

# Faculty of Education Curriculum & Instruction Department

# The effect of a critical literacy-based program on enhancing EFL learners' reading of fictional texts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the M.A. Degree

in Education (Curriculum & Instruction: TEFL) Prepared by Abdullah Magdy Abdullah

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2020

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# ABSTRACT

The present study aimed at enhancing EFL learner's critical reading of fictional text skills using critical literacy. The study used a quasi- experimental method. The study participants were a group of 30 students from grade 3 (an American Education system). The researcher employed the critical reading of fictional texts pre-post-test and reading of fictional texts rubric as research tools. Results revealed that that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the study participants in the pre and post-test in terms of critical reading of fictional texts as the main skill in favor of post testing at the level of 0.01. Moreover, results showed that the students were able to challenge the texts and explore identities presented or marginalized in the text effectively. However, they showed limited ability in going beyond bias and creating whole new parallel texts.

Key words: critical literacy, critical reading, fictional texts.

## Introduction

Teaching literature is an indispensable part of teaching language arts due to its close connection to enhancing the awareness of the societies it came from. Literary texts do not usually serve as the image carrier, but they may deliver messages that may implicitly or explicitly subsidize changes according to certain agendas. For this reason, the treatment of the text should, even in the early grades, should go from the levels of the literal comprehension to the deeper understanding of the structural part of the texts including ideologies, attitudes, identities, and so on.

Fictional texts are part of the various literary genres in which themes like power, prejudice, justice, and equality are introduced. The role of Critical reading of fictional texts, in this case, involves analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of these themes. It is a process of active reading against the text to question its assumptions and arguments rather than restating them or taking them for granted. To this effect, Douglas, (2000) states that critical reading is reading the text "suspiciously and analytically and then evaluating it". It means that a reader

applies certain processes, models, questions, and theories that result in enhanced clarity and comprehension.

Different researchers and authors mention the importance of learning literature such as: Bodden, (2006) A.Costello, (2006) Dupre, (2006), not only because it increases the artistic taste but also, as Eliot, (1922) stated, because reading literary texts is equivalent to reading the chain of humanity. However, EFL learners lack a clear understanding of how to tackle fictional texts critically the matter which hinders the skills of critical thinking in general. The laziness towards going beyond the text and leaving the meaning aside concentrating on the outer frame like whether the text is: "poetry", "novel" or "drama" may narrow the reader's thoughts and expectations to lean on readymade analyses without working on the text in a close and sustained reading process to analyze and synthesize the text.

Literature review

# **Critical literacy**

Hagood& Beck agree that Critical Literacy (CL) was initially proposed by social critical theorists that were unsettled by social injustice and inequalities, due to unequal power relationships. They believed that those predominant in society use their power to indicate the prevailing truths that are mediated through education and formulate how things stand. Thus, knowledge is authenticated by specific groups of people where other groups are excluded. CL theory applies the beliefs of critical social theory to education by examining how schools reproduce inequality and justice (Neophytou & Valiandes, 2013, pp. 412-426).

Most critical literacy theorists agree that the act of literacy itself, in Siegel & Fernandez's words, is a "social and political practice rather than a set of neutral, psychological skills". As such, being critically literate involves not only being decoders and creators of texts but also learning to "detect and handle the ideological dimension "of language and literacy (Papola-Ellis & Eberly, Spring 2015). Freire and Macedo; Janks; Knoblauch and Brannen agree that critical literacy is a social and political process (as cited in Reidel & Draper, 2011) which focuses, on Luke's (2000) words, 'on teaching and learning how texts work, understanding and remediating what texts attempt to do in the world and to people, and moving students toward active position- takings with texts to critique and reconstruct the social fields in which they live and work" (p.453). In addition, critical literacy tackles a widespread, covered social agenda of power (Kaur & Sidhu, 2016) by addressing the cultural and social contexts of textual information (McNichol, 2016). Hoggart suggests that the term is not only about *'learning to sharpen the mind'* to *'look closely at society and ask questions about it'*, but also to *'compare the quality'* of cultural productions (as cited inTurner, 2007). Thus, Labadie, Wetzel, & Rogers, (2012) suggest that considering multiple perspectives and disrupt commonplace understandings are two important elements of critical Literacy, or on Anwaruddin's (2016) words: 'it seeks to analyze, criticize, and redefine texts of all kinds'(p.265).

