Reading as Onlookers or as Critical Participants?[1]

(¿Leer como espectadores o partícipes críticos?)

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a critique on the tendency to give priority to reading comprehension strategies on a superficial level, at the expense of other strategies requiring foreign language learners to read more critically to evaluate the meaning within texts. It also reports on the results of a study conducted with a group of students on the implementation of critical reading tasks, and offers an analysis of the experience, thus providing caveats as to the possible pitfalls of bringing critical literacy into reading courses and English as a Foreign Language programs.

RESUMEN

Este artículo desarrolla una crítica sobre la tendencia de priorizar estrategias de comprensión superficial de textos, por encima de otras estrategias, que podrían llevar al aprendiz de lenguas extranjeras a leer en mejores condiciones y evaluar el significado de lo leído. Se presentan los resultados

de un estudio que consistió en someter a un grupo de estudiantes a procesos de lectura crítica, de lo cual extrae un análisis y señala las dificultades de implementar procesos de alfabetización crítica en cursos de lectura y programas de inglés como lengua extranjera.

Keywords: critical literacy, critical thinking, reading, foreign language programs
Palabras clave: literacidad crítica, pensamiento crítico, lectura, programas de lenguas extranjeras

Introduction

In English as a foreign language programs, reading tasks often center on comprehension at a superficial level, with students being taught how to skim and scan texts to locate explicit information. These and other similar meaning-decoding strategies are given center stage, at the expense of others requiring learners to read more critically to construct and evaluate meaning in texts. In this regard, some would warn that at early stages of language learning students are not yet sufficiently equipped, either linguistically or academically, to evaluate texts *beyond the lines*.[4] Our position in this paper, however, is that enabling students to analyze texts beyond what is explicit, regardless of their foreign language proficiency level, is central to their transformation from consumers of texts to critics of the stances, ideologies, assumptions and views implicit in what they read.[5] That is, we concur that reading courses in EFL programs must move from *functional literacy* with a focus on developing students' linguistic skills, to *critical literacy*, endowing students with a language for the critique of the power structures implicit in texts.[6]

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4   M. Ko, "Critical Literacy Practices in the EFL Context and the English Language Proficiency: Further Exploration," *English Language Teaching* 6, 11 (2013b): 17-28. DOI: 10.5539/elt.v6n11p17.
5   K. Paesani, H. W. Allen, and B. Dupuy, *A Multiliteracies Framework for Collegiate Foreign Language Teaching* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2016).
6   Ko (2013b).

We thus ventured to include critical literacy tasks in a *reading* course offered in the second year of a B.A. program in English Teaching at a Costa Rican University. As students engaged in critical literacy reading tasks, Researcher 1 (R1) took notes on noticeable changes in their capacity for deeper reading. At the end of the course, we distributed a questionnaire to document their views on having to read between and beyond the lines at an early stage in their additional language learning endeavors. The results we present here suggest that the inclusion of an approach to reading that requires a more critical stance on the part of the students (critical literacy) is not only feasible but also welcomed and highly valued by them. In essence, this study is an attempt to move from *functional* to *critical literacies* and seeks to examine target EFL students' views on engaging in critical literacy tasks and their benefits.

Theoretical Considerations

In this section, we start by briefly defining critical thinking (CT), and have included the elements of thought, the intellectual standards and the intellectual traits suggested by Paul and Elder.[7] Thereafter, we move on to describing postulates of critical literacy in second/foreign language teaching and learning. We continue with a brief recount of three types of reading discussed by Corrigan[8]: critical, contemplative and active reading. We conclude by explaining important characteristics of texts and providing a brief overview of previous investigations similar to those of the present study.

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7   R. Paul, L. Elder, and Foundation for Critical Thinking, *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking: Concepts and Tools* (Dillon Beach, CA: Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2009).
8   P. Corrigan, "Attending to the Act of Reading: Critical Reading, Contemplative Reading, and Active Reading," *Essays in Reader-Oriented Theory, Criticism, and Pedagogy* 63-64 (2012): 146–173.

