the dimensions of critical literacy may be utilized to improve the teaching of English novels.

**Pondering Critical Literacy and Traditional Banking Education**

The roots of critical literacy may be traced to Paolo Freire, a Brazilian educator who studied literacy from a socio-political aspect by linking power with literacy. In the mid-twentieth century, Freire was Brazil's Pernambuco Department of Education and Culture director. In this position, he designed an adult literacy campaign in the 1960s that utilized critical pedagogy. His literacy design was based on the critical social theory that emphasized a critical pedagogy, putting schooling in a political context. He challenged teachers and researchers to uncover implicit oppression within inequities, such as race, gender, sexual orientation and other aspects of identity. Freire's programme was based on a model where learner creativity was appreciated and the idea of learner empowerment.

In traditional banking education, the teacher becomes the automatic distributor of knowledge, and the learner is the passive recipient. Therefore, this contributes to perpetuating existing structures of oppression and the asymmetrical relations of power. Traditional banking education reduces any sense of relationship that the learner may have with the material to be learned and stifles students' creativity and critical thinking. Mayo further states that it is characterized by the learner's isolation from the content of their education. This banking model considers learners as uncritically exposed to ideas and their lives deemed irrelevant. Therefore, Teachers are seen as pillars of knowledge, while learners are receivers of knowledge that they memorize and repeat without relating it to their lives.

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18 Miok Jeong, “Developing critical literacy through English newspaper articles for high-intermediate EFL students in Korea” (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-River Falls, 2012).
26 Mayo, “Critical literacy and emancipatory politics: The work of Paulo Freire.”
Critical literacy researchers reject the traditional banking education system. First, it is said to have over-packaged knowledge, easily transferable to passive learners, depicting the world as static and unchangeable.\textsuperscript{28} Second, it is dehumanizing, as it creates oppressive passivity in learners. Its capability to minimize or annul the learners’ creative power and stimulate their credulity serves the oppressors’ interests, who care not to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed.\textsuperscript{29} So teachers must move away from banking education, as it promotes marginalization, maintaining the dominant ideology of education institutions.\textsuperscript{30} Critical literacy is associated with various concepts, such as critical language awareness, critical thinking, and critical reading.\textsuperscript{31} Critical language awareness focuses on problematizing hidden curricula and grammar and seizing teachable moments by, among other things, analyzing how power relations involving race, class, and gender play out in language.\textsuperscript{32} It regards the individual reader as an independent critical thinker.\textsuperscript{33} Critical thinking can be defined as an individual thought process that begins with the intent to solve a problem or to answer a question by examining different options and choosing the most suitable and logical one.\textsuperscript{34} Critical reading involves analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating what is read.\textsuperscript{35} On this note, the role of the teacher is to ask questions and provide the information necessary to promote learners’ critical thinking.\textsuperscript{36} Below is a summary of the characteristics of critical reading, critical thinking and critical literacy provided by Bobkina and Stefanova.\textsuperscript{37}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Interaction between the reader and the text
  \item Reflection and interpretation of the world
  \item Intercultural and ideological awareness
  \item Analysis and synthesis
  \item Evaluation and argumentation
\end{itemize}

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\caption{Characteristics of Critical reading}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{28} Aliakbari and Faraji, Basic principles of critical pedagogy.
\textsuperscript{29} Elnadeef, “Perspective on the Relationship between Banking Education and English Achievement. A Case of Fresh EFL Students at King Khalid University.”
\textsuperscript{31} Terry Locke and Alison Cleary, “Critical literacy as an approach to literary study in the multicultural, high-school classroom,” English Teaching: Practice and Critique 10, no. 1 (2011); Kristine Brown and Anne Burns, Developing critical literacy (National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research, 1999); Chetty, “Freirean principles and critical literacy to counter retrograde impulses in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement.”; Fajardo, “A review of critical literacy beliefs and practices of English language learners and teacher.”
\textsuperscript{33} Chetty, “Freirean principles and critical literacy to counter retrograde impulses in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement.”
There are similar characteristics of critical reading, critical thinking and critical literacy. Unlike traditional teaching, critical literacy promotes the active participation of learners. Kaur and Sidhu\textsuperscript{38} argue that critical literacy can be a credible pedagogy only if it allows learners to understand and unravel the biases and prejudices in a given language. It means making space for discussion, gaining sociocultural knowledge, interpreting dominance, creating comfort with complexity, and taking action when needed. Learners of all ages might need their teachers’ words, but they will also need to be able to see and speak out for themselves.\textsuperscript{39} The critical literacy model is meant to be infused with and used as a lens for learning that is an integral part of daily classroom practices.\textsuperscript{40}

Utilizing dimensions of critical literacy to improve the teaching of English novels
From the experiences of the authors and three English teachers in Lesotho schools, four dimensions of critical literacy emerged as enhancers for improving the teaching of English novels.