Cooper & White(2008) explain that critical literacy enhances the capability to read, linking the development of self-efficacy, an attitude of questioning the text, and the desire to cause positive social mobility. While Luke (2000) sees that Critical literacy is *the social semiotic 'tool kit'* that is triggered in various settings in life (p.448). In addition, Silvers, Shorey, & Crafton (2010) see that literacy and literate practices include a great range of knowledge, skills, processes, and behaviors aiming to change. For the sake of this change, Kaur(2013) asserts that higher comprehension levels of reading are required to accomplish the practices of critical literacy which hold multiple and conflicting perspectives of learners.

# **Reading of fictional texts**

Fictional texts are full of issues of race, class, and gender and teaching these literary texts without questioning the historical and social framework may lead to ignoring biased behavior introduced in the texts and students adopt (Christisen, 1999). McNicol (2016) suggests that the critical stance that critical literacy offers an interrogation of the society by dismantling the basic assumption introduced as unquestionable realities.

This critical stance enables the reader to develops the quality of response to the texts. McNicol (2016) also offers that the reader from this critical stance does not accept or take the printed word for granted but rather a connection to the historical and social circumstances of the reader is triggered to ask who is powered in the text and who is not; whose viewpoint is being presented, and whose absent and what the author appears to want the reader to think

Christensen (1999) suggests that Reading fiction from the critical literacy lens enables the reader to consider diversity in the text as the reader examines how the characters feel about themselves, race, language, families, and culture, hence students talk back to the text as if they were in a direct interaction with the text. Chu Lau (2012) adds that reading from the critical literacy perspective enables students to be active readers and writers of cultural texts, also they become confident to express themselves and disturb the commonplace; Lau derives the example of dismantling the stenotype of the evil stepmother in Disney's version of Cinderella or the stereotype of the 'beautiful girl who always can marry a powerful and handsome man," . Lau's students were able to write less biased versions of Cinderella and even with totally different endings.

According to Molden (2007), Critical literacy is a synonym to analytical reading that provides an in-depth examination of the text components: 'why it was written, whom it includes and excludes, and self-questioning, are there any biases?'. Molden also affirms that the author's purpose directs the story to get the readers influenced by the author's point of view by emphasizing certain events or characters and deemphasizing others as they read the situations critically, then they made decisions about what to include and what to exclude. He also highlighted four goals critical literacy can achieve when applied to fiction:

• To perceive the author's purpose of writing the text

- To discover how the author uses language to manipulate the reader's understanding
- To find diverse understandings rather than that of the author

• To read against the text by forming a different understanding or perspective from that introduced in the text (p50-56).

#### The Study design

The present study used the quasi-experimental one group pre-post-test design. This study investigates the effectiveness of the proposed program based on critical literacy on enhancing EFL learners' reading of fictional texts.

#### The study variables

In this study, there is one independent variable and one dependent variable. They are as follow:

1- The independent variable:

It is a program based on critical literacy.

# 2- The dependent variable:

The enhancement of EFL learner's critical reading of fictional texts.

# Instruments

Aiming to examine the effect of a critical literacy-based program on enhancing EFL learners' critical reading of fictional texts, the researcher designed the following instruments as follows:

- 1- Fictional texts pre-post-test,
- 2- Critical reading of fictional texts rubric
- 3- Self-assessment questionnaire

# Results

Results will be presented interms of the study hypothesis

# 4.1 Verifying the first hypothesis

The first hypothesis states that there will be a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the study participants in the pre and post-test in terms of critical reading of fictional texts as the main skill in favor of post-testing. To verify this hypothesis, the researcher used a T-test to examine the significance of the difference between the pre-test and the post-test of reading fictional texts in terms of critical reading of fictional texts. The following table show this.

# Table (5)

The differences between the students' scores in the pre-test and the post-test of reading fictional texts in terms of the overall critical reading of fictional texts.