Critical Thinking

Paul and Elder explain how thoughts that are left unexamined and unchallenged are "biased, distorted, partial, uninformed and prejudiced"[9]; a risk we cannot afford to take given that the quality of our lives depends on our capacity to think critically. They warn that critical thinking does not come to us naturally, and must therefore be systematically cultivated and constantly refined. Broadly put, they sustain that, "Critical thinking is the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it,"[10] and that becoming experienced critical thinkers calls for the development of self-direction, self-discipline and self-monitoring so that we can combat our tendency to fall back on our egocentric and sociocentric way of thinking.[11] Paul and Elder also point out that in nurturing our capacity to think critically, we need to recognize that all reasoning has a *purpose*, that all reasoning aims at *answering a question or solving* a problem, that all reasoning is based on *assumptions* that shape our *point of view*, that in reasoning we base our thinking on *data/information* containing *concepts and ideas* upon which we make i*nferences* and draw *conclusions*, all of which have *implications and consequences*.[12]

Needless to say, these elements of thought are permeated by the political and historical contexts in which we partake when we engage in the act of reasoning. Examining these elements of thought without consideration of their political and historical origins can lead to egocentric and sociocentric thinking.[13] Because we are naturally prone to thinking in egocentric and sociocentric ways, we must ensure that we are subjecting the elements of thought in our reasoning to the intellectual standards of *clarity, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, significance and fairness*. A word of caution, however, is that applying these standards to our reasoning does not come easy and

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9   Paul and Elder, 4.
10   Paul and Elder, 4
11   Paul and Elder, 4.
12   Paul and Elder, 7-9.
13   Paul and Elder, 9.

that in the process we must develop the intellectual virtues of *integrity, humility, confidence in reason, perseverance, fair-mindedness, courage, empathy and autonomy*. Paul and Elder provide a series of templates for solving problems, evaluating reasoning, analyzing the logic of articles, and assessing research, based on the above elements of thought, intellectual virtues and standards.[14]

Critical Literacy

As Huang explains, despite the fact that critical literacy (CL) has been practiced and examined in first language education contexts at all levels, "Research that explores critical literacy in English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms [...] remains scarce"[15]; so much so that in practicing CL, teachers define "critical" differently: moving from orderly to messy reading, working back and forth between sympathetic engagement and critical evaluation, remaining open and flexible, and revising one's thoughts while challenging one's own thinking, and deepening one's own readings.[16] Notwithstanding the plethora of definitions, they all encompass a particular way of engaging with texts[17] (which contrasts with the linguistic skills focus on functional literacy.[18]

As Ko indicates, teachers often take critical reading and critical literacy (CL) to be the same. However, while the former focuses on rational thinking/pure reasoning as situated within the individual, the latter sees literacy as a social practice and concedes that knowledge is never neutral and that texts are inscribed with power and hidden agendas.[19] The practice of CL is founded on the premise that, "...education is first and foremost a means of social transformation because injustice, power

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14   Paul and Elder.
15   S.-Y. Huang, "Reading 'Further and Beyond the Text': Student Perspectives of Critical Literacy in EFL Reading and Writing," *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 55, 2 (2011): 145-154 (145). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1002/JAAL. 00017.
16   Corrigan, 151.
17   Lankshear (1994), quoted in Huang, 145.
18   Ko (2013b), 92.
19   Ko (2013b), 92-93.

asymmetry, and human suffering do exist."[20] As this critical pedagogue sustains, "For transformation to take place at a social level, individuals should enhance their ability to recognize problem situations, their causes, and the existing resources which can be drawn upon to deal with and improve them."[21] Thus, it becomes pivotal to educate learners "... to be critical consumers of texts and reconstruct them in ways that are more consistent with their own local experiences."[22]

In such an endeavor, learning to read texts critically (from a CL perspective) is essential, as students in higher education must move from reading as onlookers to reading as critical participants, able not only to decode meaning but also to create and evaluate meaning. As Abednia sustains: "In CL students are encouraged to approach texts in a questioning manner, challenge received knowledge, and, instead of taking in knowledge passively, construct it actively and autonomously."[23] This task may prove itself problematic given that "... neutral, apolitical, and cognitive linguistic perspectives on language appear to have dominated the profession of teaching English as a second language teaching for decades."[24] The same can be said of how EFL education (especially reading and writing) has been approached over the years. In EFL contexts, more often than not, students' and teachers' "… assumptions about reading and about texts prohibit critical reading, especially the assumption that reading means finding rather than making meaning."[25]

