

Enhancing Students' Engagement and Critical Thinking Skills in English Language Teaching: A Transformative Approach

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Abstract: The transition from high school to tertiary institutions always pose challenges to students. Students struggle with engagement because of lack of critical academic literacy skills. The aim of this study was to review two Academic Literacy modules offered to Education students with the intention to bring in engagement and develop critical thinking skills amongst students. The study adopted the qualitative explorative approach where two students (one registered for HACLO11/012 and one registered for HLLT021/022 modules) and two lecturers were interviewed. Students were interviewed on their perceptions towards the importance of the modules in their preparations for their academic studies and whether the tenets of social justice have been met in developing their academic reading skills. Lecturers were interviewed on their perceptions on the importance of the content in their modules. This was whether the content empowers students to develop the critical reading skills and the transformative learning needed for them to be fully engaged in their academic studies. The study found that although the two modules aimed at empowering students with critical thinking skills, they run short because the level 1 module is fused in within the computer literacy module. The critical thinking skills' aspects of the module are far less towards empowering students with social justice aspects that would contribute to transformed critical thinking and reading. Lecturers' reflections also indicated a lack of power in changing the content of the module as it will require the whole module review, which implies the review of the whole programme.

Keywords: Module Review, Social Justice, Critical thinking Skills

1. INTRODUCTION

Transition from high school to institutions of higher learning always poses some challenges to students, especially with academic reading. This study focused on developing students' academic reading skills as a vehicle towards bridging the transition from high school to tertiary institutions. It is through the development of critical reading skills that students are empowered to negotiate their way through academic texts prescribed (Younis, 2019; Olifant, Cekiso & Rautenbach, 2020).

The possession of academic reading skills is a vehicle to access knowledge in different academic programmes. Arifin (2020) argues that it is important to develop students' critical reading skills to enable them to access the wealth of information recorded exclusively in English texts. The development of critical reading skills will be an empowerment to students who are marginalised and underprepared for university studies because of their historical past (Oliveira, Lopes & Spear-Swerling, 2019, Boakye, 2017). Enhanced critical reading enables students to access higher knowledge due to the empowerment feature. In fact, critical reading, is part of critical thinking and critique that has inherent transformation opportunities. This will also be a strategy to bring in transformation and social justice in the teaching and learning at Higher institutions (Badat, 2009; Fujino, Gomez, Lezra, Lipsitz, Mitchell & Fonseca; Kavanagh & Danielson, 2020).

Definition of Critical Reading

Critical reading is defined as a high-level comprehension of written material requiring interpretation and evaluation skills that enable readers to separate important from unimportant information, distinguish between facts and opinions and determine a writer's purpose and tone. It also entails using reference to go beyond what is stated explicitly, filling in information gap and coming to logical conclusion (Liu, 2019, p.342). In agreement with the above, Millin and Millin

(2018) define academic reading (2002, p.2) as a complex, multi-level, and different from other kinds of reading which involves the reading of a range of lengthy academic texts.

Students find this type of reading particularly challenging as it involves the reading of complex texts from various disciplines. This form of reading has become complex to students as it requires certain skills which are not the same as in other ordinary reading settings. The process of academic reading serves as the basic for whatever learning taking place at universities (Millin & Millin, 2018).

Critical reading has its own peculiar demands. "In order to be academically literate, students should be able to make meaning from texts, extrapolate from texts app, distinguish between essential and nonessential information, among others" (Bokye,

& Mia, 2017, p.235). They are also expected to read and write in specific subject field. Therefore, the acquisition of the critical reading skills is crucial towards students' academic success. Critical reading is a component of critical thinking and together, they contribute towards fostering transformation in students learning.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT

The objective of this study was to review two Academic Literacy modules offered to students registered in the School of Education, with the intention to bring in engagement and develop critical thinking skills amongst students. The two modules under study were the academic literacy modules for all the first-year students (HACL011/012) and the second module is the Language of Learning and Teaching (HLLT021/022) module offered to all the level two students registered in the School of Education. These are the modules, which aim to empower students with the necessary critical reading skills for them to become competent critical educators for imparting the 21st Century Skills in our learners (Al-Busaidi & Tuzlukova, 2021).

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The study was informed by the change theory. The change theory puts emphasis on the transformation of education in making it accessible to all (Fullan, 2006). In the context of this study, the change theory, therefore, aims at bringing transformation in the first year of academic programmes to enhance students' access in their academic programmes. In addition to Fullan (2006)'s change theory, Freire (2000) 's critical pedagogy informed this study. The aspect is the transformatory notion of empowering students and capacitating lecturers with approaches to deal with social justice issues in their classes. The transformational approach in the way students are taught will lead to the development of critical thinking, hence the application of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy aims at bringing in radical approaches to education and change to status quo to empower and liberate the participants (Freire 2000). The review of the academic literacy module (HACL 011/012), and the Language of Learning and Teaching module (HLLT021/022), with the intention of developing their critical reading skills, will empower them (students) to be competent in tackling any reading demand on them. This is what first year students normally struggle with. This effect of change will bring the much-awaited social justice, as it aims at redressing the imbalances of the past. In critical reading, this would be enacted where students' voice as part of their ownership of their learning is promoted.