SKIL	mean		Std. Deviation		T-test	Sig.	N	Freedom degree	Effect size (η2)
	pre	post	pre	post					
Critical									
reading of									
fictional	9.39	26.04	1.18	1.07	38.374	0.000	30	29	0.980
texts									Very large
(main skill)									

Table (5) above shows that the arithmetic mean score of the study participants in the critical reading of fictional texts pretest is estimated at (9.39) with a standard deviation of (1.18), which is less than the arithmetic mean score of the posttest 26.04 with a standard deviation of (1.07). This means that there are statistically significant differences in the grades of the students in favor of the posttest.

As revealed in the table (5), the value of the t-test is (38.374), which indicates a highly significant level at (0.01). The mean was (9.39) and (26.04) for the pretest and the posttest, respectively. The t-values functioned at the degree of freedom 29 and a significance level (0.01).

As a result, there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the study participants in the pre and posttest in terms of the overall critical reading of fictional texts favoring post-testing at the significance level of (0.01). Therefore, this hypnosis is accepted.

The effect size was also calculated using eta-squared according to the following equation  $(\eta 2) = t2/(t2 + df)$ , which found to be (0.980) very large. Accordingly, this implies that the suggested program, as an independent variable, affected the students' critical reading of fictional texts. Thus, the research question 'what is the effect of a critical literacy-based program on enhancing EFL Egyptian learners' reading fictional texts?' was answered.

#### 4.2 Verifying the second hypothesis

The second hypothesis states that 'There will be a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the study participants in the pre and post-test in terms of challenging the text in favor of post-testing'. To verify this hypothesis, the researcher used a t-test to examine the significance of the difference between the pre-test and the post-test of reading fictional texts in terms of challenging the text, as shown in the following table.

#### Table (6)

The differences between the students' scores in the pre-test and the post-test of reading fictional texts in terms of challenging the text

	Mean		Std. Deviation						
SKIL	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	T-test	Sig.	N	Freedom degree	Effect size (η2)
Challenging the text	4.03	9.45	1.18	0.77	18.602	0.000	30	29	0.922 (Very large)

Table (6) above demonstrates that the mean score of the study participants in challenging the text pretest is (4.03) with a standard deviation of (1.18), which is less than the arithmetic mean score of the posttest (9.45) with a standard deviation of (1.77). Which indicates that there are statistically significant differences in the grades of the students in favor of the posttest.

This is confirmed by the value of the t-test of (18.602) which is a functioned value at the degree of freedom 29 and a significant level of (0.01). which indicates a highly significant level at (0.01). Therefore, this hypnosis is accepted.

The effect size was further calculated using eta-squared according to the following equation ( $\eta 2$ ) = t2/(t2 +df), which found to be (0.922) very large. Consequently, this implies that the suggested program has a significant positive impact on enhancing the student's ability to challenge the text.

#### 4.3 Verifying the third hypothesis

The third hypothesis states that there will be a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the study participants in the pre and post-test in terms of exploring identities in favor of post-testing. To verify this hypothesis, the researcher used a T-test to examine the significance of the difference between the pre-test and the post-test of reading fictional texts in terms of exploring identities. The following table show this:

#### Table (7)

The differences between the students' scores in the pre-test and the post-test of reading fictional texts in terms of exploring identities

SKIL	Mean		Std.						
	1 <b>V1</b>	Call	Deviation		T to st	<b>C</b> :-	Ν	Freedom	Effect
	pre	Post	pre	post	- T-test	Sig.		degree	size
									(η2)
Exploring									0.986
identities	4.13	14.60	0.96	0.73	46.826	0.000	30	29	Very
									large

Table (7) shows that The students' mean score in the pretest in terms of exploring identities, is (4.14) with a standard deviation of (0.96) which less than the students' mean score in the

posttest which is (14.40) with a standard deviation of (0.73) ,in terms of the same skill. As a result, there is a statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the study participants in the pre and post-test in terms of exploring identities in favor of post-testing. Moreover, this is confirmed by the t-value which is estimated at (46.826) which indicated high significance at the level of (0.01).