In moving away from this trend of functional literacy in reading courses, proficient readers must develop coding competence, semantic competence, pragmatic competence, and critical competence, all of which should nurture their capacities to become code breakers, text

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20   A. Abednia, "Practicing Critical Literacy in Second Language Reading," *International Journal of Critical Literacy* 6, 2 (2015): 79.
21   Abednia, 79.
22   Abednia, 77.
23   Abednia, 78.
24   Braxley (2008); Crooks and Lehner (1998); Pennycook (1990); all quoted in Abednia, 78.
25   Heilker quoted in Corrigan, 15.

users, meaning makers, and text critics. A text critic is aware that "... texts are not ideologically natural or neutral–that they represent particular points of view while silencing others–and is also able to critically analyze and transform texts."[26] In addition, a text critic must "... question the voices behind texts, who is represented and who is not, what positions texts are assuming,[27] and "...be able to 'construct a reading that may actively resist and challenge the preferred reading of a text."[28]

Critical, Contemplative and Active Reading

Corrigan[29] points to three types of reading that should be interrelated: critical, contemplative and active reading. As to the first type, he states that it requires critical distance between the reader and the text and a self-conscious stance on the part of the former. Corrigan also suggests that, in reading critically, the reader must be aware of the fact that CL "is a historically embedded practice, meaning different things in different times and places."[30] Regarding the second type, Corrigan notes that, "Contemplative reading introduces dimensions of depth and inner growth … [and] has to do with attentiveness, presence, dialogue, and community, and slowing down."[31] He also explains that, "While critical reading may involve taking an aggressive approach, contemplative reading involves taking time to really listen," and that it means being "continuously present," requires "sustained acts of attention," "depth and reflection," mindfulness, sustained focus, contemplation and introspection.[32]

With respect to the last type, Corrigan adds that, "... for students to learn to read more deeply or on a higher level, they need to learn to

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26   Huang, 146.
27   Stevens and Bean (2007), 6; quoted in Huang, 146.
28   Bean and Moni (2003), 639; quoted in Huang, 146.
29   Corrigan.
30   Corrigan, 151.
31   Corrigan, 153.
32   Corrigan, 153-154.

read actively," and that, "while many scholars and teachers appear to take active reading for granted, possibly assuming students will come into such study skills on their own…", efforts should be made in class so that "...students understand and adopt such habits as underlining, writing comments in the margins, asking questions, rereading," given that "when students learn to read 'actively and critically,' they pass a 'conceptual threshold,' a breakthrough in intellectual development."[33] None of the three appear to be the norm, especially in reading courses.

Given that texts are socially and culturally embedded, inevitably ideological, and constitutive of the existing power structures,[34] they cannot be separated from their authors and contexts. This is supported by philosopher Walter Mignolo, who questions the widespread belief that the *knowing subject* (author) is transparent and untouched by geo-political configurations.[35] Opposite to popular belief, while texts portray some voices, they neglect and silence others,[36] thereby reproducing the power structures in place.[37] That is to say that when students engage with texts, they also engage in a dialogical process of reshaping perspectives; it is as crucial to consider as the power inherent to the voice of the author(s) of a given text can stifle the readers' voices. However, texts can potentially become a space for students to appropriate, re-voice and question the ideas contained in the texts they encounter at school.[38]

Previous Studies of Critical Literacy in EFL Contexts

In 2006, Correia piloted a study in Brazil with eight advanced university students who had been studying English for five years.

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33 Corrigan, 146-149.

34 M. Sperling, D. Appleman, K Gilyard, and S. Freedman, "Voice in the Context of Literacy Studies," *Reading Research Quarterly* 46, 1 (2011): 70-84. DOI: 10.1598/RRQ.46.1.4.

35 W. Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom," *Theory, Culture and Society* 26 (2009): 7-8. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409349275.

