



Critical Conversations as a Post-reading Strategy to Develop Critical Literacy in an EFL Context

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ABSTRACT. This paper reports the findings of a qualitative case study exploring how the integration of critical conversations as a post-reading strategy fosters critical literacy development among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in a Colombian private school. The study involved twenty-one tenth-grade students (B1 proficiency), who engaged with short stories addressing sociocultural issues through structured lesson plans. Emphasis was placed on post-reading tasks and discussions, such as role-switching, retelling stories from multiple perspectives, and problem-posing, to promote critical reflection. Data were collected via student artifacts (written and oral counter-narratives), audio-recorded commenting sessions, and a focus group interview. These data were analyzed using theory-informed thematic analysis, guided by the four-dimensional framework of critical literacy proposed by Lewison et al. (2002). The analysis traced students' development across these dimensions by examining their discourse and written work for evidence of disrupted commonplace assumptions, interrogation of multiple viewpoints, connection to sociopolitical issues, and

symbolic action through counter-narrative creation. Findings reveal that critical conversations fostered critical literacy by enabling students to move beyond superficial comprehension toward critical interpretations of global and local issues. Students demonstrated increased awareness of sociocultural power dynamics, as evidenced in their ability to question authorial intent, identify silenced voices, and link fictional narratives to real-world injustices. Furthermore, these conversations encouraged learners to extrapolate stories to their lived realities, fostering socio-cultural awareness, personal agency, and voice. This study underscores the pedagogical value of integrating critical literacy approaches into EFL curricula.

INTRODUCTION

In an era of globalization, language education is increasingly tasked with empowering learners as agents of social transformation, moving beyond instrumental skills to engage with issues of power and equity (Norris et al., 2012). Traditional literacy approaches that reduce reading and writing to analytical and grading metrics fail to address the idea that EFL pedagogy engages learners in reshaping and transforming their realities. This necessitates the reconceptualization of literacy as a contextualized social practice where texts become tools for constructing meaning-making and identity negotiation (Zhang, 2015), particularly in Colombia where EFL education has a dual challenge of meeting global economic demands while responding to local sociocultural inequalities (Mora, 2014; Le Gal, 2018).

The Colombian educational context reveals some recognition of critical pedagogy's role in addressing power, equity and justice (Prada et al., 2022), integrating with global scholarship by positioning critical literacy as "a necessary tool to discuss imperialism, equity, and social justice in language education" (Mora, 2014, p.16). When effectively implemented, critical literacy positions learners as active meaning-makers who challenge and interrogate sociocultural and political issues through English (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004), enabling them to simultaneously decode language while understanding their social reality, which means read the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Despite these theoretical foundations and pedagogical relevance, EFL classrooms often preserve traditional approaches to literacy. Reading and writing frequently remain tools for standardized assessment, even as research demonstrates that fostering critical literacy through reflective tasks demonstrably enhances language skills while encouraging learners to analyze, critique, and transform sociocultural and political texts (Bishop, 2014; Ciaderlo, 2004; Daly-Lesch, 2019; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004; Sultan

et al., 2017). As documented by Usma Wilches (2009), institutional plans and strategies risk marginalizing learners' experiences, voices and lived realities. Consequently, learners are seldom exposed to opportunities where they can fully create, analyze or communicate interpretations of their local and global context. This practice confines literacy to accuracy-focused tasks emphasizing fluency over critical engagement.

This systematic misconception of critical literacy as a mere assessment process is reinforced by key stakeholders such as teachers, policy makers and some institutions. As underscored by Mora (2014), while Colombia's language teaching community debates policy creation and implementation, critical literacy's integration into curricula remains underdeveloped. Consequently, critical literacy principles are noticeably absent in fundamental documents like the Basic Learning Rights (Ministerio de Educación Nacional [MEN], 2016) and the Basic Competences Standards in English (MEN, 2014). These frameworks emphasize individual skills (summarizing texts, producing medium-length texts, identifying main ideas, recognizing textual purposes, etc.) while omitting competencies that stimulate sociocultural and political critique or critical engagement. Therefore, this curricular gap is contradictory given literacy's inherent complexity.

Simultaneously, Colombian English teachers face external pressures from government, policymakers and the private sector to incorporate external ICTs and approaches, and to frame English instrumentally for global economic participation (Mora, 2014). This aligns with Le Gal's (2018) critique of Colombia's unhealthy dependency on external strategies, institutions and expertise. These pressures reduce reading and writing to systematized evaluation, which marginalizes critical literacy. However, resisting these forces is imperative: critical literacy works as essential lens, highlighted by Janks (2014) and Mora (2014), to reconceptualize language policies. This positions English as a tool for acting on local and global sociocultural issues, countering reductive assessment approaches.

This paper addresses these gaps by exploring critical conversations as a post-reading strategy to develop critical literacy among B1 (proficiency level) students in a Colombian private school. The research emerges from an evident void in EFL contexts: (1) the significant geographical imbalance, with studies concentrated in urban areas like Bogotá and Medellín, neglecting conflict-affected regions (Herrera-Molina & Portilla Quintero, 2021); (2) misconceptions of critical literacy practices and understudied pedagogical challenges, especially learners' barrier to analyze author positionality and binary thinking (Castaño-Roldán, 2021); and (3) systematic barriers report that EFL teachers have inadequate training in critical pedagogies despite their value (Becerra-Posada, 2024), while standardized assessment and

Eurocentric textbooks marginalize local epistemologies (Núñez-Pardo, 2020; Bastidas, 2017).

Grounded in Janks' (2014) critical literacy practice and Luke and Dooley's (2011) scheme of textual engagement as sociocultural and political participation that involves an understanding of how texts can be constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed to shape, challenge and change social and symbolic relationships, this qualitative case study intervened in an educational context where reading strategies and practices within an institutional Readers Project focused on long text and complex activities mislabeled as critical. The study utilized critical reflection and conversation tasks such as role-switching, juxtaposition, problem-posing, character substitution, etc., to transform post-reading discussions into moments where learners interrogate multiple viewpoints and promote social awareness (Lewison et al., 2002).

