

Reading beyond comprehension: Critical Literacy

Nuez, Graciela*. Faculty of Modern Philology. University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. C. Pérez del Toro, 1, 35001 Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Canary Islands, Spain.

ABSTRACT

If the reading comprehension of our Spanish secondary students scarcely reaches the minimum required as reflected in the Education and Training Monitor 2017¹, it may be time to question how our teachers read and instruct in such activity. Starting from the text as a knowledge-building structural center, we investigate the approach to it by a group of ten active teachers through a reading activity. We propose a deep development of the complex reader process using an interpretative critical approach also called in origin critical literacy.

Keywords: Reading, Teaching Methodology, Critical Literacy, Word, World

1. INTRODUCTION

Once the required 'calm down' minutes for the class to start went by, a worksheet with three short poems was handed out for students to read individually in the English Literature III course held in the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (Spain) not long ago. Richard Aldington's *New Love*, Ezra Pound's *A Girl* and Emily Dickinson's *Time & Eternity* were the pieces chosen to work with. After 5 to 10 minutes, the teacher observed the students and asked in that first approach what was the first poem about? A general horror expression was manifested in most students' faces and then a few weak responses were given with the final question mark intonation which revealed nothing but doubt. The teacher which happened to be myself was desolated: How come students can hardly participate in such a basic first question? They were quiet for what it seemed two eternal demanding minutes for me as if they said: Well we have tried, now give us the right answer, that's what you are there for! Right away, I decided to manage the situation and told them to stand up, to leave their 'ready to get information notebooks' aside and to take their chairs to the middle of the class and arrange those in a big semicircle. The class seemed a total disaster! The tables were packed next to the windows and we were all together in the center. I asked them to read the poems again and gave them more time, it was weird to allow so much silence without having me talking, but it was necessary to read together and allow silence to do the work expected in such activity. What happened then was pure magic, they truly started to talk about what was the poem about in their opinions and we heard the 'word' and the 'world' in it together. We could not finish with all three poems, but it was for sure worthwhile!

The experience manifested that students were used to playing the passive role of containers waiting for the 'informational dispenser' to deliver the precious content in them. No one ever questioned a thing I said, they just believed what was told until I started opening such possibility through collaborative oral reflection.

The situation manifested a deeper reality within our educational system. Questions about the role of teachers in our school systems and the methods of reading instruction were raised. Decoding language proved not to be enough to go beyond comprehension. The situation demanded instruction in the art of listening and an urgent critical literacy development.

If according to the Education and Training Monitor 2017 the reading comprehension of our high school students barely reaches the minimum required average it may be time to question how our teachers read and instruct in this activity.

2. CRITICAL LITERACY AS A DEVICE FOR READING IMPROVEMENT

We propose to promote Critical Literacy (CL) in order to develop a greater reading proficiency both for teachers first, and pupils second. "Comprehension used to be our ultimate goal, but now it's the point at which we begin our critical discussions"². The approach to language needs to go beyond decoding it, as Kravchenko³ (2007) indicated, language is not a code, but an empirical phenomenon characterized by complex dynamics. The ability to read is not entirely an easy

*graciela.delanuez@ulpgc.es

task as well as the ability to listen, even more so when the agent is unaware of the real complexity of the process and may even believe that he or she is aware of such a faculty for the simple fact of having the sight and auditory sense. In our globalized world, reading can no longer be innocent or naive, it is necessary to wake up the ear to the constant flow of messages in their different modes. The habits of reading behavior within the academic field could manifest overlapping mechanisms of teaching management, which is to say tacit mechanisms of thought.

With CL, the text becomes an interactive tool to discover hidden meanings and agendas beyond seeing or hearing, not just a worksheet to answer comprehension questions⁴. We could define CL as a development of an active role of readers who dares to question the word and the world that any form of text manifests⁵. This activity is based in four basic principles such as the awareness of different perspectives to take action in order to transform the situation observed, focusing on the real problem and its complexities, using a variety of strategies to adapt as an act of creation or reinvention, and keeping an eye on the multiple possible perspectives involved at once. Our intention is to do it on a small scale using the assumptions of CL as a catalytic filter and keeping in mind the reading action as an instrument of access to the dynamics that generate social meaning according to the postulates of distributed cognition.

These principles help us understand what is and how it functions. "It is a dynamic process that examines relationships, expands our thinking, and enlightens our perceptions as we read the word and the world - as we read from a critical stance"⁶. To engage into an effective process of educating the ability to listen and allow the emergence of new forms of reading, we must bear in mind that the mind is social and is also distributed. The process of knowing is distributed physically, socially and symbolically. Therefore, it tells us that cognition is a process of construction of meaning that incorporates environment, action and 'artifact' as a whole. Readers are not limited to passively interpreting the text but rather carry out a completely complex activity where aspects beyond the purely linguistic and grammatical have to be considered.