36 Sperling, Appleman, Gilyard and Freedman.

37 R. Grosfoguel, "The Epistemic Decolonial Turn," *Cultural Studies* 21 (2007): 211-223. DOI: 10.1080/09502380601162514

38 Sperling, Appleman, Gilyard and Freedman.

Centering on author's bias and point of view, Correia encouraged the learners to engage in critical reading of newspaper articles. Among the benefits of this critical literacy approach to reading, she mentions higher levels of participation. In her study, the students reported that formerly they were used to accepting the information in texts at face value, without questioning its reliability or author(s)' biases or vested interests. They also reported that while they were critical readers in Portuguese, they felt they needed help to read between the lines in English and question the message the author conveys in the text.[39]

In 2010, Izadinia and Abednia conducted a study with 25 freshman English Literature students at a University in Iran to examine their perceptions regarding the inclusion of a critical literacy approach in a reading course. Their analysis of the journals the students wrote throughout the course pointed to the students' appreciation of freedom of speech and improvement of their critical thinking ability, self-confidence and self-awareness that the inclusion of a critical literacy approach to reading fostered in class.[40]

In 2013, Ko conducted a case study in an English reading class in a university in Taiwan, whose purpose was to document the challenges and victories of one professor who agreed to apply tenets of critical literacy to a reading course that had formerly been based on functional literacy. The study showed that against commonly-held beliefs that Asian students' passive role in class stopped them from engaging in critical literacy tasks, the instructor was very successful in empowering students to problematize the power structures and vested interests embedded in the texts they tackled in class.[41]

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39   R. Correia, "Encouraging Critical Reading in the EFL Classroom," *English Teaching Forum* 44, 1 (2006): 16.

40   M. Izadinia, and A. Abednia, "Dynamics of an EFL Reading Course with a Critical Literacy Orientation," *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* 6, 2 (2010): 51-67.

41   M.-Y. Ko, "A Case Study of an EFL Teacher's Critical Literacy Teaching in a Reading Class in Taiwan," *Language Teaching Research* 17, 1 (2013a): 91-108. DOI: 10.1177/1362168812457537.

As evident in these studies conducted in Brazil, Iran and Taiwan,[42] introducing critical literacy tasks in EFL reading courses is a challenging but feasible enterprise that brings positive outcomes and that students value. By and large, teachers of reading courses in EFL contexts must "… help EFL readers feel they have options in the way they choose to read the text and to help them feel in a more equal relationship with the writer."[43] In sum, as Taglieber suggests, students should start developing their critical thinking skills as early as possible.[44] In addition, "focusing on critical reading should not wait until presumably lower level reading skills have been mastered"[45] since critical reading is an ability that students need for studying. We also agree with Taglieber that, "It should be a function of the university to consolidate the process of preparing individuals who can think and act independently and autonomously."[46] Students must develop the skills necessary to be "…reading the lines, reading between the lines, and reading beyond the lines,"[47] because understanding the literal meanings, inferring implicit meanings, and critically evaluating these meanings in texts are all abilities that students require in order to succeed in their respective fields.

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42 See also: C. Wallace, "Critical Language Awareness: Key Principles for a Course in Critical Reading," *Language Awareness* 8, 2 (1999): 98-110, https://doi.org/10.1080/09658419908667121; S. Huh, "Instructional Model of Critical Literacy in an EFL Context: Balancing Conventional and Critical Literacy," *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies* 13, 3 (2016): 210-235, DOI: 10.1080/15427587.2016.1154445; I. Papadopoulos, and E. Griva, "Promoting Critical Literacy in the EFL Context: Implementing a Project to Young Learners," *European Journal of Language and Literature Studies* 7, 1 (2017): 107- 210, DOI: https://doi.org/10. 26417/ejls.v7i1.p107-120; and Ko (2013b), 17-28.

43 C. Wallace, "Critical Literacy Awareness in the EFL Classroom," *Critical Language Awareness,* N. Fairclough, ed. (London: Longman, 1992) 59-92 (80).

44 Paesani, Allen and Dupuy (2016).

45 Loni Kreis Taglieber, "Critical Reading and Critical Thinking," *Ilha Do Desterro* 44 (2008): 141-163 (144). DOI: https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-8026.2003n44p141.

46 Taglieber, 147.

47 R. Zabihi, and M. Pordel, "An Investigation of Critical Reading in Reading Textbooks: A Qualitative Analysis," *International Education Studies* 4, 3 (2011): 80-87 (81). DOI: https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v4n3p80.