The study is guided by the central research question: How can critical conversations, employed as post-reading strategy, promote critical literacy development in a group of EFL learners? This inquiry operationalized three objectives: first, to analyze the processes and interactions through which critical conversations, as a post-reading strategy, facilitate critical literacy development; second, to promote sociocultural awareness by encouraging students to extrapolate narratives dealing with global and local issues to their immediate context and lived experiences; third, to create dialogic spaces that go beyond traditional textual analysis and stimulate active critical engagement. These objectives respond to the documented problem that Colombian EFL classrooms often reduce literacy to systematic assessment, neglecting critical spaces and dimensions despite evidence that strategies such as perspective-alternating, role-switching, and problem-posing enhance language skills while promoting sociocultural awareness.

In synthesizing these arguments, this study contributes to Colombian EFL scholarship by demonstrating how critical conversation and reflection tasks can disrupt reductionist literacy practice that emphasize linguistic accuracy and systematic assessment over critical engagement; employ post-reading discussions as opportunities to analyze power relations and inequalities; and transform EFL classrooms into spaces where learners use English to challenge, interrogate and intervene in their own social worlds.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CONCEPTUALIZING CRITICAL LITERACY IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Critical literacy represents a paradigm shift from traditional literacy practices. It moves beyond functional coding skills toward engaging with texts as tools of sociocultural and political analysis and potential transformation. While

definitions vary, its core principles consistently highlight the interrogation of power structures and the promotion of social justice.

Fundamentally, critical literacy is defined as the use of texts to analyze and transform relations of social, cultural and political power within individuals' realities (Luke & Dooley, 2009). This perspective rejects the notion of literacy as a neutral skill, framing it as a political act with material and social consequences, an idea that echoes Freire's (1970) link between literacy education and emancipation. It positions reading as an active and reflective activity that enables people to understand relationships of power, inequality and injustice relationships. Correspondingly, Vasquez et al. (2019) define it as a lens for examining sociocultural and political structures, power dynamics and discourses embedded in all texts to challenge ideologies and promote social justice.

Central to this concept is the rejection of textual neutrality. As Luke & Dooley (2009) emphasize, texts are "human technologies for representing and reshaping possible worlds" (p.1) rather than repositories of immutable wisdom. Consequently, critical literacy aims to enable learners to both critique existing texts and produce new ones that represent their cultural and community realities and interests by deconstructing and reconstructing social and semiotic relations (Luke & Dooley, 2009). Janks (2014) theorizes this focus as the critical relationship between language, power, and identity, arguing that texts carry hegemonic agendas requiring systematic deconstruction.

This necessitates pedagogical approaches that position learners as transformative agents rather than passive recipients of linguistic codes (Norris et al., 2012). Mora (2014) frames this as a social imperative in language education, recognizing critical literacy's value in fostering dialogue on justice, equity, and identity. Language itself is thus conceptualized as a social practice that promotes reflection and emancipatory action (Vasquez, 2019).

Beyond a set of classroom strategies, critical literacy is understood as a core orientation toward the world. Vasquez et al., (2019) frame it as "a way of being and doing" (p.300), an evolving set of analytical and interrogative practices that permeate daily life (Comber, 2015). It involves examining issues from multiple perspectives to analyze contradictions and imagine possibilities for improvement (Bishop, 2014). Therefore, it should not be reduced to and add-on but integrated as an essential part of the curriculum and classroom experience, embedded across contexts rather than confined to isolated units (Vasquez et al., 2013).

Integrating critical literacy into the curriculum functions as a lens enabling learners to analyze sociopolitical structures, power dynamics, and discourses to challenge hegemonic ideologies (Vasquez et al., 2019). This integration foregrounds three core principles pertinent to EFL contexts (Huang, 2011; Vasquez et al., 2019): (1) the non-neutrality of texts, which reflect power relations related to identity, race, gender, class, etc.; (2) the foundational concept of language as a social practice that promotes reflection and transformation; and (3) disruptive inquiry that interrogates marginalized viewpoints.

Collectively, these perspectives position critical literacy not as a singular methodology but as a dynamic, politically engaged framework focused on analyzing power and representation within and beyond texts. It empowers individuals to read their worlds critically, challenge dominant narratives, and use literacy for transformation. For effective curricular integration, Janks (2014) proposes five interconnected praxes: connecting to learners' lived experiences; enabling inquiry in social issues; analyzing textual practices; and imagining action possibilities for positive change. Grounded in this framework, the study approaches critical literacy as a pedagogical stance that explores the language-power connection, prompting learners to interrogate how language constructs social disparities and conceive equitable solutions, thereby promoting critical engagement with both the word and the world.

THE FOUR DIMENSIONS OF CRITICAL LITERACY

Critical literacy represents a transformative educational approach that reshapes traditional literacy instruction by encouraging learners to question the relationship between language and power, critique culture and media, and consider actions for promoting social justice. As Lewison et al. (2002) argue, it involves challenging the common place and interrogating the everyday world. Their four-dimensional framework provides a comprehensive model for integrating critical literacy into educational settings, comprising: (1) disrupting the common place, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action to promote social justice. This framework served as the foundational lens for designing the critical conversation tasks in this study.

DISRUPTING THE COMMON PLACE

This dimension involves moving beyond the presentation of literacy skills as neutral strategies, instead framing literacy as a sociocultural practice inherently concerned with power relations. It emphasizes critiquing popular culture, media, and language to unveil hidden biases and power dynamics (Lewison et al., 2014). The goal is to enable students to challenge assumptions and norms typically taken for granted in everyday texts and practices, thereby

encouraging them to interrogate how these elements shape perceptions, construct specific views of reality, and perpetuate dominant ideologies (Lewison et al., 2002).

In practice, this requires learners to deconstruct everyday texts such as news reports, advertisements, social media posts, or textbooks presenting contents from a single perspective, to examine how they position readers and shape worldviews. By problematizing these commonsense narratives, students develop a critical consciousness of how texts reinforce power structures and cultural conventions (Leland et al., 2021).

INTERROGATING MULTIPLE VIEWPOINTS

Grounded in the principle that a comprehensive understanding of any issue of text requires examining it from multiple perspectives, this dimension seeks to make differences visible and account for a wider range of human experiences beyond a single dominant narrative (Lee, 2012). It served as an essential guide for task design in this study, prompting students to explore both prominent and silenced voices within texts and issues they analyzed.

