

# Learners' reading between the signs in the English second language classroom

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**Background:** In South Africa, developing criticality among learners is essential for their careers in school and outside school. However, knowledge and understanding of critical literacy within the schooling context is unclear, with only patchy guidance available for teachers.

**Objectives:** An intervention project was set up to discover how community signs could be used as a pedagogical tool for teaching learners to be critical readers. The focus of the study was teaching English second language learners to use language as an instrument for creative and critical thinking.

**Method:** In this 'study within a study', the learners' role has been elevated to that of researchers. As 'researchers', the learners collected community signs from around their township and conducted interviews with community members. They analysed the signs and interview transcripts using Fairclough's method of critical discourse analysis. The social semantic theory was used to anchor this study.

**Results:** The first attempt at being critical readers was the categorisation of data. Three categories that formed broad themes were observed. The learners' responses gave insight into their own 'processes' of reception and processes of production of the signs. The results suggest learners developing an ability to read signs as instantiations of township discourses.

**Conclusion:** Teaching critical literacy awareness can be achieved when teachers use texts drawn from familiar contexts. The study contributes to knowledge on how unconventional texts can be used in the classroom to develop criticality among learners.

**Keywords:** community signs; critical literacy; critical discourse analysis; social semantic theory; township.

## Introduction

In South Africa, knowledge and understanding of critical literacy within the schooling context is unclear, with only patchy guidance available for teachers. Theoretically, the New Curriculum Statements (NCS, Grades 10–12) should produce a learner who is able to read and view texts for understanding and be able to respond to and critically evaluate a wide range of texts (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2011). Relevant aims of NCS are to produce learners that are able to identify and solve problems and make decisions using critical and creative thinking, and critically evaluate information (DBE 2011). Drawing on the NCS, the focus of this study is to investigate how community signs can be used as a tool to teach learners to read and think critically. In addition, if learners are able to interact critically with texts, they should be able to challenge perspectives, values and power relations embedded in texts (DBE 2011).

Developing criticality among learners is essential for their careers in school and outside school. While critical literacy is generally considered important for older children, researchers argue that younger learners can develop the skills necessary for constructing critical literacy as well (Gregory & Cahill 2009; Silvers, Shorey & Crafton 2010; Vasquez 2003, 2007). For learners, learning to become critically literate begins with the development of foundational comprehension skills, as suggested by Hassett (2008). This involves making connections, inferring, questioning, visualising and synthesising.

There is vast global interest in critical literacy, with an increasing number of classroom-based researchers exploring how teachers can support learners' development of a critical literacy at any stage, including the early years. As the works of Barbara Comber (2003, 2013, 2016) in Australia, Hilary Janks (2010, 2014, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2020) in South Africa and Vivian Vasquez (2003, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2014, 2017) in Canada have shown, teachers can respond to social issues raised by

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their learners by supporting their use of language practices to take action for change. For example, having learners collect attention-grabbing icons such as 'signs, advertisements and multimedia forms of text from their neighborhood surroundings is one way to start developing their critical literacy' (Stevens & Bean 2007:24).

Attention-grabbing texts such as community signs are found around learners' neighbourhoods. Several studies investigating the discourse of signs have mainly focused on shop signs, constructed with the reader in mind and what their needs are thought to be (Leeman & Modan 2010; Lou 2007; Papen 2012). Many neighbourhood businesses carefully understand and determine the values and preferences of local neighbourhood communities (Rahman & Mehta 2020:35). Storefront signs place texts in a seemingly innocuous way, but in a no less dominant manner, by considering who, what and how the signs index (Ochs 1990; Silverstein 2003). Regardless of whether shop owners are the type of people their signs suggest, signage marks public space with *personae* for passers-by and 'communicate identities and values which help them connect with certain types of consumers' (Rahman & Mehta 2020:35). For example, in their study of shop signs in Brooklyn, New York, Trinch and Snajdr (2016:73) show how 'language is uniquely integrated into the human geography of diverse urban neighborhoods'. Although an area's linguistic landscape both delineates and represents the social context in which people find themselves and their languages (Gorter 2006; Shohamy, Ben-Rafael & Barni 2010), Stewart (1982) reminds us that 'names on the land' are determined by the dynamics of culture and custom. Semiotic and material features of buildings, streets and typography can convey messages of distinctiveness and exclusion (Aiello 2011; Gendelman & Aiello 2011).