Methodology

The motivation for this study arose from a positive experience R1 had while encouraging students to tackle texts more critically, using the templates proposed by Paul and Elder. Throughout the course, R1 noticed an increased capacity to understand and evaluate texts on the part of the students. Upon informal discussions of this experience applying CT to reading, both researchers (R1 and R2) agreed that this seemingly positive outcome should be corroborated and documented more systematically. In this spirit, we chose to engage in a similar but more elaborate task with second-year students enrolled in a reading course during the second semester of 2017. We decided to work with 22 students from a B.A. program in English Teaching for Elementary Schools. In essence, this study aims to move from functional to critical literacies,[48] and seeks to find answers to the following questions:

1.   Does students' being at early stages of EFL learning (high beginners/low intermediate) hinder their capacity to read texts critically?
2.   What reactions might students have towards having to read texts critically?
3.   What challenges might students face when reading texts critically?
4.   Will the students notice any changes in their reading skill?

For this study, we used the framework *explain, demonstrate, guide, practice and reflect*.[49] First, we had students read articles about critical thinking and active, contemplative and critical reading, which we discussed centering on the difference between functional and critical literacy. Second, we gave students demonstrations on how to read

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48   Ko (2013b), 17-28.
49   Ko (2013b).

between and beyond the lines,[50] using articles from a local newspaper in English. Next, we engaged in class analysis of comics, making sure they had sufficient guidance in the process of unveiling hidden agendas/power structures inscribed in the texts.[51] Finally, we had them engage in critical reading, using the two sets of questions below:

> *Set 1*:   What is the key question raised in the text?
> What information supports the main claim?
> What key concepts are needed to understand it?
> What inferences are made upon this information?
> What assumptions underlie this text?
> What would be the implications of (not) taking this claim seriously?

> *Set 2*: What is the author's point of view?
> What voices are portrayed in the text?
> Who is represented in the text?
> What positions are assumed in the text?
> What is the preferred reading of the text?
> What are alternative readings of the text?

For the first half of the semester, the learners discussed texts by using the questions proposed by Paul and Elder,[52] which enabled them to delve deeper into meaning. For the second half, R1 (who was the professor of the course) had them discuss texts using the questions above, which pushed them to link texts to their own experience,[53] and unveil the author(s)' hidden agendas.[54] At times, R1 had students read

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50 Zabihi and Pordel, 81.
51 Ko (2013b), 92-93.
52 Paul and Elder.
53 L. P. Stevens, and T. W. Bean, *Critical Literacy: Context, Research, and Practice in the K–12 Classroom* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007).
54 T. W. Bean, and K. Moni, "Developing Students' Critical Literacy: Exploring Identity Construction in Young Adult Fiction," *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 46, 8 (2003): 638-648.

and analyze single texts. At others, he assigned them to two texts with opposite views. After each reading activity, R1 encouraged students to participate in small group discussions of the text, while he was taking notes of their progress as critical readers. At the end of the course, the students completed a questionnaire to document their opinions/ perceptions of the experience of reading texts critically. Later, we compared the data emerging from teacher notes and questionnaires to identify recurrent patterns, which we present in the following section.

Discussion of Findings

In this section, we answer the questions we posed at the beginning of this inquiry, and examine students' perceptions and reactions on their experience. As we progress with this analysis, we present quantitative as well as qualitative data coming from both the student questionnaire and the teacher notes.

The Students' Perspectives

Regarding whether the students' being at early stages of EFL learning hindered their capacity to read critically, eighteen students reported that their level of proficiency (high beginner/low intermediate) did not hinder their analysis of texts, two students said that it did, and one student stated that her proficiency sometimes interfered (one student did not answer). Among the reasons those eighteen students gave were that they felt they were prepared to understand the CL approach, that they had no problems applying it, and that their proficiency was good enough by the second year. In this regard, other interesting perspectives surfaced. Student 7A explained that CL has to do with rational and cognitive competences and not language proficiency. Student 15A indicated that CT has no correlation with their level in their major. Those who reported difficulties mentioned the linguistic complexity of the texts, and the myriad technical terms in scientific and academic texts. Likewise, one student stated that the difficulty

lied in expressing their analysis in English. As to whether the students thought it was pertinent for them to be exposed to critical approaches to reading in their second year (their reactions to the CL approach), eighteen students answered affirmatively, two students thought that CL approaches to reading should be introduced in their first year, and one student felt that reading texts from a critical literacy stance was so stressful and complicated that it should not be introduced in either the first or second year. The eighteen students who answered affirmatively stated that the having read texts from a CL perspective helped them become more critical and read more easily, analyze texts better, read more in less time, get ready for future courses, read beyond the lines, transfer their skills to their everyday life, improve overall reading comprehension, and really understand what the authors are writing about.