Operationally, it involves critical questions such as “Whose voices are heard?” and “Whose voices are missing?” thereby requiring the seeking out of marginalized or silenced perspectives. Lewison et al. (2002) highlight that this dimension enables students to analyze competing narratives and produce counter-narratives that challenge predominant discourses. Accordingly, in this study, the students constructed new story versions from different character perspectives, giving voice to traditionally overlooked positions.

FOCUSING ON SOCIOPOLITICAL ISSUES

This dimension is constructed on the core principle that literacy is not a neutral skill but a socially and politically situated practice, inevitably shaped by agendas that privilege certain groups while marginalizing others. Lee (2012) contends that literacy education which overlooks this inherent context is incomplete and misleading, as it fails to engage with power dynamics and viewpoints embedded within texts and discourses. This explicit focus on systems of power is what distinguished the texts, activities, and spaces promoted in this study from the superficially “critical” activities of the prior institutional Readers Project.

The dimension involves moving beyond personal interpretation to actively analyze the broader sociopolitical systems in which both texts and readers are situated. It foregrounds the connections between language use and the maintenance of power, thereby transforming literacy into a tool for engaged cultural citizenship and political action (Lewison et al., 2002). In line with this, in this study, the students were guided to analyze content dealing with global

and local sociopolitical issues to create counter-narratives that disrupted mainstream messages to construct more equitable discourses.

TAKING ACTION TO PROMOTE SOCIAL JUSTICE

This dimension is fundamentally centered on moving beyond critical awareness to enact change through literacies practices. Lee (2012) argues that such action does not solely equate to overt social or political activism, which can be daunting in educational settings. Instead, it encompasses transformative personal and pedagogical practices, such as reading resistantly, questioning textual assumptions, and communicating multiple perspectives. This represents a fundamental shift in one's habitual engagement with texts and the world. The goal is to model and cultivate the use of literacy as a tool to interrogate and begin transforming inequitable realities.

This dimension integrates and extends the understating gained from other aspects of critical literacy to inform its justice-oriented work. As Lewison et al. (2012) state, it involves using literacy to analyze and dismantle oppressive language practices, exercise power to enhance everyday life, and challenge unjust privilege. In line with this, the study emphasized the analysis of language and power by having participants examine how texts constructed social norms and privilege. They were then tasked with creating counter-narratives and resources to validate non-dominant linguistic identities, translating critical literacy analysis into tangible, transformative practice.

METHOD

This study was framed within qualitative research methodology, employing a case study design. The research approach aligns with Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) conception of qualitative inquiry as being concerned with how individuals construct meaning from experience within a specific social context. This methodology was selected to facilitate an in-depth exploration of how critical conversations foster critical literacy development and to understand the meaning-making processes evident in participants' narratives.

The case study design was intentionally chosen for its capacity to support an intensive, bounded investigation of a contemporary phenomenon in its real-world context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As Cresswell (2012) notes, a qualitative case study enables the detailed exploration of a specific case through rich, multi-source data collection. Grounded in these principles, this design provided the necessary depth to address the central research question: How can critical conversations, employed as a post-reading strategy, promote critical literacy development in a group of EFL learners?

CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

This study was conducted at a private high school in Sincelejo, Sucre, notable for its enhanced language program. The school partners with an external institution that implements communicative language strategies, including the Readers Program referenced in this study. It employed a purposive sample method, a qualitative strategy in which researchers intentionally choose a specific case or group that can provide relevant information to address the research questions (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). The selected case was an A1 (Advanced 1) class of twenty-one tenth-grade students, aged 14-15, from similar economic backgrounds, who had been enrolled at the institution since preschool, ensuring prolonged and consistent exposure to its English curriculum.

A key contextual factor was the school's termly Readers Program, implemented over 2-3 weeks using leveled books. While the program officially aimed to develop critical thinking, preliminary analysis revealed its pedagogy emphasized mechanical and literal comprehension. Tasks prioritized linguistic accuracy and fluency, lacking authentic pre-reading scaffolding opportunities for disruptive textual analysis, or multimodal engagement. Consequently, students were not guided to construct meaning, interrogate power structures, or explore silenced voices within texts, a practice aligning with Janks' (2010) concept of "linguistic tokenism."

This specific context informed the purposive sampling decision. The participants' combination of formal English proficiency (B1 level) and their documented lack of exposure to genuine critical literacy practices made this group an information-rich case for investigating whether structured critical conversations could effectively develop critical literacy skills.

DATA COLLECTION AND INSTRUMENTS

To gather comprehensive data for this qualitative case study, three primary instruments were employed: (1) student artifacts, (2) audio-reading commenting sessions, and (3) a final focus group interview. This triangulation of source was designed to provide rich, multifaceted insights into how critical conversations foster the development of critical literacy within an EFL context.

ARTIFACTS

Artifacts are material traces created by participants during a study, encompassing written, oral, visual and manual productions (Cresswell, 2012). In this research. Artifacts included the pre-reading and while reading worksheets completed by students, as well as the written and oral texts generated from the critical conversation and reflection tasks. These latter texts consisted of retold stories (counter-narratives) and analyses

produced through activities such as role-switching, juxtaposition, problem-posing and perspective-altering, serving as tangible evidence of students' meaning-making and critical engagement.

COMMENTING SESSIONS

The commenting sessions were structured, audio-recorded reflective discussions held at the end of key sessions. Moving beyond simple task evaluation, these sessions aimed to capture students' subjective experiences and personal perceptions of the critical literacy interventions. Guided by open-ended prompts (what surprised you most about this activity? How did discussing this issue make you feel?), the sessions generated data on task effectiveness, emerging critical literacy competencies, and students' affective responses. This instrument aligns with Gee's (2007) concept of "effective literacy", which validates learners' lived experiences as crucial data for understanding pedagogical impact.

FOCUS GROUP

Following the intervention phase, a 60-minute focus group interview was conducted with ten purposefully selected students. A focus group is a carefully planned discussion designed to elicit perceptions on a defined topic in a permissive, non-threatening environment (Krueger & Cassey, 2015). The semi-structured protocol centered on some key areas: (a) the perceived value of the sessions, (b) affective engagement, (c) pedagogical preferences, (d) content evaluation, and (e) memorable moments. This instrument was instrumental in generating rich qualitative data on the multidimensional impact of the intervention, capturing students' cognitive gains, emotional responses, and personal transformations.