Beyond serving as conventional geographical markers, a significant body of research suggests that signs can serve many other purposes. They can be effective in promoting change of behaviour in a variety of domains such as road traffic (Huybers, Van Houten & Malenfant 2004; Pesti & McCoy 2001; Sullivan et al. 2004). In the health domain, signs have been found to encourage change in behaviours (Honnen & Kleinke 1990), such as minimising smoking-related pregnancy risks (Kollath-Cattano, Osman & Thrasher 2017) and encouraging safer sex habits by promoting condom use (Honnen & Kleinke 1990; Meis & Kashima 2017). As this study demonstrates, township community signs reflect the thinking and behaviour of community members. Through language discourses, township community signs provide 'a window into the visual identity of the neighborhood' (Rahman & Mehta 2020:35).

This article reports on how secondary school learners begin to develop critical reading as part of a larger project exploring teaching critical literacy awareness using community signs. My study profiles a teaching intervention, undertaken with English second language (ESL) learners at a typical township secondary school in South Africa. As 'researchers', the learners collected signs found in their neighbourhood. The purpose served by community signs in this study differs from that of conventional signs, which transmit messages in an attempt to

persuade people what to do or not to do (McDougall, Curry & De Bruijn 1999). They are unconventional texts, falling *mostly* within the discourse of graffiti but containing messages constructed and understood within a particular context. It is within this context that this project aimed to integrate literacy and criticality in language teaching. It particularly aimed to investigate how community signs can be used as pedagogical tools to teach critical reading in the classroom.

## Theoretical perspectives

Within the theoretical framework of social semiotic theory (Jewitt 2006; Kress 2010), this article conceptualises community signs as texts to develop critical reading. The term *text* implies both a reader and a writer. Signage in this study is conceptualised as a 'social practice' (Street 1984) promoting shared meaning between the writer and the reader. As texts, community signs carry within them particular histories of their composition. Within those histories lie the lived experiences of township dwellers.

Before discussing the specific intervention strategy employed in the study, I present the understanding of signs, including the applicable elements of critical literacy, and the interaction between texts and identity formation. Based on the work of De Saussure (1959), signs or symbols that signify meaning (semiotic) constitute 'text' (Stables & Bishop 2001), and texts are read, in turn. As community signs stand, they can be recognised as a form of text. Community signs represent a social discourse that distributes power among various individuals in the community, especially those who have no voice to contribute to social transformation because of being poor or uneducated in the formal sense. Rooted in the critical social theories of Paulo Freire (1972), critical literacy encourages learners to question and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions through analysis of language and power. According to Shor (1992:129), critical reading habits should go 'beneath surface meaning [...] to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, [or] process'. Developing literacy in this sense is not merely 'reading the word', but also 'reading the world' (Freire 1998). Literacy itself is ideological and linked to power structures (Street 2008). Informal texts such as community signs can be empowering for poor communities because they 'symbolize a critical state of consciousness in which these communities participate as critical minds within unstatic conditions of world and words' (Alshreif 2016:456). Further, community signs do not merely reflect individual abilities to read and write but aim to empower individuals to think critically, to understand their own realities, and to form new identities as they make new interpretations of reality.

## Conceptualising community signs

Signs are semiotic devices found around neighbourhoods. Rahman and Mehta (2020:35) succinctly describe signs as 'a window into the visual identity of the neighborhood' that provides direct spatial semiotic – a visual sociology of place

(Krase & Shortell 2011). Signage is an interesting field of study, which prototypically represents and mediates between what Zukin (1995) calls the visual economy of the landscape and market culture. Research has shown that signs speak through language ideologies (Irvine & Gal 2000; Schieffelin, Woolard & Kroskrity 1998), by marking the land not only for languages and their users, but, more importantly, for the ways in which people use language according to their prevailing *sociolinguistic* standards and values (Trinch & Snajdr 2016). As signs embody different language ideologies, they come to shape political, social and economic contexts (Trinch & Snajdr 2016). In their work, Trinch and Snajdr (2020) critically engage with the role of language in signage. Similar to spoken utterances and written texts, signs are designed for particular audiences (Bell 1984; Warner 2002). As Rahman and Mehta (2020:35) point out, 'signs convey messages beyond what is expressed within the text of the sign'. Through personalities and qualities of type, signage becomes a source of messages and meanings that serves as a form of cultural expression. Signs can reveal how inhabitants use semiotic resources to shape a place according to their 'varied interests and tastes, and can also provide insight into the power dynamics that contribute to a social construction of taste' (Adami 2020:3).