Of all the aspects they analyzed (see fig. 1), they found some to be more useful than others for college reading. Those that they deemed more useful were: understanding the author's purpose, identifying the main idea, understanding conclusions, arriving at alternative interpretations, and assessing the overall reliability of texts. The one aspect they thought was the least useful, to be discussed later, was identifying the voices included in and excluded from the text. All other aspects (understanding author's positions, key question, and assumptions and evaluating information/key concepts, and supporting ideas) they found relatively useful. Interestingly, most of these are aspects they found difficult to analyze, as will be discussed below.

Figure 1. Aspects Students Found Most Useful to Analyze for College Reading
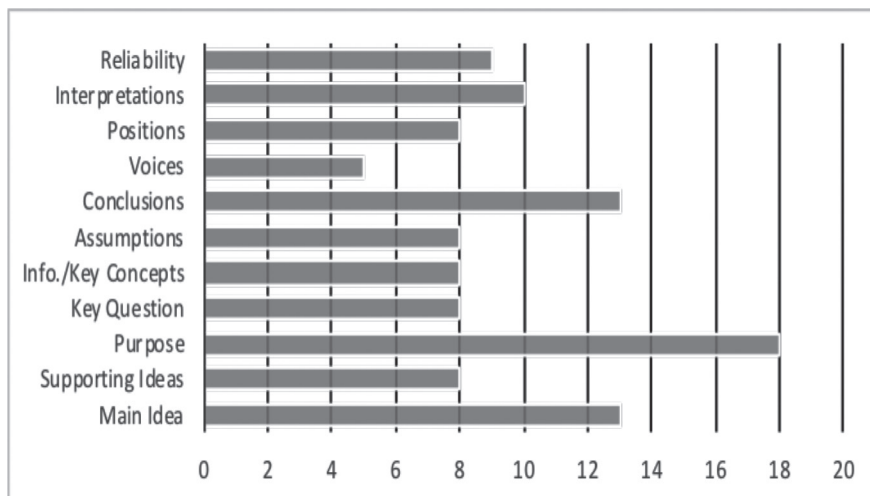
Source: Student questionnaires

    As to the question about the challenges students might face in having to read texts critically, figure 2 below shows that by the end of the course students felt relatively confident in analyzing aspects of texts such as information and key concepts, the author's purpose, the main idea, supporting ideas, conclusions, the author's position and overall reliability. Conversely, they felt that other aspects are still difficult to examine: alternative interpretations, assumptions, and the key question, all of which appeared repeatedly throughout the student questionnaires and are central to critical literacy approaches to reading.
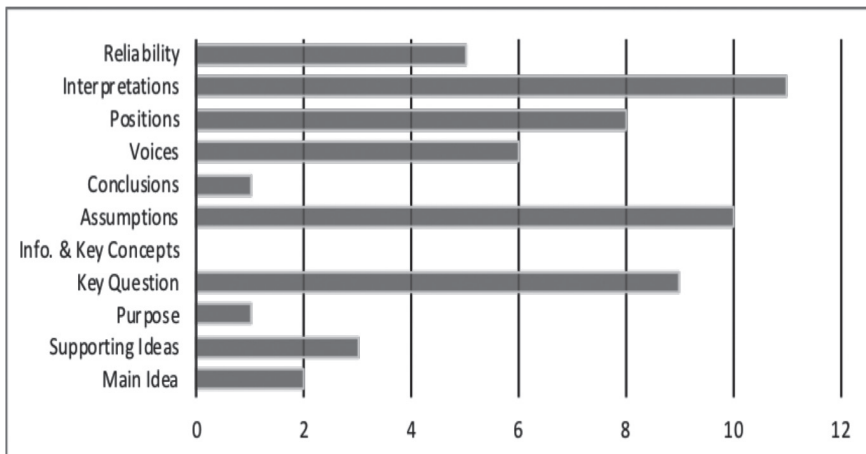
Figure 2. Aspects Students Can Analyze with Relative Ease
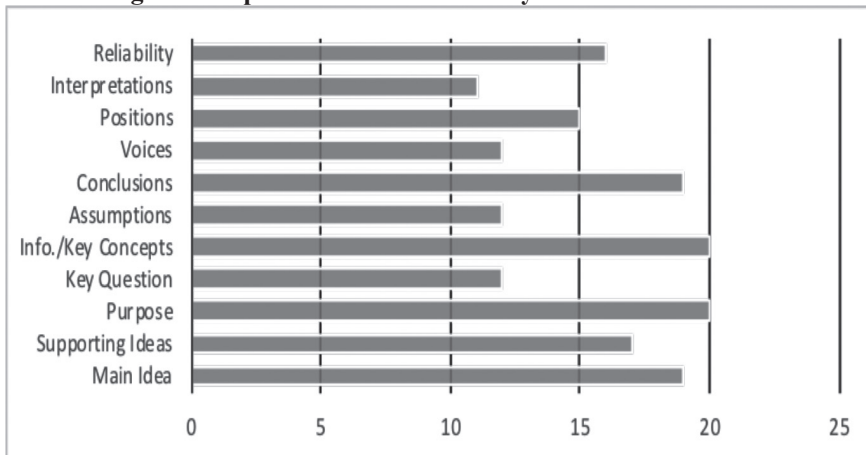
Source: Student questionnaires