Disrupting the commonplace as an enhancer

This dimension involves challenging learners to examine the familiar closely through new lenses. It is a way to interrogate texts by asking how texts try to position learners. At this stage, teachers begin to develop in learners a language of critique and hope, meaning learners must start to look at the text with a critical eye. Teachers must help learners avoid taking the text at surface value, thus critiquing it to find its deeper meaning. Therefore, learners must be encouraged to problematize text issues or others' claims using their experiential and academic knowledge, such as knowledge gained through life experience in social and cultural contexts or learned through classroom instruction or reading. In disrupting the commonplace, the teachers must change their perceptions of the learners in a more contingent and recursive way. This dimension may be resisted because it disrupts the status quo, especially when teachers, compared to learners, have the dominant voice in the classroom. This may be challenging for teachers who may have enjoyed being the dominant figure in traditional teaching. CL involves relinquishing power as a knowledgeable authority and adopting a sense of openness and possibility. The authors then find it essential that the teacher releases the power they hold in teaching English novels and allows learners to take charge of their learning by constructing their knowledge instead of the teacher analyzing the novel to the exclusion of learners. Rogers et al. argue that in the process of disrupting and critiquing societal power relationships, critical literacy practices end up valuing "dialogue, debate and dissent," which are essential "features of a democracy". This means that the active involvement of learners, either through dialogue or debate, can improve the teaching of English novels. Learners can effect multiple analysis perspectives and deepen their understanding of the novel's meaning, disrupting traditional banking education that happens to disempower learners by denying them a voice in their study of English novels, where the teacher takes over the discussion.

Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints as an Enhancer

The second dimension is about interrogating texts through multiple voices and perspectives. Its focus is on understanding experiences and texts from learners’ perspectives and the viewpoints of others and considering these various perspectives concurrently. This requires learners to envision texts and experiences not only through their expertise but also through varying perspectives. There is a continuous interrogation of texts to find the dominant and marginalized voices, together with a need for an awareness of underrepresented voices in texts or experiences. This dimension helps learners understand power and privilege. It is pertinent in this study as it agrees with what Freire called the "culture circle", where literacy is offered as a tool through empowering groups rather than individuals. In cultural circles, everyone makes progress, not just a few isolated "star learners." Group work will empower learners to discover multiple text perspectives, resulting in active learning.

Interaction through group work involves negotiating meaning with others through discussion or other means as a social aspect of constructivism. It is supported by the work of Lev Vygotsky, who viewed thinking and learning as contextualized social practices. Work on critical literacy originated from constructivism theory (with its roots in philosophy and psychology), which describes how knowledge is constructed in the human being when information comes into contact with existing knowledge developed by experiences. CL creates a
learning environment in which the critique of the text is emphasized, and multiple perspectives are encouraged, explored and valued.\textsuperscript{55} So, CL, as a way of being and doing in the world encourages learners to become active meaning-makers.\textsuperscript{56}

Through a critical lens, teachers must interrogate and revise long-held beliefs about traditional teaching methods\textsuperscript{57} and ask themselves: What curriculum practices and teaching practices have been privileged? What counts as literacy? Who decides what uses of language are sanctioned? What are the roles available in the classroom for teachers and learners?\textsuperscript{58} These questions can serve as a starting point for teaching meant to enact change. It, therefore, becomes the teacher’s responsibility to leave the traditional methods and make way for new and better methods for the students’ benefit.\textsuperscript{59} In moving away from the traditional teaching pedagogy, there is the need to "understand the new, constantly changing environments" and to prepare individuals for "transformative engagement with the world."\textsuperscript{60} According to Comber and Nixon, "Schools and individual teachers must own the existing inequalities and find ways to address them in local contexts. This requires a commitment by individuals as well as whole-school support."\textsuperscript{61} In personal interrogations, teachers try to identify the inequalities in their teaching of English novels and discover how they can be best addressed.

**Focusing on socio-political issues as an enhancer**

This dimension of focusing on socio-political issues gives attention to how the socio-political system, power relationships and language are intertwined.\textsuperscript{62} This involves examining and questioning differences globally, in socio-political ranks and systems.

Traditional teaching approaches are generally teacher-directed, where students are taught in a manner conducive to sitting and listening.\textsuperscript{63} The traditional teaching of literacy considers the teacher and the text as information sources, portraying learners as having no communication power. The author sets the agenda, establishes the significance of the characters, decides the themes and values, and chooses the viewpoint.\textsuperscript{64} Therefore, the traditional teaching of literacy promotes passivity in learners, as the teacher is the only one given the power to communicate, restricting learners, whereas critical literacy empowers learners, allowing them to express their perspectives and act for themselves.\textsuperscript{65} It is clear, therefore, that critical literacy aims to give learners a voice and encourages active learning as learners construct their knowledge, thus promoting democracy.