The notion of community signs implies a connection with reading and writing – with text (Stables 1996, 1998; Stables & Bishop 2001; Stables & Scott 1999). Community signs, as text, are a social construct that can provide a 'voice to empower communities' (Iddings, McCafferty & Da Silva 2011:8). Texts do not only intertwine with the distribution of power within communities, but also enable effective self-expression in any form (Iddings et al. 2011). Like the exospheric indexicality in graffiti (Alshreif 2016), township community signs can create an exceptional context, becoming 'part of the fabric of the ecosocial semiotic environment of a neighborhood' (Iddings et al. 2011:8). The study of community signs as critical pedagogy (Freire 1970/1993) calls for teachers to adapt their teaching to lived experiences of learners. In this regard, learners are encouraged to construct new knowledges and develop critical consciousness (Lehner et al. 2017). Therefore, community signs are a sociolinguistic identity mostly understood and shared by township dwellers as 'situated social practices' (Barton & Hamilton 1998; Street 1984).

Townships are typically densely populated urban residential areas with many examples of environmental print around them – mainly in English but also in local languages. Most township dwellers are unemployed. To generate income, people set up 'backyard businesses' such as small grocery shops (known as *spazas*), barber shops, hair salons, panel beaters and vegetable stalls. These informal businesses usually have homemade signs and noticeboards, serving as some form of commercial advertisements for various products and services. Neighbourhood or community signs are a common feature in townships. These informal texts are what Comber and Simpson (1995) and O'Brien (2001) term 'alternative' texts. They can be found at the shops, nightclubs, schools and clinics, places of worship and community halls. Signs at the gates of residential areas are a distinct feature of

townships. Most signs used as street names tell stories of the history of the place yet others are *just* street names.

## Conceptualising critical literacy

For Lankshear and Knobel (2003), critical literacy:

involves awareness that all social practices, and thus all literacies, are socially constructed and 'selective' [and] they include some representations and classifications – values, purposes, rules, standards, and perspectives – and exclude others. (p. 11)

Freire and Macedo (1987) view critical literacy as the ability to 'read both the word and the world'. As Freire suggests, 'reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world' (Freire & Macedo 1987:29). Critical awareness can create possibilities for community participation, while reflecting on certain perceptions of social issues, even if participants are 'illiterate' in the formal sense. In this case, reading community signs aims to create critical awareness and consequently promote social justice. Critical pedagogies can develop within learners the ability to interrogate canonical texts, often from home and community settings, thus opening up new spaces in which young people can draw on their funds of knowledge and cultural capital (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti 2005; Lee 2007; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade 2002; Richardson 2006). A focus on young people's funds of knowledge and unravelling of power relations needs to be extended to 'recognise young people's entanglements with objects outside school' (Pahl & Rowsell 2011:131). Engagement with out-of-school texts can offer 'third spaces' where these literacies are valued alongside canonical texts and young people's out-of-school literacy practices are recognised (Moje et al. 2004).

## Purpose of the study

Following the work of Lee (2007), proposing culturally responsive pedagogies to challenge deficit models of instruction in schools, this study demonstrates a sustained engagement with texts from local communities. The purpose of this study was to investigate the use of community signs as a pedagogical tool to promote critical literacy awareness in the ESL classroom. The study aimed to equip learners with critical literacy skills to enable them to interrogate the production and reception process (Fairclough 1992) of community signs. The ultimate purpose of this article is to share findings from a literacy intervention project, with a particular focus on changes and literacy gains made by learners reading community signs. The intervention employed classroom-based literacy practices aimed at engaging learners at various levels in becoming conscious participants in critical literacy.

## Research questions

The focus of this study is to address the following research questions:

1. How do learners interrogate the production of community signs?

2. As readers, how do learners engage critically with the social effects and implications of messages on community signs?

## Research method and design

### Research context

This literacy intervention was administered to 20 Grade 12 learners at a township school. Their ages ranged from 17 to 19 years old. This study was conducted at Longview Township,<sup>1</sup> one of the areas designated by the apartheid state for the 'Coloured' community in Gauteng. The township is predominantly Afrikaans speaking though there is a significant presence of indigenous African language speakers. Schools in townships are relatively poorly equipped, compared to those in former white-only suburbs. To counteract this resource deficit, this study demonstrates an innovative approach to teaching using community signs as classroom resources.

### Data collection

As 'researchers', the learners gathered community signs from around their township, at the gates of houses, shops, streets and other public spaces. In order to tease out the specifics of production and reception of signs, I divided the class into five groups of four learners. Each group chose a leader to present findings of their group to the whole class. Each of the 20 learners interviewed two people from their community to establish their attitudes regarding the production and meaning of signs (reception). They posed the following questions: (1) What do you find interesting about signs found in your township? (2) What disturbs you about them? (3) What social issues do they portray?

