
Examining Critical Literacy in NUST

This paper discusses research on critical literacy carried out at the National University of Science and Technology (NUST). The research assessed students' responses to various questions designed to stimulate them into developing a critical stance. Students explored various texts from multiple perspectives and re-assessed their world. The activity was conducted by means of a questionnaire filled by 31 students from all over NUST. The questions set included a multi-perspective dual passage, a thought-provoking picture, and a quotation. In summary, this research supports the study of critical literacy in Pakistan aside from the traditional four language skills.

'Critical literacy' originated in the 1980s. It gained influence in the mid-1990s when an increasing number of countries incorporated the course into their academic institutions. Critical literacy alludes to a different instructional approach that encourages students to extract encoded messages from various forms of media to help better understand power imbalances from an author's way of delivering their content. It teaches them to challenge the authority in question and assume a more prominent role in combating social injustices.

Despite the significance of critical literacy, it is still treated as second-language and foreign-language based education, with marginalized importance as compared to the other traditional language skills. Awareness and research on critical literacy are still scarce, especially in Pakistan. In response, this research has been conducted to investigate the potential of critical literacy in Pakistan, with the National University of Science and Technology (NUST) providing the source of students who were assessed on multiple grounds. Two questions were examined in the activity:

- 1) How did the students respond to an activity designed from a critical perspective? and
- 2) How did the students compare their learning in this activity to their prior experience?

There are various meanings of critical literacy, as critical researchers develop their own set of theoretical frameworks and approach. Many of these researchers hold that this research should be targeted from differential social and political perspectives. Using these different practices actually helps out students and improves their language, this, in turn, motivates and makes them capable of challenging the underlying assumptions of society.

The text, literacies and language practices in critical literacy are never unbiased, therefore, students who aren't equipped with critical competence are likely to fail in recognizing

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ideological messages and social forces encoded in texts. Moreover, if we consider the modern era and the trending youth culture, the notion of literacy should be expanded to various literacies including art, music, movement, visual text etc. Although language learning is a complex process that takes time, it has the potential to involve students' social identity, critical literacy which is important not only to the first language context but also to the second language context. The postmodern world encourages and motivates students to think differently and these differences are appreciated. Critical literacy motivates students to become active meaning-makers by creating a learning environment in which textual critique is stressed and multiple perspectives are encouraged, explored, and respected. All these models suggest that critical literacy sees language learning as a social practice, one that helps learners learn a language effectively and also change their attitudes toward the society in which they live. Critical instruction involves task-based learning that introduces inquiry into language learning and sees language learning as a process of performing a social act rather than as the goal itself. Having a social environment in the classrooms, will more likely result in students being more motivated, and exploit the many offered opportunities to explore topics by using students' own and/or others' perspectives and knowledge. Most picture books for children and young adults are usually designed in a way to express a central theme and also involve several relevant issues, this enables the instructor to create ample opportunities' to develop tasks that involve a critical analysis of the texts. This observation is based on the research that Picture books promote critical thinking and thereby enhances students' critical literacy.

To conclude the current study, we see critical literacy as an educational tool that uses tasks to make students active learners in the pursuit of knowledge and language development.

Two methods of data collection were used from the interested students. Interested students were asked to fill out an online questionnaire (made on Google Forms) on an iPad or smartphone. Secondly, links to the form were also sent out to several students enrolled in different schools across NUST. This approach was chosen to further diversify the collection of responses.

The questionnaire comprised of three sections: a dual-perspective passage, a picture, and a quotation. Each section was accompanied by short questions aimed at assessing the respondent's critical perspectives and their logical foundations.

Once the data was collected, the entire breakdown of all the responses was provided by Google Forms. Multiple-choice responses appeared as pie-charts that displayed the percentage distribution of the types of responses. The full list of responses was also visible for inspection.

Dual-perspective passages

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This prompt was set with the intention of forcing respondents into choosing a side. The passages involved the opinions of two scientists on whether an observed dip in temperature far below normal levels in the Northeastern and Midwestern regions of the United States was enough to justify human-induced climate change. (The passages are included in this document in Appendix A on page 8).

The first passage delivered the perspective of an expert who denied that the temperature drop had anything to do with climate change. The second passage, in turn, was written by a scientist who argued that the observation was not just a random anomaly, but rather a symptom of global warming. This contradiction of ideas provided students the opportunity to select a critical stance. The students were also asked to justify their choices: 'Give one reason why you agree with the scientist of your choice.' This was included in an effort to better understand the logical grounds of their perspectives.

From the collected data, it was observed that the majority of respondents sided with scientist 1 (72.2%) as compared to scientist 2 (27.8%).