DESCRIPTION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION

This qualitative case study explored how critical conversation tasks, embedded within regular classroom practice, fostered critical literacy development in an EFL context. The inquiry unfolded across three interconnected sessions centered on core literary texts, each following a consistent two-stage pedagogical sequence: (1) Reading Skill Development and (2) Critical Conversations. This design allowed students first to achieve textual comprehension (a core requirement of the Institutional Readers Program) before engaging in higher-order critical analysis, thereby scaffolding their journey from decoding language to decoding social realities. The focus was not on measuring the effects of a predetermined intervention but on understanding the processes and meaning-making that emerged as students participated in these dialogic activities.

The foundation of the inquiry was the in-depth study of three texts, each serving as a distinct anchor for exploring and extrapolating complex social

issues. *Billy Elliot*: explored gender norms, class struggle, and personal aspiration within the context of the UK Miner's strike. *Noughts & Crosses*: examined systematic racism, social segregation, and power structure in a fictional dystopia. *A Common Story of a Domestic Violence Survivor*: analyzed gender-based violence, legal injustice, and cultural oppression.

The exploration of each text followed a structured session framework divided into three moments: pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading. The pre-reading activities activated prior knowledge and built predictive skills using titles, sources, and thematic vocabulary. The while-reading activities employed strategic reading skills such as scanning, skimming and inferring to comprehend the texts; guided worksheets and graphic organizers allowed students to locate key information, extract evidence, and identify core themes. The post-reading activities focused on initial discussions, ensuring narrative and factual comprehension through summarization and literal question-answering, and establishing a common understanding of texts. The operation structure of each session, including the instructional stages, activities, readings skills, and critical literacy dimensions, is documented in Appendices A-C.

To disrupt singular interpretations and connect the texts' narratives to real-world sociopolitical discourses and varied representations, the sessions incorporated supplementary multimedia materials that enabled students to triangulate perspectives and 'read the world' alongside the word. For *Billy Elliot*, students viewed excerpts from films to ground the story in its actual political context; for *Noughts & Crosses* they watched some episodes of the television series and read some news articles on racial discrimination cases in Colombia; for the blog entry, students were introduced to other literary references such as *Homeless Bird* to deepen their understanding of the cultural context of gender oppression.

The core of the inquiry was the facilitation of critical conversations following the deep engagement with each text and its supplementary materials. This phase was designed to create conditions where passive comprehension could potentially transform into active critique and symbolic action. Critical reflection tasks (Lewison et al., 2002) provided a framework for structuring these dialogues, including:

(a) Switching and character substitution tasks enabled students to alter key elements of the narratives, for example gender in *Billy Elliot*, the race of the protagonist in *Noughts & Crosses* and the contextual setting of the survivor in the blog entry, thereby helping them interrogate how power dynamics are constructed and normalized.

(b) Juxtaposition and alternative text tasks enabled students to place the core texts' themes alongside news articles and create counter narratives from different cultural and political perspectives, which forced them to analyze the persistence and variation of similar issues (inequality, racism, prejudice) across different contexts.

(c) Multiple perspectives tasks required students to retell stories and scenes from the viewpoint of marginalized characters and to imagine dialogues between them from different texts.

Guided by open-ended prompts such as 'Whose voice is missing?' or 'How would this issue be viewed in your community?', students began to extrapolate the texts' contents to their own social and cultural realities. The conversations invited students to share their reactions, perceptions, opinions, and analyses of how themes such as discrimination, injustice, oppression, and identity manifested across different settings, and how these discussions informed their comprehension of their individual and social worlds. The underlying aim was to create conditions where English might be experienced not merely as a linguistic code but as a vehicle for critical dialogue, potentially enabling learners to envision more equitable relations.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected from students' artifacts, commenting sessions and the focus group were analyzed using Theory-Informed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), aligned with the four-dimensional framework proposed by Lewison et al. (2002). This method was selected for its flexibility and rigor in identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative dataset, and its harmony with the study's theoretical framework.

The analysis was carried out following a recursive six-phase process. First, all audio recordings were transcribed, and all written artifacts were reviewed repeatedly to achieve deep immersion in the data. Second, initial codes were generated across the dataset, focusing on moments where students identified power relations, interrogated textual assumptions, articulated marginalized perspectives, or extrapolated texts to their lived realities.

Third, codes were grouped into broader themes representing the process of critical literacy development, rather than single skills or tasks. These themes were informed deductively by the critical literacy dimensions that guided the design of the different critical conversation tasks, while remaining open to inductive insights emerging from students' discourse.

Fourth, themes were reviewed across data sources to ensure triangulation. Fifth, themes were defined and refined to register how critical conversations

functioned as mediational spaces for sociocultural awareness, agency, and voice construction. Finally, themes were woven into a coherent narrative, illustrated with vivid extracts from data such as written counter-narratives, student dialogues, focus group reflections, commenting session opinions to provide transparent evidence for the interpretive claims.

The following table illustrates how codes generated from the data were grouped into preliminary themes and ultimately refined into three main findings, framed within the four dimensions of critical literacy that informed the analysis.

Table 1 Thematic development from codes to findings

| Critical Literacy Dimension | Illustrative Data Codes | Preliminary Theme | Final Theme and Core Finding |
|------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Disrupting the common place. | -Gender-switching in narratives. -Racial re-imagination of characters. -Localizing story settings. -Shock at switched outcomes. | Deconstructing Normalized Readings through Perspective-Switching | Disrupting normalized readings through perspective-switching critical conversations Students disrupted stereotypical interpretations by reimagining texts through different gender, racial, and cultural lenses |
| Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints | Recognizing most present and missing voices. -Critiquing institutional power. -Analyzing authorial intent. -Connecting fictional power structures to local reality. | Interrogating Power and Marginalization in Texts and Context | Interrogating power, voice, and marginalization through problem-posing dialogue Students interrogated power relations by analyzing whose voices were privileged or silenced, linking texts to sociopolitical realities. |
| Focusing on Socio-political Issues | -Connecting text to police violence and state authority. | Connecting Text to Personal and | Connecting text, self, and society: critical literacy, |

| | | | |
|----------------------------------|---|--|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Articulating personal experiences of discrimination. Extrapolating gender inequality to family/sports contexts. -Judging social realities as unfair or oppressive. | Sociopolitical Realities | <p>agency, and affective engagement</p> <p>Students transformed reading into meaningful, critical practice by connecting narratives to their lives, fostering agency and engagement.</p> |
| Taking Action for Social Justice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Creating counter-narratives. -Using English to voice personal critique. -Participating in dialogues. -Expressing motivation to discuss silenced topics. | Empowerment and Affective Agency in Literacy Practices | <p>Integrated in themes 1, 2, and 3 as the result of creating counter-narratives that represent silenced voices and avoided content in traditional classes.</p> |