### Data analysis

The analytical focus of the signs was on the linguistic features and the meanings people attach to them. The learners analysed the signs by categorising (Dey 1993) them according to purposes they serve and how they are interpreted. The categorisation process served to assist learners to organise data, develop a general understanding of what is going on, and generate themes and theoretical concepts (Maxwell 2008). In their analysis, the learners initially identified several categories such as vulgar, swearing, educational, goods and services, gangsters, violence, HIV/AIDS awareness, dogs, crime and domestic signs. With my mediation, the learners repeated the categorisation process and narrowed the data to three broad categories: crime and security, information, and sexist or vulgar. These distinct categories formed themes of discussion for this study (King 1998; Smith 1995). As active participants in the study, each of the 20 learners analysed one sign from each of the three categories. They brought their analysis to their group discussion. The goal of the group discussion was to elicit individual responses and points of view. The following analysis and interpretation constitute group and individual responses.

1. Not the township's real name.

## Data presentation, analysis and interpretation

In their reading and analysis, the learners answered the two research questions as they interrogated the production and reception factors of community signs. As readers, the learners engaged critically with the social effects and implications of messages on the community signs. The presentation and discussion of results in this section is in two parts: learners' own analysis and residents' analysis. Only pertinent responses were chosen for this article because others were repetitive. Based on the purpose the signs served, the learners categorised the signs into three main categories as illustrated in Table 1.

### Learners' own analysis

The categorisation of signs (Table 1) was the first attempt by learners at being critical readers. As the table shows, three broad themes emerged in the learners' responses to signs found around their township. The learners' responses give insight into their own 'processes' of reception and processes of production of the signs. The signs project the identities of authors and intended addressee (Adami 2015). Critical analysis of signs is informed by social factors and personal experiences of readers.

### Crime and security

Data shows that most signs found in Longview Township denote crime and security. Such signs portray Longview as

TABLE 1: Sample of community signs.

No.	Crime and security	Information signs	Sexist and vulgar
1	West side	Save water drink beer	I don't bite beautiful women
2	Mafia City	Prevent AIDS – use a condom	Only sexy girls may enter
3	Gangsters' paradise	Drink responsibly	I just want beautiful ladies
4	Ninja town	No alcohol sold to persons under 18	Ugly girls don't enter the gate
5	If you get into my house with a bad attitude you will meet mine	Cut for the girls and grill for the fucking ninjas	I don't have a wife, feel free to come in
6	You enter you die	Club 9-2-5	Black bitches
7	They won't mind eating you	No dumping	Vagina sweet
8	Enter at your own risk	Viagra <i>skhokho</i>	Leave your panties at the gate
9	Beware of the dog	Danger, <i>gevaar, ingozi</i>	Blood in blood out
10	<i>Basop lo inja</i>	Electrical fence and gate	White niggaz
11	<i>Tshaba nja</i>	<i>Basop lo inja</i>	Niggaz don't cry
12	<i>Pass op vir die hond</i>	The morning after the night before	Fuck the Longview bitches
13	Beware of the gun	Blue Magic	Fuck Longview virgins
14	Enter at own risk – killer dogs	Don't talk to me talk to my lawyer	Black ass
15	I can make it to the gate in 5 s, can you?	Don't ask for credit, I'm also looking for him	When I die bury me upside down so that the world can kiss my ass
16	I don't forget to bite people	No credit till 30 February	White trash
17	I eat human meat only	Mr Credit died yesterday	Fuck ANC
18	Dogs! You enter at your own risk	Mr Credit was killed by My Cash	<i>Hloma nge condom</i>
19	You don't close the gate you will deal with the owner	Crazy store	Son of a bitch
20	You mess with my dogs you will deal with me	Airtime sold here	<i>Jou ma se poes</i>

highly dangerous and unsafe to live in. That can be noted on signs such as, *'Gangsters' Paradise*, *'Mafia country, you enter you die'* and *'West side, don't enter'*. The language on the signs was said to be used by *Tsotsis* and gangsters to mark their territory. As one girl revealed, 'The west part of Longview is a no-go area for ordinary people. *Tsotsis* rape, rob and kill people'. Another learner indicated that the sign *'Wild, wild Longview'* derives from *'Wild, wild west'*, a concept associated with lawlessness. As Stewart (1982) reminds us, names on the land are determined by culture and customs. Therefore, learners strongly felt that signs in their community draw on negative popular culture and gangster practices depicted in American media: 'American media has a negative influence on us. Killing, just like people just having sex is common in most American media. It's disgusting'. The learners perceive western media as glorifying gangsterism and casual sex.