The arguments in favor of scientist 1 varied considerably. Some students felt that a single anomaly cannot act as concrete evidence for a broader occurrence. For instance, one respondent argued that: 'It is indeed important to look for patterns over time, instead of analyzing a single event in isolation.' A similar explanation is: 'Even though I believe in global warming, I have to admit that not every change is related to it and we should look at all possible explanations.' Others stated that it was their intuition that leads them to agree with the scientist. For example, 'It seems more realistic and bold' and 'It's just a random occurrence'. This is an interesting aspect; it leads us to believe that some students used their intuition rather than rational thought to develop their critical stance.

Responses favoring scientist 2 varied similarly. One student stated: 'This scientist provides some scientific evidence to back their claim. And the notion of climate change bringing record low temperatures corroborates with my own understanding of global warming.' The student incorporated their own understanding of the topic at hand to formulate a critical stance. Others felt that the anomaly should not be ignored outright: 'We should not ignore this anomaly because temperatures are lower than they have ever been.'

Picture

The second prompt contained a thought-provoking image (see Appendix B on page 9). Students were asked to explain what the picture depicted. The image was chosen on the expectation that it would invoke a strong emotion among the students and invite original opinions and perspectives. It depicted the statue of a squad of soldiers that stood high above a

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frightened mother and child.

There was a diversity of opinions regarding the central message of the image. A few students held that the soldiers were “protecting” and “defending” the civilians, and that “they have sacrificed their today to save our future.” Others stated that “wars destroy lives” and that “we should support dialogue.” A student went beyond the obvious and stated that he saw something “missing” from the image: politicians. “The politicians that fueled hatred in the hearts of the people and who were the real reason the war started”, the student wrote. Another extraordinary response stated that war has impacts far beyond what we usually associate it to have. The student explained his view by saying: “War hurts. It hurts most not physically but psychologically as well.”

Some students expressed their perspective that war alters our priorities and emphasizes the wrong things. One response states: “War glorifies soldiers but not the countless civilian lives that are lost in these wars. Because these lost lives mostly consist of women and children who are not ‘heroic’ enough to fight back and worthy of recognition in our society” and “Soldiers are treated with higher status than other people in times of war.”

Students were then asked a follow-up question: “Imagine that an Indian-Afghanistan military alliance has attacked Pakistan on the pretext of targeting ‘militant safe-havens’. Would you support dialogue or warfare?” They had to choose an option and then briefly explain this choice. This question compelled students to think about their responses in the previous prompt as know they were placed in a position similar to that of the mother and her child. Furthermore, patriotism cannot be ignored and must be taken into consideration. It was expected that this emotion would invoke stronger, unfiltered responses.

Rather surprisingly, the responses were equally divided between war and dialogue. This is interesting keeping in mind that a majority of students presented a negative perspective towards warfare when asked what they saw in the image.

On the other hand, responses that deviated from the general opinion usually mentioned the need for the protection of Pakistan’s sovereignty and the civilian population. “Pakistan should not tolerate any attacks. It has a duty to protect its citizens” is an example. Furthermore, there have been references to the rivalry between the nations as a justification for their choice: “It’s a blatant act of hatred.”, for instance.

Quotation

“Ideals are peaceful, history is violent” - Brad Pitt

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This quotation was chosen to understand how students interpreted a rather abstruse line from the movie Fury. They were asked to explain the meaning of the quote.

The majority of responses described how peaceful intentions lead to violent ends. One student delivered this notion in their words: 'Good intentions always give way to violence.' Another student further elaborated the idea: 'All men desire peace but history has taught us that these ideals always end up causing violence and disparity because in pursuing these ideals we disregard the ideals of other people. This creates conflict and conflict breeds war.'

Some responses alluded to the futility of peaceful ideals. For instance, 'Ideals are just nothing more than ideas. They have no effects without action. Whilst actions are those which are written in history' and 'Peace is only imaginary. Violence always prevails sooner or later.'

One student provided a rather distinct perspective: 'Realities are different than dreams. Histories prove it as a most of legend or heroes went into wars at times.' They perhaps thought that reality demands violence to achieve peaceful ideals.

There were also some answers that provided a completely different aspect. One example is: 'Peace is an imaginary concept created by the elite in order to control the weak minded.' The respondent referred to a conspiracy, indicating out-of-the-box thinking even though it may not clearly relate to the quotation.

This paper assessed the state of critical literacy at the National University of Science and Technology, NUST, in Pakistan, with the student body serving as the source of information. The respondents developed critical stances and demonstrated varying perspectives in an activity that stimulated them to re-examine their world.

As such the findings of this paper advocate for the implementation of critical literacy courses at the academic level. Students involved in the activity were better able to understand the topic at hand. They were encouraged to ponder over and choose between various perspectives. In summary, critical literacy should garner more attention in Pakistan if we ever hope to inculcate skills of critical competence in our students.

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