According to Vasquez, critical literacy is viewed in this way:

\begin{quote}
A critical literacy curriculum needs to be lived. It arises from the social and political conditions that unfold in the communities in which we live. As such, it cannot be traditionally taught. In other words, as teachers, we need to incorporate a critical perspective into our everyday lives with our learners in order to find ways to help children understand the social and political issues around them.\textsuperscript{66}
\end{quote}

It could be inferred from the above definition of critical literacy that its use in the classroom helps move away from traditional teaching. In using critical literacy as a lens, readers incorporate examining socio-political issues into a close reading of a text. They begin to take notice of socio-economic factors, such as employment, class systems and discrimination in the text.\textsuperscript{67}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
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In reading an English novel closely with critical literacy, readers must make inferences to understand the story’s setting and theme. Such readers will be able to answer questions that require deep analytical thinking about the text.

**Taking action and promoting social justice as enhancers**

According to Abednia and Crookes, "a defining feature of CL is its emphasis on coupling critical reflection with transformative action, or in Freire's terms, praxis." CL does not necessarily involve taking a negative standpoint; instead, it means looking at an issue or topic from different angles, analyzing it, and hopefully proposing change and improvement methods. There is often an activist component to critical literacy education, where the teacher facilitates social change. Once learners and teachers engage in critical research and better understand aspects of their school or community, they engage in projects aimed to improve an area that is lacking; the inference is that collective action is vital for transformation. In teaching English novels, for example, learners may produce posters to raise awareness of a particular disease that may have been presented in the novel. According to Pennycook, CL pedagogy is built on the notion of dialogue… "the opening up of a space for the marginalized to speak, write, or read… so that the voicing of their lives may transform both their lives and the social system that excludes them.”

CL achieves and encourages social justice by engaging in what Freire refers to as "praxis – reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it." Social justice-oriented action is about confronting material inequality and restoring humanity by transforming capitalism's political and economic system. Taking action to promote social justice does not always need someone to become a social activist. Still, a shift in attitude or how one develops from a superficial reading to a critical reading can also be considered taking action. CL involves looking at how information from the text can be used to promote social justice. McLaughlin and DeVoogd further point out that action may include consideration of the following: how one’s attitude or actions change about the topic; how one will treat others differently as a result of having critically analyzed the topic; what one can do to change a rule, a procedure or an unjust attitude; and how one can support those who are maltreated. Thus, teachers and learners would have to be engaged in proposing change and brainstorming ways of improving their current situation. This could therefore contribute to enhancing active learning in the teaching of English novels and thus deepen learners' understanding of the genre.

**CONCLUSION**

Reading skills are vital for success at school and in the world of work; learners are armed with effective reading skills to communicate well in English as it involves a lot of reading. CL seems a promising method of improving active learning in support of using a learner-centred approach.

CL seeks to create a platform for learners to connect and respond to critical thinking through dialogue. Teachers implementing critical literacy recognize that there must be a shift away from traditional teaching and passive learning, implying that learners in critical literacy classrooms become responsible for their learning, as well as interacting with other learners and the teacher and thus adding to their knowledge in diverse ways. CL education’s heart includes learners’ experience with the world; critically-literate learners often understand reality from different perspectives.

The generation and maintenance of efforts to improve teaching and learning require a continuous and more significant role to be played by teachers since they are the ones who help in the implementation of policies and plans. However, learners’ contribution to learning cannot go unnoticed and calls for active involvement. This article argues that teachers should create inclusive classrooms to teach English novels, inviting learners to be active participants. CL may greatly benefit stakeholders, such as teachers, who may be released from the

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68 Papola, “Critical literacy, Common Core, and close reading.”
70 Vasquez, Negotiating critical literacies with young children.
72 Freire, Pedagogy of the oppressed, 85.
75 McLaughlin and DeVoogd, Critical literacy: Enhancing students comprehension of text.
76 Jun-min, “Critical literacy in the EFL classroom: Evolving multiple perspectives through learning tasks.”
77 Lewison et al., “Taking on critical literacy: The journey of newcomers and novices.”
78 Gustine, “A survey on critical literacy as a pedagogical approach to teaching English in Indonesia.”
burden of simply being knowledge depositors. Ultimately, the world of work will benefit by being provided with critical thinkers who may positively contribute to building a democratic nation.

Although CL still has challenges, the article nevertheless argues that it must be incorporated into teaching English novels. This study concludes that CL should be revisited and recognized to enable teachers to act as facilitators in teaching English novels, thus allowing the learners to take charge of their learning. This literature study could help teachers to reflect on their teaching of English novels and to discover how they could utilize CL to improve active learning. Teachers will be better positioned to select and implement teaching strategies that promote practical reading skills of English novels. Learners will be able to read an English novel at a deeper level and will be able to critically analyze it, which is vital in the study of English at the tertiary level and the world of work. Furthermore, teachers can better support learners in their development of questioning, challenging and evaluating English novels, leading to effective reading and writing skills, thus improving the general performance of the subject of English.

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ABOUT AUTHORS
Mabohlokoa Masunhloane is a Doctoral student at the University of the Free State, Faculty of Education, South Africa. She teaches English in a high school in Lesotho.

Rantsie Kgothule is a Lecturer in the Psychology of Education discipline, Faculty of Education, University of the Free State, South Africa. His area of specialisation is inclusive education. He has published in accredited journals and has supervised postgraduate students.