The effect size was also calculated using eta-squared according to the following equation  $(\eta 2) = t2/(t2 + df)$ , which found to be (0.986) very large. Accordingly, this implies that the suggested program, as an independent variable, affected the students' ability to explore identities in the fictional texts.

#### **4.4 Verifying the fourth hypothesis**

The fourth hypothesis states that there will be a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the study participants in the pre and post-test in terms of seeing beyond bias the text in favor of post-testing. To verify this hypothesis, the researcher used a t-test to examine the significance of the difference between the pre-test and the post-test of reading fictional texts in terms of seeing beyond bias. The following table show this.

#### Table (8)

The differences between the students' scores in the pre-test and the post-test of reading fictional texts in terms of seeing beyond bias

SKIL	Mean		Std. Deviation					Freedom	Effect
SKIL	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	T-test	Sig.	Ν	degree	size (η2)
Seeing									0.148
beyond bias	1.53	1.99	0.62	0.51	2.249	0.032	30	29	large

Table (8) above shows that the mean score of the study participants in seeing beyond bias pretest is (1.53) with a standard deviation of (0.62), which is less than the arithmetic mean score of the posttest (1.99) with a standard deviation of (0.51). Which indicates that there are statistically significant differences in the grades of the students in favor of the posttest at the level of (0.05).

This is confirmed by the value of the t-test of (2.249) which is a functioned value at the degree of freedom 29 and a significant level of (0.05). which indicates a significant level at (0.05). Therefore, this hypnosis is accepted.

The effect size was calculated too using eta-squared according to the following equation  $(\eta 2) = t2/(t2 + df)$ , which found to be (0.148) large. Consequently, this implies that the suggested program has a significant positive impact on enhancing the student's ability in exploring identities.

## The study findings

the present study proved the following results:

- 1- There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the study participants in the pre and post-test in terms of critical reading of fictional texts as the main skill in favor of post-testing at the level of (0.01).
- 2- There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the study participants in the pre and post-test in terms of challenging the text in favor of post-testing at the level of (0.01).
- 3- There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the study participants in the pre and post-test in terms of exploring identities in favor of post-testing at the level of (0.01).
- 4- There is statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the study participants in the pre and post-test in terms of seeing beyond bias the text in favor of post-testing at the level of (0.05).

# Conclusion

- Using critical literacy has a significant effect on enhancing the critical reading of fictional texts.
- 2- The students' ability to challenge the texts, and exploring the identities presented has been proved using critical literacy, despite their age.
- **3-** The students' ability to deal with what is present and criticize it was better than creating parallel or opponent texts.
- 4- The students' attitudes towards the texts had changed when they took the freedom to modify them to reach better and fairer texts. The matter which appeared in their selfesteem and tendency to be 'co-authors'.

- 5- Non-verbal responses can be taken into consideration while teaching language arts to those with limited linguistic skills.
- 6- the use of critical literacy has enhanced significantly EFL learner's reading of fictional texts throughout enhancing the skills of challenging the text, exploring identities, and seeing beyond bias.

# Recommendations

In light of the study, some recommendations should be taken into consideration:

- 1- Tackling fictional texts critically should be highlighted in curriculum designing along with teaching for comprehension.
- 2- The classroom environment where critical literacy is implanted should be a stressfree one to give the students the freedom to think and create.
- 3- Teachers should accept all students' responses to the texts without neglecting or marginalizing any of their opinions during the production process.
- 4- The students' responses to the texts should not be limited to the verbal ones only but the non-verbal responses like drawings, illustrations should be considered also.
- 5- Teaching fictional text should be taken seriously as teaching life experiences that would help the students' in their out of class life.

# Suggestions for further research

There are several suggestions for further research in the field of critical literacy such

as:

- 1- Enhancing critical writing for higher grades using critical literacy.
- 2- Using critical literacy in teaching historical texts to discover bias towards the oppressed groups
- 3- Using critical literacy in teachers' training programs.
- 4- Using critical literacy in enhancing critical reading in other languages such as Arabic, French, German and so on.
- 5- Using critical literacy in enhancing argumentative writing

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