FINDINGS

DISRUPTING NORMALIZED READINGS THROUGH PERSPECTIVE-SWITCHING CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

One of the most salient findings of this study was how critical conversations structured around perspective-switching tasks created conditions for students to disrupt normalized and stereotypical discourses in texts. Through the three sessions, students move beyond literal meaning to question how race, culture, power relations and gender were socially constructed within and beyond narratives they read.

This process emerged during the first critical conversation based on Billy Elliot, where students engaged in different switching tasks involving race, setting, and gender. By imagining the protagonist as a girl, a black boy, and a Caribbean adolescent, students critically examined the social consequences of deviating from dominant norms. As one student highlighted “When I imagined

Billy Elliot as a girl, as a boy from the Caribbean region and as a Black boy, I could understand all the problems people have to face just because they want to be what they really are” (Student 1, Critical Conversation 1). This reflection exemplifies an emerging awareness of how identity categories shape lived experiences and access to social acceptance.

Students’ written artifacts demonstrated how perspective-switching fostered critical interrogation of sociocultural norms. For instance, one student retold the story relocating the protagonist in a Colombian Caribbean context, making emphasis on familiar and regional power structures:

Billy Eliot was a boy who lived in Soledad – Atlántico. He practiced soccer, but he did not like it. He wanted to be a tailor. His mother agreed on his decision, but unfortunately, she died. After his mother’s death, his father and grandfather found out Billy’s secret, and he was kicked out of the house, because they, especially his grandfather, thought he would end up being a girly man. (Student 9, Critical conversation 1)

This rewritten narrative illustrates how students did not merely create a new version of the story but reconstructed it through local sociocultural lens, presenting how patriarchal expectations and hegemonic masculinity operate within their local contexts. The student later justified this choice by explaining, “In these regions we still have many stereotypes and male family figures, especially grandfathers, that can be cruel to us” (Student 9, Students’ Comments). These reflections indicates a shift consuming texts as neutral stories to understanding them as representations embedded in power relations.

A similar pattern emerged during the third critical conversation, where students switched the female protagonist of a domestic violence testimony with a male character. This task generated what they described as “shocking” realization regarding gender privilege in some cultures. One student stated, “Our story was really short because in India men do not suffer as much as women do” (Student 4, Students’ comments), while another reflected, “I had not been aware of how dangerous traditions and culture can be for some groups of people, and that is what we understood when we placed a man as the protagonist” (Student 11, Students’ comments). These responses suggest how altering narrative perspectives can support students in interrogating naturalized assumptions about suffering, culture, and gender.

Focus group data further confirmed that perspective-switching tasks functioned as catalysts for deeper critical awareness. A group of students reflected on how viewing the same situations from multiple perspectives change their understanding of social issues:

When we were writing the stories, we noticed that there was no more to write about since we had a boy as a protagonist... We understood how complex this situation is because of culture and traditions. When we saw the three stories from different perspectives, we could understand all the problems people have to face, and now we are more aware of that. (Students 11, 8, and 4, Focus group)

Taken together these findings illustrate that critical conversations grounded in perspective-switching did not simply enhance engagement with the texts but supported students in disrupting common-sense interpretations, interrogate normalized inequalities, and recognize how power operates in racialized, gendered, and cultural discourses. This finding directly addresses the research objective of fostering critical literacy by positioning students not as passive readers but as meaning-makers capable of interrogating both textual and social realities.

INTERROGATING POWER, VOICE, AND MARGINALIZATION THROUGH PROBLEM-POSING DIALOGUE

A second finding concerns how problem-posing critical conversations created opportunities for students to question power relations and recognize silenced voices within texts and their sociopolitical contexts. This theme emerged strongly from dialogic data, particularly from the second session on Noughts & Crosses, and was triangulated through students' comments and focus group reflections.

Through guided dialogic questions such as "Whose voice is missing?", "Whose voice is most present?", and "Who might be disadvantaged by the text?", students moved beyond literal content to critically explore how inequality and authority were presented. When encouraged to identify hidden or implicit messages with the text, they articulated interpretations that extended far beyond superficial meaning by identifying themes such as "an alternative universe as a way of revenge from the author", "Black people as the real elite", and "Black people discriminating other black people" (Critical conversation 2). One student elaborated on this interpretation by stating:

"In the story white people are discriminated by Black ones, so that alternative universe is a way of revenge from the author... maybe she was discriminated in the past for being black, and the story is her revenge" (Student 5, Critical conversation 2).

These reflections suggest that students were not simply interpreting plot events but also were engaging with authorial positioning. This shift toward critical interpretation was identified by the students themselves, as one of them remarked, "We did not answer what you asked us, we went beyond, we thought more than you asked" (Student 2, Focus group).

The interpretation of voice became more pronounced when students responded to questions related to dominant and absent perspectives. Rather than locating individual characters, students conceptualized voices as abstract social forces. For instance, one student noted, “The most present voice is inequality and hatred... we live the same in our current society” (Student 20, Critical conversation 2), while another described it as “racism and inequality, a mix between them, since we can see how privileged classes rules the Blankers” (Student 4, critical conversation 2). On the other hand, students debated the nature of the missing voice, with some defining it as acceptance or respect, while others argued that “the missing voice is the one that defends white people, nobody defended them in the story” (Students 9, 11, 15, Critical conversation 2). This disagreement shows some level of critical reasoning, as students recognized how power determines whose perspectives are recognized or erased.