Gangsterism and other crimes were seen as a serious concern in Longview Township. The seriousness with which residents reacted to the high level of crime is portrayed on the sign with a stark warning: *'Trespassers will be shot and survivors will be shot again'*; as one learner suggested: 'People don't want to take chances with criminals but to ensure that they are *real dead*' [emphasis my own]. Vigilantism and killing of suspected criminals is prevalent among township communities that have lost trust in law enforcement and policing as one learner noted: 'Longview gangsters are free to do what they want. The police fear them'. It is interesting to note that the words 'gangster' and 'gang' feature prominently in the participants' responses. This finding suggests that gangsterism is a major social problem in Longview, like other townships in South Africa. For example, in Coloured communities of Cape Town, gangs are reported to dominate social and economic life for the working class (Jacobs 2019). News reports and documentaries broadcast around the world depict the reign of terror that violent gangs exercise in townships (Jacobs 2019). The learners described the frequency of gang-related killings in the townships as 'daily bread'. Although dated, Kinnes (1995) reported that most attempted murder incidents in Western Cape townships were gang related, which is a common occurrence in present-day townships. Closely related to signs denoting crime is the presence of dog-warning signs. Data shows that the 'dogs and security' category has the highest number of entries (49 out of 87), which suggests serious security concerns in Longview Township. However, crime is a national concern as the 2018 Global Peace Index ranked South Africa as one of the most violent countries in the world, ranked 38 out of 163 countries (RSA 2020). Depicting townships as violent (Jensen 2001; Lindegaard & Hendriksen 2005) is not a general characteristic (Maringira & Gibson 2019) because as insiders themselves (Kinnes 1995; Maringira & Gibson 2019) township dwellers typically stereotype townships as violent and risky. Responses to signs denoting violence were constructed around victim discourse, which is a common narrative in townships. Victim discourse depicts gangsters as the other, which is portrayed as the perpetrator. The otherness depicts power relations between the victim and the perpetrator. This relational identity of residents pitted against gangsters centres on power relations.

### Sexist and vulgar

In this category, the learners described profanity on the signs as typifying graffiti. The learners reported that signs frequently contain sexist slurs to describe women. They found sexually explicit language directed at women to be disturbing, as illustrated in signs such as *'Fuck Longview bitches'*, *'Son of a bitch'* and *'Jou ma se poes'* [your mother's private parts]. The learners described such lewd language as degrading women. When commenting on the signs *'I don't have a wife, feel free to come in'* and *'Leave your panties at the gate'*, one girl noted with disgust: 'They are written by sick men who think that women are their sex toys'. This comment suggests resistance to objectification and positioning of women as tools for sexual gratification. The learners were very critical of the profanity on the signs, which they considered a bad influence because they 'teach children to swear too much. They sing it [vulgarity] like an anthem'. By using the analogy of the national anthem, the learners view vulgar language as a common feature in their community's speech pattern. They interestingly suggested that the sign *'Fuck the Longview virgins'* emanates from a common myth in some African communities that 'sex with a virgin cures AIDS'. They also suggested that the obscene message *'Fuck ANC'* was directed at the ruling African National Congress party because 'people are angry about empty promises that ANC makes'. The learners concluded that obscene signs with sexist connotations were mostly 'directed at girls and women who men call bitches always'. The construction of community signs has an element of power dynamics, suggesting male dominance. Although the study was conducted before the gender-based violence (GBV) narrative gained much traction, the learners demonstrated a deep understanding of violence against women. This is summed in one group's comment: 'The writers of these messages are sick men who enjoy abusing girls and women'. In this era of widespread sexual violence, studies of power and masculinity seek to understand the processes through which these signs are culturally produced and reproduced (Larkan & Van Wyk 2014). Gender relations depict masculinity and the process through which women are constructed as gendered beings (Gibson & Hardon 2005; Hearn 2004). While much literature has pointed to conflicting aspects of masculine hegemony (Shefer et al. 2005; Spronk 2005), male learners in this study are found to behave contrary to gendered stereotypes depicted in the community signs and as such could be seen as examples of 'positive masculinity' (Shefer et al. 2005).