Overall, what is prominent in figures 2 and 3 is that students had the greatest difficulty with aspects involving reading beyond the lines: alternative interpretations and author's assumptions.

Figure 3: Aspects Students Found Difficult to Analyze

Source: Student questionnaires

Finally, as to whether the students noticed any changes in their reading skill, all twenty-one students agreed that they perceived a positive impact of a CL approach on their reading skill. Among their evaluations were that CL has permeated not only their college projects but also their daily life as readers, that they are able to read beyond the lines, that they read better now, that they enjoy reading more than before, that they can focus on important aspects of texts, that reading has become easier, that their analyses of texts are more critical, that they feel more capable of reading, that their thinking is more critical, that it is now easier to understand texts, that they have become more interested in reading, and that they appreciated the instructor's encouragement to think about and analyze texts in a different way.

Instructors' Perspectives

The instructor of the course (R1) documented several important moments that revealed the victories and tensions derived from the application of a CL approach to reading. First, as students progressed in the course and had more practice applying a CL approach, levels of participation in small group discussions about texts increased significantly. As the instructor moved around the classroom observing and taking notes, he noticed that discussions became longer, louder, and more heated and passionate, as students compared their analyses of aspects that went beyond the lines. On one occasion, he noticed that two groups were invested in carefully analyzing the references included at the end of the article to examine the origin of the sources cited in the text, and the depth and breadth of references included in the text; this could be considered as an indication that students were taking the role of critical readers, and not that of passive consumers of texts.

Second, having realized that students were unable to identify assumptions implicit in the texts, he implemented two mediation activities. For the first one, he wrote a list of seemingly harmless statements about social issues and proceeded to analyze the assumptions of the

first aloud. He then asked the students to work with classmates and identify the assumptions in the other statements. Surprisingly, they were able to complete this task, but when asked to do the same on texts, they would become doubtful and hesitate. Therefore, he carried out a second activity, which consisted of a role-play in which he acted as the principal of a bilingual school and the students played the role of teachers. The context was a meeting in which the principal reprimanded the teachers for classroom practices and behavior considered detrimental to their students' learning of English. In this role-play, the teachers were to contradict the principal by questioning the assumptions that he was basing his reproach on. The students were so successful at this that the instructor ran out of arguments to sustain his position. This activity improved their skill at identifying assumptions in texts, but not as much as the instructor might have expected.

Third, the instructor observed that while students were able to identify the voices that were included in and excluded from the text, they did not seem to see a problem with this. They would often report that certain (important) voices were excluded yet gave a favorable rating to the text's overall reliability. They seemed to think that the exclusion of voices is a natural, normal process of writing and knowledge construction. Further, despite extensive practice on author's preferred interpretation of the text and alternative interpretations, students seemed to limit themselves to the text itself and could not connect it to the broader context or their own lives. This continued to be the case even at the end of the semester; further attention to this is urgent, given that envisioning an alternative interpretation of texts is an important part of approaching texts from a CL perspective.