Furthermore, when students were asked to identify who might be disadvantaged by the text, they did not focus on fictional characters but connected the narrative to institutional power in their own context. Different participants identified the police as a disadvantaged group, not in a sympathetic sense, but as an institution criticized within the story. Students explicitly linked the story to experiences of violence and abuse of authority in Colombia:

“The police were disadvantaged because they were aggressive and unfair, they showed their true colors” (Student 8, Critical conversation 2). “When I read it, I could immediately relate it to all the unfair situations we live in Colombia because of them” (Student 3, Critical conversation 2).

The reflections illustrate how problem-posing questions operated as bridges between fiction and lived sociopolitical realities. This connection was reinforced when students were encouraged to juxtapose the text with real-world news articles addressing police violence. One student defined this triangulation as transformative: “I could connect four different realities: the story, the three articles we read, and our reality... the ones that are supposed to protect us violate our rights and mistreat us” (Student 11, Students’ comments).

Additionally, the focus group corroborated this, as students emphasized that the critical conversations enabled them to judge their sociocultural environment critically: “The different conversations we had here let me judge my reality and talk about those things that are unfair. We reflected on different perspectives and discussed social and cultural issues that affect us” (Student 4, Focus group).

Collectively, this theme suggests that problem-posing dialogue transformed reading into a political and ethical act for these students. Students came to recognize texts as sites where power is exercised, voices are privileged or marginalized, and social hierarchies are normalized. By questioning present and absent voices, students positioned themselves as critical readers capable of interrogating authority, connecting global narratives to local injustices, and identified and informed critiques of sociopolitical structures, which is a core objective of critical literacy development.

CONNECTING TEXT, SELF, AND SOCIETY: CRITICAL LITERACY, AGENCY, AND EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT

The third central theme concerns how critical conversations supported students in articulating literary texts to their personal lives and sociocultural realities, transforming reading into a space for agency, emotional engagement, and critical self-expression. This theme was powerfully presented across all data sources, highlighting a consistent student-perceived shift from abstract academic tasks to meaningful, lived literacy practices.

Students contrasted these experiences with previous institutional reading practices. One participant highlighted, "I was really interested in the connections we could make between the stories and our lives, which was not possible in the activities we did in the Readers Project" (Student 15, Students' comments). Similarly, another student made emphasis on the personal resonance and safety of the sessions, noting, "We could relate the stories to our lives, we saw ourselves in some characters as the victims... this was a safe place for us" (Student 11, Focus group). All these reflections suggest that critical conversations created dialogic spaces where students engaged with sensitive sociocultural and sociopolitical issues without fear of judgement.

This connection between text and lived experience was evident in the first critical conversation on *Billy Elliot*, when students were encouraged to retell the story by placing themselves as the protagonist. One student narrated her own experience of gender discrimination in sports:

...In this story Billy Elliot is me, a girl who practices softball, a girl who is good at it and a girl who has won many championships. However, this girl has been discriminated by his uncle, he thinks that this sport is not for girls, but for boys. He thinks that she looks like a tomboy, and he would like her to play another sport like tennis, a sport for girls. (Student 3, Critical conversation 1)

Through this retelling, the students transformed the fictional narrative into a tool for articulating personal experiences of marginalization. This illustrates how critical literacy practices enabled students to use English to narrate their own realities and reflect on the sociocultural forces shaping them. Other groups echoed this response, stating that "we described the issues like our

own issues" (Focus Group) and that listening to their classmates' stories was "a way of reflecting about how these problems affect everyone" (Student 11, Students' Comments).

Students also extrapolated textual content to their immediate social contexts, especially family and community dynamics. For instance, one student compared Billy's experience to gender inequality in Colombian sports and family discourses: "Billy playing ballet is like the girls from the Colombian soccer team... Billy's father is like my mom, she is always saying that girls who play soccer are manly" (Student 8, Critical conversation 1).

Similarly, during the discussion of Noughts & Crosses, students compared systematic oppression in the text to political and institutional realities in their city: "The crosses represent the government and authority of our country... people who promote injustice and mistreat those who fight for their rights" (Student 11, Critical conversation 2). These excerpts demonstrate how students moved beyond empathy toward critical judgement, employing texts as lenses to evaluate power relations within their own contextual realities.

Additionally, this process of connection and critical self-expression appeared alongside heightened engagement and motivation, a pattern evident in both session comments and focus group data. Students constantly described the critical conversations spaces as meaningful and emotionally engaging, especially because they were not limited to answering superficial questions. One student stated, "I really liked this session because I was not answering complex questions like we normally do but talking about my reality after reading an interesting story" (Student 16, Students' comments). Another noted, "It was meaningful to express how we felt... it was not just about answering literal questions" (Student 10, Focus group).

This engagement was not merely superficial; it appeared to emerge as students found themselves capable of addressing topics often silenced in other academic spaces. As one student stated, "It was a space where we could speak loudly about these situations that sometimes we cannot discuss in other classes" (Student 6, Students' Comments). Another student reinforced this idea by defining the sessions as empowering: "These activities made us express something that we are not capable of doing in other scenarios" (Student 7, Focus group).

In light of the above, critical conversations can be understood as having transformed reading activities into spaces of critical agency, sustained engagement, and emotional safety for these participants. By interconnecting texts to personal and collective experiences, students were motivated to participate, articulate their voices, and examine injustices affecting their lives. Engagement thus emerged not as isolated outcome but as an integral

component of critical literacy development, grounded on dialogue, relevance and the recognition of students' lived experiences as sources of knowledge and critique.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore how critical conversations, employed as a post-reading strategy, could foster critical literacy among EFL learners in a Colombian high school context. The findings suggest that planned dialogic tasks created conditions for students to move beyond superficial comprehension, positioning them as meaning-makers who questioned discourses, interconnected narratives to their lives, and engaged in transformative reading practices. This discussion interprets these findings within broader scholarship of critical literacy and language education, emphasizing how they confirm, extend and complicate theoretical and pedagogical frameworks.

The first finding illustrates that perspective-switching tasks functioned as vehicles that supported students in disrupting stereotypical and normalized discourses within texts. By reinventing characters across axes of gender, race, culture, and geography, students could deconstruct the "commonplace" assumptions embedded in narratives (Lewison et al., 2002). This practice aligns with Janks' (2014) conception of critical literacy as the deconstruction of how language and texts privilege certain identities while silenced others.