### Informative signs

In their analysis of signs in this category, the learners identified ideologies underlining their production and reflected critical understanding of their meaning. However, street names that the learners collected were deliberately excluded from this article to protect the identity of the research site. Only selected signs found to be interesting are presented in this section. These are signs such as *'Danger, gevaar, ingozi'*, found on an electricity meter box, which the learners found useful so that 'children won't play with electricity'. For example, when commenting on the sign *'Save*

*water drink beer*', one learner critically noted, 'I don't find this funny. It promotes alcoholism, which is a big problem in our community. And how alcoholics try to justify their habit'. The learners were critical of the alternative behaviour (Geller, Witmer & Tusso 1977) that the sign proposed as relatively inconvenient (Crump, Crossman & Nunes 1977). In contrast, the sign '*No alcohol sold to persons under 18*', found at a nightclub, was identified as 'trying to discourage us to drink'. In spite of the warning against selling beer to persons under 18, the learners revealed that in 'Longview most youngsters drink and buy beer from shops displaying this signs'. Reacting to the sign '*Club 925*', outside a nightclub, learners noted: 'This sign must read nine-to-five. It is written in SMS [short message service] language', which means the club is open from 9 pm until 5 am. In their analysis of another nightclub's name *Blue Magic*, the learners described it as an epitome of evil; as one learner put it 'There is nothing magical about the place. It's as dirty as Sodom and Gomorrah'. The use of biblical analogy emphasises the 'un-holiness' with which the club is perceived. The learners revealed that the club is popularly known as 'Blue movie', which depicts explicit sexual activity said to be a common occurrence at the club with 'strippers, drugs and people having sex'. Because of the perceived moral decadence in their community, the learners found useful messages in signs calling for safer sex, such as '*Safe sex saves lives*', found at a street corner. They said it is 'a useful message to us young people to practise safe sex always'. A related sign, '*Wise people condomise*', on the wall of a stadium, elicited the response: 'All the clever boys and girls use condoms every time they have sex with many partners'. This comment demonstrates the prevalence of casual sex among teenagers in this community. Another sign, '*Fools love flesh on flesh*', on the wall of a local stadium, produced the reaction: 'Everyone knows about Aids and only fools have sex without a condom'. The learners' comments regarding sex demonstrate their understanding of the spread of HIV and responsible sexual behaviour. The learners identified humour in a sign found at a public toilet: '*Gentlemen, your aim is important. Ladies, remain seated for the entire performance*'. They described the sign as a clever portrayal of how men and women relieve themselves, whose purpose is to warn people not to mess the toilet when drunk. Learners were fascinated by the imagery of theatre, '*remain seated for the entire performance*', which they described as enhancing meaning. One learner made an interesting observation: 'I think the sign was constructed by an irate toilet cleaner who was *gatvol*'. *Gatvol* is an Afrikaans expression meaning being 'fed up', which is commonly used in this predominantly Afrikaans-speaking community. In this analysis the learners demonstrate an ability to use an ensemble of modes for making meaning as a whole (Kress 2010). They found ambiguity in the sign '*Your hair cut while you wait*' humorous, as one learner jokingly remarked: 'Does it mean that at other saloons you leave your head and collect it afterwards?' Learners made interesting findings about signs found at *spazas*. *Spazas* are informal convenience grocery stores often operating from some residents' houses. Their close proximity to customers' homes makes them the bloodline of township life. Signs at *spaza* shops were found to be sending humorous

messages: '*No credit till 30 February*', '*Don't ask for credit, I'm also looking for one*', '*Mr Credit died yesterday*', and '*Mr Credit was killed by My Cash*'. To summarise the aim of these signs, the learners noted: 'He is trying to tell us that he does not sell for credit. He is right coz many Longview people can't pay because they don't work and some are crooks'.

Despite the inherent negativity in most signs, the learners found some signs bearing positive messages, which 'tell us where we are coming from' and portray 'Longview culture'. Importantly, these observations draw on semiotics in that signs are perceived as embedded within a community (Scollon & Scollon 2003). As Rowsell and Pahl (2007) point out, when this material culture is brought into classrooms and conceptualised as 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzalez et al. 2005), it supports literacy development. The learners identified 69 signs with positive messages, which suggests that the Longview community is concerned about addressing social problems such as preventing the spreading of HIV and AIDS. Although the learners perceived the sign '*hloma nge condom*' [insert with a condom] as obscene, they found the message appropriate in prompting behavioural change and promoting safer sex practices. The learners suggested that displaying the sign at a nightclub was appropriate because most drunk people were likely to engage in unprotected sex there. According to Geller, Winett and Everett (1982), signs displayed in close proximity to the point of action of particular behaviour are more effective because they specifically state the desired behaviour or describe alternative behaviours.

As data shows, themes emerging from the categorisation depict the learners' understanding of the purpose served by signs (reception) (Fairclough 1992). As Lankshear and Knobel (2003:10) remind us, 'the *critical* dimension involves awareness that all social practices, and thus all literacies, are socially constructed'. Thus, the learners' conception of how the signs are produced is informed by different township discourses such as crime and sexism. According to Gee (2014), discourse gives us multiple identities such as victim-perpetrator discourse depicted in this study.