Overall, the patterns that emerged in R1's notes coincide with the information in the figures above: (1) that assumptions and alternative interpretations were the hardest to analyze; and (2) that students thought that, for college reading, analyzing included and excluded voices was the least useful skill.

Conclusions

By and large, the participating students welcomed and valued the inclusion of a CL approach in the course. As they reported, having to read texts critically gave them with transferrable skills that are useful not only for college assignments but also for their lives. Having been consumers of texts, they appreciated having had the space to become critics of texts and having been pushed to develop the skills to read the lines, between the lines, and beyond the lines. As prominent in the instructor's notes, they adopted the habit of questioning and evaluating the key question raised in texts, the information and key concepts supporting texts, the inferences made in the text, the assumptions underlying texts, the author(s)' point of view and the implications of the conclusions the author(s) arrived at. In addition, they also gained experience in examining voices included in and excluded from the texts, the positions assumed in the text, the author(s)' preferred/intended interpretation and alternative interpretations of the information contained in the text.

Still, some students struggled to tackle texts from a CL approach and became frustrated when asked to examine aspects that were not explicit in the texts. This can be understood in light of the fact that reading courses in the English department of this Costa Rican University are based on functional literacy, with students limited to skimming and scanning exercises to find general or specific information or other related meaning-decoding exercises that focus on the text itself. It comes as no surprise then that some students had a hard time adjusting to the different dynamics of a CL approach that disrupts the commonplace, interrogates multiple viewpoints, focuses on sociopolitical issues and promotes social justice.[55] Accustomed to a functional approach to reading, they often grappled with the text when the instructor wanted to "… help [them] feel they have options

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55 M. Lewison, A. S. Flint, and K. Van Sluys, "Taking on Critical Literacy: The Journey of Newcomers and Novices," *Language Arts* 79, 5 (2002): 382-392 (382).

in the way they choose to read the text and to help them feel in a more equal relationship with the writer."[56]

As was corroborated in the student questionnaires and instructor's notes, the students' English proficiency (high beginner/low intermediate) did not stop them from approaching texts from a CL perspective. Overall, they succeeded at reading between and beyond the lines, as evident in their discussions. As one student pointed out, however, applying CL to texts was not impossible but the difficulty lied in communicating their analysis in English. This led us to two important conclusions. On the one hand, when students are first introduced to a CL approach, texts should be restricted to short newspaper articles that are relevant for the students' lives and whose bias and hidden agendas are more easily identifiable. It must be admitted that one major problem was that, in following the course syllabus, students were assigned academic/scientific texts, which might have complicated their analysis and created frustration, as bias and power structures are often subtler and harder to pinpoint in these types of text. On the other hand, another solution to this dilemma is to abandon the English-only communication policies in place in this department and allow spaces for students to translanguage[57] and develop this much needed critical literacy.

We concur, however, that adopting a CL perspective only in reading courses will not suffice. It is of paramount importance that courses such as writing, oral communication and grammar, also be taught from this perspective. This would help students make a smoother transition from functional to critical literacies. We cannot deny that "...education is first and foremost a means of social transformation because injustice, power asymmetry, and human suffering do exist."[58] Learning to read spoken and written texts critically is essential, as students in higher education must move from reading as onlookers

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56 Wallace (1992), 59-92 (80).
57 O. García, *Bilingual Education in the 21st Century: A Global Perspective* (Malden Oxford: Wiley/ Blackwell, 2009).
58 Abednia, 79.

to reading as critical participants, able not only to decode meaning but also to make and evaluate meaning. Learners are entitled to being aware that "... texts are not ideologically natural or neutral –that they represent particular points of view while silencing others'…"[59] and to learning "... to question the voices behind texts, who is represented and who is not, what positions texts are assuming"[60] and to "...be able to 'construct a reading that may actively resist and challenge the preferred reading of a text.'"[61]

59   Huang, 146.
60   Stevens and Bean, 6; quoted in Huang, 146.
61   Bean and Moni, 639; quoted in Huang, 146.