When students relocated Billy Elliot to the Colombian Caribbean, foregrounding patriarchal authority, they did not simply translate a story but reconstructed power relations through a local lens. This act of localized rewriting aligns with Luke and Dooley's (2011) view of texts as "human technologies" that can be reshaped to show different possible worlds. Students' reactions during gender-altering tasks illustrate how reconfiguring narrative viewpoints can bring hidden privilege to the surface, an observation that resonates with and extends the work of Wee et al. (2019) and Gómez and Gutiérrez (2019), who argue that exploring multiple perspectives is essential for unveiling socio-cultural dimensions that superficial readings miss. Therefore, this study offers a contribution to EFL critical literacy research by illustrating how this disruption was not just cognitive but also linguistic for these participants, as students leveraged their foreign language skills to articulate new critical interpretations.

The second finding suggests that problem-posing practices shifted reading from understanding into a sociopolitical act. Questions such as "Whose voice is missing?" guided students to analyze texts and sites of ideological struggle, moving them into the roles of "text critics" (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). Their identification of hidden messages and authorial intent demonstrates a

type of engagement with textual power that outperform standard EFL reading goals.

Students did not confine their critiques to the fictional characters or situations within texts; rather, they enacted the critical literacy dimension of focusing on sociopolitical issues (Lewison et al., 2002) by linking oppressive systems in the stories to the Colombian police and government. This act of extrapolation, guided by juxtaposition with news articles, exemplifies Freire's (1970) praxis of connection the "word" to the "world". This finding resonates with the conclusions of Chambers and Radbourne (2015) and Sultan et al. (2017) regarding the potential of problem-posing practices for fostering deep inquiry. The contribution of this study lies in documenting how EFL learners, when given discursive tools, can enact a form of global critique by connecting narratives to their local context.

The third finding highlights that critical conversations were meaningful for participants in part because they created a personally relevant and emotionally safe dialogic space. Students persistently contrasted the meaningful engagement they experienced and felt in these discussions with the decontextualized practices of the institutional Readers Project. This emphasizes a fundamental principle of critical pedagogy: learning is grounded in the lived experiences of students (Freire & Macedo, 1987). When students shared their own experiences of discrimination through the character of Billy Elliot, they were using English not just for communication, but for critical self-expression and agency.

This process of connection appeared to foster both motivation and more critical discourse, aligning with Norris et al.'s (2012) claim that learners need to see themselves reflected in curricular materials. Rather than being a superficial outcome, this heightened engagement functioned as a core component of literacy development, as students felt empowered to voice their opinions on topics often avoided and silenced elsewhere. This aligns with the definition that Vasquez et al. (2019) proposed for critical literacy as a way of being and doing. Furthermore, it supports findings by Huang (2011) and Caetano (2020) that critical literacy pedagogies can enhance sociopolitical awareness, which is illustrated in this study by describing how the affective and agential dimensions of learning are inseparable from the development of critical literacy, where the "safe place" was a prerequisite for critical risk-taking in a foreign language.

Collectively, these findings offer compelling evidence for the potential of integrating critical conversations into EFL curricula. They illustrate that students in this context engaged in disrupting commonplace interpretations, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action through the creation of counternarratives, demonstrating the

possibilities for such practices even within the constraints of an EFL classroom.

CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to examine how critical conversations, as a post-reading strategy, can promote critical literacy among EFL learners in a Colombian high school. The analysis, guided by the four-dimensional framework proposed by Lewison et al. (2002), reveals three interconnected outcomes that collectively present the pedagogical value of dialogic, critically oriented tasks that enable students to move beyond literal comprehension toward sociocultural critique and agency.

First, perspective-switching tasks enabled students to disrupt normalized reading of texts. By creating and remaining characters across racial, geographical and gender lines, students could deconstruct stereotypical narratives and analyze how power operates within discourses. This demonstrates the operationalization of disrupting the common place in an EFL context, confirming that activities such as character substitution, switching exercises, and localized rewriting are effective for developing critical awareness.

Second, problem-posing tasks and dialogues transformed superficial reading activities into sociopolitical practices. Questions about marginalization, voice, and power guided students to interrogate ideologies and connect narratives to real-world injustices such as relating systematic racism in *Nought & Crosses* to local and national experiences of police violence. This reflects the critical literacy dimensions of focusing on sociopolitical issues and taking action, presenting how EFL learners can use English as vehicle for ethical critique.

Third, critical conversations connected texts to students' lives and realities, fostering affective engagement and personal agency. The dialogic space was constantly defined as a "safe place" where students could voice experiences often silenced in traditional classes or literary experiences. This underscores the principle that literacy is rooted in lived experiences and highlights how motivation and critical development are mutually reinforced in EFL settings.

All these findings offer a replicable pedagogical model for integrating critical literacy into EFL spaces, particularly in settings like Colombia where critical approaches remain underdeveloped in official policies (Mora, 2014). Key considerations include selecting socially appropriate texts, scaffolding activities and tasks from reading comprehension to critique, and creating dialogic spaces that legitimize student voice. While this study is limited by its case design, future research could explore longitudinal impacts in EFL

contexts, implementation in public institutions, or the role of teacher preparation in supporting critical dialogues.

To conclude, this study demonstrates that critical conversations are not simply an auxiliary strategy but a transformative orientation. By embedding critical literacy and its principles into post-reading activities, EFL education can empower learners to use English not only as linguistic codes but as a critical vehicle for questions, reading, and engaging with their world.