## Residents' analysis of the signs

To inform the learners' understanding of the production and reception of the signs, they posed three questions in their interviews with selected residents of their township. Interviews with residents were an attempt to extract different opinions and understanding of the signs. The residents' responses presented in this section were guided by the questions posed to them.

### Question 1: What do you find interesting about signs found in your township?

According to some residents, signs just 'give directions'. An interesting response was: 'Signs are Longview culture'. This view is consistent with the social semiotic approach to representation and communication, which sees all modes as meaning-making systems integrally connected with social and cultural systems (Kress 2003). When asked what 'Longview culture' is, the learners made several interesting

suggestions. Some suggested that it had to do with language. Most suggestions hovered on the perceived culture of violence. An interesting suggestion was: 'It means the way we do things here'. Although this view seemed vague, it was thought-provoking and suggestive of the uniqueness of Longview. Although signs may be 'a window into the visual identity of the neighborhood' (Rahman & Mehta 2020:35), they may be 'culture' sensitive and likely to be better understood by insiders. For example, the signs '*Cut for the girls and grill for the boys*' and '*Cut for the girls and grill for the fucking ninjas*' could be understood within Longview context. According to the learners, 'cut' refers to a piece of meat, which is associated with South African *braai* (barbeque) culture. Accordingly, Van Leeuwen (2005) notes that 'semiotic resources' include semiotic modes such as language and everyday objects that carry cultural value and significance. In this approach, people express meaning through their selection of the semiotic resources that are available to them at a particular moment (Moro, Mortimer & Tiberghien 2019). Some responses in the study suggest that residents found the signs beneficial – 'They teach us young people to behave' – and offering valuable life lessons – 'I love the positive message like to condomise. Young people like us must protect ourselves from AIDS'. Some respondents found some signs useful in promoting literacy: 'Children learn to read'; as one respondent attested, 'I can understand them because they are written in Afrikaans and English'. The signs were perceived as valuable sources of information: 'We can see the prices at a spaza shop and buy happy'.

### Question 2: What disturbs you about them?

In their response to the above question, the residents expressed concern that 'Some signs give us a bad name' and 'They make our township dirty'. Similar to learners, the residents maintained that most signs depicted violence. Some of the prominent responses were 'They encourage people to kill others', 'Encourage us to be gangsters', 'They are written by gangsters', and 'Gangsters write to frighten us'. Of interest is one resident's view that 'Gangsters rule Longview' and even mark their territory. Similar to the learners' responses, the word 'gangster' also features prominently in the residents' responses. Associated with this perception is the element of social positioning. The rhetoric in Longview is detaching gangsters from the rest of the 'law-abiding' community. Close attention is paid to language use as one respondent noted that signs contain 'strong language and hate speech' and others identified gender disparity: 'Women are still discriminated', 'Men insult women'. One respondent was apprehensive that 'The signs teach our children bad manners', which underlines the key role of language as a tool for socialisation. Some respondents dismissed the signs as insignificant and useless 'graffiti'. Interestingly, the study established that some of the people in this community were unable to navigate the meaning of the signs because they could not read; as one resident noted, 'How will my grandmother get the message? She can't read'. Findings from my study show dominant English use in the signs, although Longview is a predominantly Afrikaans-speaking community,

### Question 3: What social issues are the signs portraying?

In response to the above question, one resident noted: 'They teach the rules of our township'. Ambiguity in this response suggested an unfixed signifier with possibilities for multiple meanings. The response sparked an interesting debate during class discussion as learners speculated about which rules the respondent was referring to. Most speculations centred on gangs warning people. Interestingly, the residents expressed sentiments similar to those of learners when commenting on crime: 'Gangsters rule Longview', 'No one is safe', 'Longview problems of crime and drugs' and 'They talk about crime in our township'. Although the residents' analysis does not focus on particular signs, their responses suggest an understanding of issues they portray, linked to the sociolinguistic context of their community.

## Discussion

Data shows that most signs identified by the learners are witty or erudite and even cheeky (Trinch & Snajdr 2016). Most signs are two-word or three-word texts, constructed on the principle of what Scollon and Scollon (2003:113) term 'low semiotic intrusion'. They mark the township with 'semiotic simplicity and textual brevity' (Trinch & Snajdr 2016:73). In this study the analysis of signs is confined to textual and linguistic features, excluding the multimodal nature of iconic signs, which could have provided a different angle of analysis. Multimodality (Kress 1997) as a framework for literacy enables the understanding that meaning can be expressed in different modes.