3. TEACHERS AS THE MAIN VARIABLE FOR THE EDUCATIONAL EQUATION

If we are apt to reach the goal of students reading beyond comprehension, it will be important to train teachers to develop such skill with required proficiency. We could question the tacit belief that the school is an institution within our society that promotes literacy. In fact Gatto⁷ stated that school as it was built is an crucial support system for a model of social manufacturing that condemns most people to be subordinate stones in a pyramid that narrows as it ascends to a terminal of control. Freire⁸ agreed with this concept when he discussed the oppression of the poor. An essential tool used for this oppression is the everyday material that we, as a society, read. McLaughlin & DeVogd⁹ signposted that books can deceive, delude, and misrepresent, as readily as they can enlighten and expand our knowledge. We should ask if, for instance, school textbooks are ever questioned, we normally have the tendency to believe everything we read at school. Nuez & Medina¹⁰ held a comparative study questioning the textbooks used in Germany and Spain to teach the English as a second language and found out that the Spanish ones used a mechanical approach for exercises whereas the German ones a conceptual one. Textbooks could be a valuable tool to analyze questions of power and pedagogical standards in a given context/culture. But in the present study we have decided to center our attention in the role of the teacher as an essential variable in the educative equation.

"The teacher's role in helping students to become critically aware actually begins with personal understanding of and engagement in critical literacy. Once the teacher is critically aware, teaching students to read from a critical stance should be a very natural process"¹¹. In our study, we designed a research to find out the critical literacy proficiency of a group of language teachers. At this point we take the text as that cultural 'artifact' which we make use of to investigate the processing of information by teachers in their reading and translation of it, as we will see in the following section.

4. ARE TEACHERS READING BEYOND COMPREHENSION?

In our qualitative study we chose five high school teachers and five university foreign language teachers and gave them a chosen text to read and work with. They all were given the same one to work at home for a time span of five days. Then we all met in a tutorial group work and asked them to answer the list of questions posed by Goodwyn & Stables¹². The questions dealt with finding the author's purpose in writing the account, seeking to identify the main claims the authors make in putting forward their argument, adopting a sceptical stance towards the author's claims, questioning whether the

author has sufficient backing for the generalizations that they are making and considering how any values guiding the author's work may affect what they claim. The strategy used to find out whether or not they had accomplished such tasks was to translate the whole argumentative text into their mother tongue as homework previous to the tutorial three hour meeting. The activity reflected the level of engagement each teacher had and their critical literacy proficiency.

The findings revealed that only 20% understood the author's purpose in writing the account, 10% sought to identify the main claims the author makes in putting forward the argument, 0% adopted a sceptical stance towards the author's claims, 0% questioned author's expertise and backing for the generalizations presented, 0% considered how any values guiding the author's work affected her claim. It was manifested the general tendency in our educational environment to believe all authoritative texts to be true, not only because they are considered an unquestionable source of wisdom, but also because the authority figure present in the classroom indicated so, and it was never convenient for pupils to question it. We grew up believing the information without asking ourselves who had written the text, in what context, from what perspective, what aspects of the topic were not considered, what voices were not included, and if the supposed sources of authority were or not reliable. We only questioned the text if we were asked to do so. The study proved this to be so.

100% of teachers understood the message but only 20% of them understood the purpose in writing the account. 50% of participants recognized facts from opinion, 65 % partakers guessed meaning from context, 30% contributors recognized difficulty in translating to mother tongue due to English language barriers. Only 5% of the teachers accomplished a rigorous research work in order to translate the text. The methodology followed in this research was not intended to verify the quality of the translation of the source text, but to what extent the study participants were able to read according to the assumptions of CL, or continued reading according to the traditional reading approaches taken on a general basis. Our starting hypothesis held that despite the theoretical training received, teachers would still continue to read the text mechanically and would proceed to translate in the same way. The results found in the study surprised most of the participants whose reading confidence was strongly questioned because the translation activity unmasked the real way they were reading.

Overall the participant teachers recognized their need to develop a deeper expertise on CL proficiency and structured guidance to apply CL in their content subjects. The activity intention was to awaken their need to practice CL when reading and, what is more, when teaching. The introductory paragraph of the selected text translated proved to be very revealing due to the tone used by the author that required higher CL reading strategies.

5. CONCLUSION

While the findings of this small-scale study cannot be generalized to the entire situation of secondary and tertiary teachers, the stated critical literacy practices of the participant teachers suggest that serious and qualified training is needed to upgrade the teacher's critical reading abilities. It is evident that more can be done in undergraduate degree programmes in the teaching discipline to include effective critical reading practices in many of the courses. It is essential for the improvement of our students in the European reading examinations such as monitor 2017. The present study reveals the urgent need to study the CL skills of our on duty teachers in order to invest for further training and qualification. Their naive non-bias knowledge on the topic should be substituted by a rigorous knowledge one. Teachers became aware of the importance of reading texts in a critical manner and that questioning what they read can help shape them as teaching professionals who can instruct in the art of hearing the word effectively in such a globalized world.

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