Appendix A

Implementation summary of session 1 (Billy Elliot)

| Stage | Phase/Task | Description | Reading Skills / Critical Literacy Dimensions |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|---|--|
| Stage 1: Reading Engagement | Pre-reading | <p>Prediction: Students analyzed the book cover and answered questions about the protagonist (age, appearance, activities).</p> <p>Contextualization: images of coal mines/miners were introduced. Guided discussion on the socio-economic impact of mine closures.</p> | Reading Skills: Predictive skills, activating prior knowledge, and contextual analysis. |
| | While-reading | <p>Paired Reading: Students read the story in pairs, segmented into chapter sets (1-3, 4-6).</p> <p>Strategy Worksheets: For each set, students completed targeted exercises ("Who said that?", error correction) to practice scanning and skimming for detail.</p> | Reading Skills: Scanning and skimming for specific information, detail identification, and sequential comprehension. |
| | Post-reading | <p>Role-Play Interview: In pairs, students conducted an interview where one was a TV host and the</p> | Reading Skills: Integration of literal, inferential, and critical comprehension through summarization, |

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| | | other was Billy Elliot, answering questions about his life, challenges, and feelings. | interpretation, and evaluation. |
| Stage 2: Critical Conversations | Switching Task | (1) Gender Switch: "What if Billy were a girl who wanted to box?" (2) Setting Switch: "What if Billy's family was a traditional Caribbean family in Colombia?" (3) Race/Time Switch: "What if Billy were a Black boy in Thatcher's UK or a Venezuelan immigrant in Colombia?" Groups brainstormed, created new narratives, and presented them to the class for discussion. | (1) Disrupting the Commonplace: Challenging norms of gender, regional identity, and nationality. (2) Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints: Seeking perspectives of girls in sports, costeño teens, immigrants. (3) Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues: Analyzing patriarchy, machismo, racism, xenophobia). (4) Taking Action & Promoting Social Justice: The act of creating and sharing counter-narratives constitutes transformative textual agency. |

Appendix B

Implementation summary of session 2 (Noughts & Crosses)

| Stage | Phase/Task | Description | Reading Skills / Critical Literacy Dimensions |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|---|--|
| Stage 1: Reading Engagement | Pre-reading | Predictive Questioning: Students analyzed a drawing of the noughts and crosses game and a key quote from the text. They answered guiding questions to predict themes. | Reading Skills: Predictive questioning, thematic analysis, and hypothesis generation based on paratextual elements (title, symbols, quotes). |
| | While-reading | Paired Reading: For each chapter set, students completed targeted | Reading Skills: Scanning and skimming for specific information, detail |

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| | | exercises (identifying right/wrong information, matching speakers to quotes) to practice scanning and skimming for detail and plot comprehension. | verification, and tracking narrative progression and character roles. |
| | Post-reading | Guided Discussion: A final conversation connected the story's themes to broader social issues (prejudice, religion, nationality, class) and students' personal experiences. | Reading Skills: Making inferences based on textual evidence and integrating thematic understanding into broader sociocultural reflection. |
| Stage 2: Critical Conversations | Problem Posing Task | <p>(1) Uncovering hidden texts: Students created two lists distinguishing evident and hidden controversial topics within the text.</p> <p>(2) Juxtaposing fiction with reality: Students skimmed three real-world news articles (on racial murder and police violence) to identify parallels with the novel's themes.</p> <p>(3) Guided problematization: Whose voice is the most present/missing in the text? Who might be disadvantaged by the text? How can we use this text to promote equity? This dialogic process positioned the text as a catalyst for critical reflection and social justice-oriented action.</p> | <p>(1) Disrupting the Commonplace: Challenging superficial readings by uncovering hidden, controversial themes within a familiar genre.</p> <p>(2) Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints: Analyzing whose voice is most present vs. missing in the text and in the real-world parallels.</p> <p>(3) Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues: Directly connecting fictional narrative to systemic, real-world issues of racism, state violence, and injustice across international and local contexts.</p> <p>(4) Taking Action & Promoting Social Justice: Discussing how a literary text can be leveraged to inspire transformative thought and dialogue toward justice.</p> |

Appendix C

Implementation summary of session 3 (A common story of a Domestic Violence Survivor)

| Stage | Phase/Task | Description | Reading Skills / Critical Literacy Dimensions |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Stage 1: Reading Engagement | Pre-reading | Prediction & Activation: Students brainstormed predictions based on the source (Women's Web) using a branches chart and activated prior knowledge via a K-W-L-H chart (K-What I Know, W-What I Want to know). | Reading Skills: Predicting content based on source, activating and organizing prior knowledge. |
| | While-reading | Evidence-Based Reading: Students read the non-fiction testimony in pairs, actively extracting and annotating textual evidence related to pre-defined themes: violence, sexism, poverty, and dangerous traditions. | Reading Skills: Close reading for thematic evidence and analytical annotation. |
| | Post-reading | Research & Contrast: Students completed the K-W-L-H chart, conducted brief research on their questions (marital rape laws), and held a discussion to contrast the testimony with information. | Reading Skills: Synthesizing information, conducting supplementary research, and contrasting narrative with reality. |
| Stage 2: Critical Conversations | Character Substitution & Alternative Text Task | Gender Substitution - Privilege Analysis: Students were given a summary of another text (Homeless Bird) about child marriage. Their task was to substitute the female protagonists from both stories with a male character and create a new narrative. This was followed by a guided conversation analyzing the drastic changes in plot, societal reaction, and outcome, directly interrogating male privilege and systemic gender bias in different cultural contexts. | (1) Disrupting the Commonplace: Directly challenges fatalistic and ethnocentric readings of gender-based violence by altering the protagonist's gender and cultural context, revealing the social, not natural construction of oppression. (2) Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints: Systematically explores the same situation from the missing viewpoints of a man (to expose privilege), a woman from a different culture (to challenge stereotypes), and an empowered |

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| | | <p>Cross-Cultural Substitution - Empowering Perspectives: Students then engaged in a more complex substitution: re-imagining the original survivor's story (a) with a woman from Latin America and (b) with an empowered woman role model of their choice. Guided by critical questions such as "to what extent would a Latin American woman tolerate this mistreatment?", "How would authorities intervene?", they crafted and presented two alternative narratives. The final discussion focused on comparing the role of cultural factors, legal frameworks, and personal agency in shaping the possibilities for resistance and justice across the three different scenarios (Indian, Latin American, Empowered).</p> | <p>woman (to imagine agency). (3) Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues: Centers the analysis on the intersection of sociopolitical systems: patriarchal norms, discriminatory legal frameworks (marital rape laws), negligent institutions, and cultural traditions that enable violence. (4) Taking Action & Promoting Social Justice: The act of creating and presenting counter-narratives is a form of symbolic action. It uses literacy to reclaim agency, envision resistant identities, and articulate pathways to justice, transforming students from passive readers into active creators of equitable possibilities.</p> |
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