4. WHAT WAS DONE

The study aimed at getting responses for the question "how are the contents for these modules aligned with the transformative pedagogy values and social justice issues in education focussing on critical thinking skills?"

4.1 Methodology

The study adopted the qualitative explorative approach (Creswell, 2014) where two students (one registered for HACL011/012 and one registered for HLLT021/022 modules) and two lecturers were interviewed. The lectures are the ones offering these modules in their respective levels (level 1 and level 2). The HACL011/012 module is the one aimed at empowering students with the critical reading skills, which are pertinent in other modules offered in the school. This module is offered to all first-year students in the School of Education. These are students who are labelled as underprepared because of the weaknesses of the education system, which does not prepare them thoroughly for academic demands at tertiary institutions (Schreiber, Luescher & Moja, 2016).

4.2 Students' Interviews

Students were interviewed on their perceptions towards the importance of the modules in their preparations for their academic studies and whether the tenets of social justice (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016, Kavanagh & Danielson, 2020) have been met in developing their academic reading skills. Leibowitz and Bozalek (2016) 's tenets of participation parity that foster students' empowerment and practice-based learning may be infused in the modules (Kanavan & Donalson, 2020). This was done with the purpose of acknowledging students' voices in their learning and address the issues of social justice participatory change. Their inputs were incorporated into the development of the module content.

4.3 Lecturers' Interviews

Lecturers were interviewed on their perceptions on the importance of the content in their modules. This was whether the content empowers students to develop their critical reading skills and the transformative learning needed for them to be fully engaged in their academic studies. Lecturer's voices on what improvement can be brought on the module content were also sought. The researcher thought this would assist in re-curriculating the module content. Questions on whether they feel empowered in developing the content of the modules were also posed.

5. PROJECT OUTCOMES

The project had the following outcomes:

5.1 Marginalisation of Critical thinking skills

The study found that although the two modules aimed at empowering students with critical thinking and academic reading skills, there are challenges with the way these are structured. The content of HACL 011/012 is fused within the computer literacy module. This creates a problem for the lecturer, as he cannot fully engage students in critical reading skills. The critical thinking skills' aspects of the module are far less towards empowering students with social justice tenets, particularly students' voice and participation parity.

5.2 Hesitations in effecting change

The other findings from the project are that the lecturer responsible for HACL 011 does not have the power to effect changes in the content of the module. The theoretical framework of change empowers one to bring a change in the sphere of education. This change, which is expected, should enhance students' access to content knowledge in other modules and develop their critical thinking skills. The authorities are also hesitant in effecting the change in the module before the official re- curriculum period start.

5.3 Experiences of disempowerment by lecturers

Lecturers' reflections also indicated a lack of power or capacity in changing the content of the module, as it will require the whole module review, which implies the review of the whole programme. The marginalisation of voice is not only experienced by students, but lecturers as well. Lecturers indicate that students have challenges of transitioning from high school to tertiary, which the module is not able to address due to the limited content.

5.4 Students Reflections

Students reflected that the academic activities were pitched up at higher levels than their academic critical reading levels. This aligns with the Yeld (2008) and Cliff (2014)'s views on the underprepared of students admitted in the first year. Most of the first-year students struggle in adjusting to the academic activities. The content of the module is also a challenge as it is limited and does not empower them with the critical reading skill. The Academic Literacy module is more of computer literacy than academic literacy. Students also reflected on their lack of academic reading skills and lack of digital literacy skills, underdeveloped opportunities for meaningful democratic critical reflection in class.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations can be drawn from the findings of the study:

- Recommend Institutional drive towards embedding Critical Reading as 21stCentury skills with transformative potential.

- Enhancement of students' academic reading skills.
- Affording students opportunities to critically appreciate, synthesize and integrate knowledge in the modules in becoming critical scholars, in being innovative in solving problems through meaningful activities.
- The project suggests the integration of critical reading skills in all the modules offered at first year for new university students.
- Bringing in principles of social justice in making the content to be accessible to all students by equipping them with academic reading skills.
- Introducing transformative pedagogy: recognising students' voices in their studying and learning (meaningful critical participation and engagement).
- Introducing digital literacy skills in the first-year modules informed by flux pedagogy. This is about bring a in a mind set with teaching agility and radical growth (Ravitch, 2020).
- Empowering lecturers with radical approaches for teaching during crisis (COVID-19) and beyond.

7. CONCLUSION

The study presented the findings on the importance of critical reading skills in empowering students to access teaching and learning at institutions of higher learning. This should be developed in every module for the successful transition from high to tertiary intuitions. The development of these critical reading skills is therefore important to be fused in every first-year university programme.

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