While trying to understand available meanings of community signs, the learners challenged their linguistic and literary prescriptivism. Such criticality enabled them to challenge the common narratives and beliefs inhabited in their community. As literate young people, the learners had no trouble reading and interpreting the meaning of the community signs. However, they found written signs exclusionary and inaccessible to a certain portion of their community that is unable to read English or cannot read at all. In contrast, an interesting observation emerging from the study is that 'everyone' in Longview knows street names: 'Though some of our parents can't read, they know the street names, even those in English'. As Trinch and Snajdr (2016) observe, people do not talk much about signs per se but often discuss and recount their experiences depicted in the signs.

As a 'window to the community', the signs in this study reflect the multilingual composition of Longview. They demonstrate the students' ability to work between different languages through a wide range of lexical and syntactical options (Cimasko & Shin 2017), which is a common feature in South African texts. Languages other than English, which frequently appear on some community signs, are usually translated into English. For example, '*Basop, beware*' is a mixture of Afrikaans and English, and '*Danger, gevaar, ingozi*' mixes English, Afrikaans and isiZulu. Research has found that texts in multiple languages are better understood within their multilingual contexts (Janks 2019). As Janks (2019)

points out, multilingual texts consisting of English, *tsotsitaal* (slang) and Afrikaans would be incomprehensible outside of South Africa. For example, *Basop loinja is fanakalo*, a pidgin mainly used in the mines of South Africa and neighbouring countries. It is primarily based on isiZulu, mixed with English and a little Afrikaans (Hurst 2018). The learners also identified derogatory ethnic terms such as *darkies*, *koolies*, *boesman*, which were written on public walls. These terms derogatorily refer to Black, Indian and Coloured people. The presence of such terms may signify ethnic intolerance, which the participants disputed. They revealed that in their community there is no malice associated with the terms because they are usually meant to tease each other. The witty acceptance of such terms suggests an accepting and peaceful coexistence of diverse ethno-linguistic groups depicting a blurred line of racial 'otherness in this community' (Smith & Eisenstein 2013:1). These literal and sincere multicultural identity references comply with Smith and Eisenstein's (2013) finding that residents living in a multi-ethnic neighbourhood use explicit ethnonyms to refer to one another.

## Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, the intervention project set out to discover how community signs could be used as a pedagogical tool for teaching learners to be critical readers. It also evaluated to what extent the learners were becoming critical readers. The project showed the tremendous impact that critical reading can have on learners' thinking. For example, the nature of the learners' responses suggests the beginning of a questioning attitude deriving from their awareness that language can be used to influence and manipulate people. The learners displayed a massive change in attitude by becoming affectively engaged with social issues in their community, in particular, and broader South Africa by developing skills to resist unjust discourses portrayed in the signs. The criticality with which the learners questioned the purpose that the signs serve suggests that they were developing critical reading skills for different purposes. This is the central goal of critical discourse analysis – trying to understand how a particular person or a group of people filter words, phrases, sentences, and images they encounter in any given text to construe the unique meaning of that text or interaction.

As critical readers, the learners were able to 'read between the signs' from around their township, an environment familiar to them. There is evidence that the learners were developing critical reading as they interrogated interplay between the construction and reception of the signs. They learnt not to accept 'obvious' statements in signs, while taking an assertive stand against the text's assumptions (Freebody 1992). Most importantly, the learners were able to recognise their potential to become agents of change who can take action against social injustice.

The intervention project created a learning space for reflective critical thought about language and society as

learners were reading and analysing the signs. This is consistent with a strong assertion that critical literacy awareness can be achieved with texts drawn from familiar contexts. Context is part of meaning that is communicated when reading texts. Reading that is done within a *context* 'conditions a reader's expectations and makes interpretations appear possible' (Janks 2010). It is recommended that teachers should be aware of the possibility of obliterating overt critical issues when familiar texts are presented for critical reading. As insiders, learners are likely to ignore or overlook what may seem 'common' to them, which outsiders may view from a different critical perspective. This is what (Gee 2014:89) describes as the 'figured worlds [...] that captures what is taken to be typical or normal [*which*] varies by context and by people's social and cultural group'. Different reading positions can be obtained from readers outside a particular context. As texts, community signs are socially constructed and located within a context that readers are likely to understand although they may not fully agree with their depiction. When using texts drawn on a familiar environment, teachers should recognise how learners relate to cultures, languages and social habits in the local literacies depicted in texts.

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R.S. is the sole author of this article.

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