ENGAGING WITH TEXT: USING DIALOGUE JOURNALS TO PROMOTE READING LITERACY

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Abstract

Encouraging learners to read remains a challenge to teachers the world over, and using innovative practice holds value. This paper provides a discussion of an extensive reading programme implemented at a school in Swaziland, Africa as an attempt to encourage learners to read, as well as to reflect on what they read. The study, through the use of dialogue journals and focus group interviews, explicates a relationship between reading and writing: that learners read and wrote more extensively than they normally did, and that they engaged more critically with the texts by making reflective connections to the self (lived experience), and broader societal issues.

Key Words: Literacy, reading, literacy as social practice, critical pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, several studies made by researchers concerned with quality of education have added depth to our understanding of achievement in primary school in South Africa and its surrounds (Fleisch, 2008: 3-4). Fleisch (2008) observes that children from formerly disadvantaged primary schools complete their schooling without being able to read fluently in their school's instructional language in contrast to the children from predominantly black and white middle class families who attend relatively well-resourced schools. In terms of academic achievement these children become proficient readers by the end of primary school. Fleisch contends that reading achievement is constrained by health and nutrition and it is conditioned by the degree of alignment between children's language repertoire and the language of schooling and further influenced by the families' literacy practices. He argues that higher reading achievement is possible if books and other reading material are widely distributed and easily accessible both in and out of schools. Above all reading achievement is determined by what teachers and learners do in school classrooms and how well they are taught how to read is itself determined by a number of factors: they depend on teachers' views of their learners' capabilities and teachers' understanding of what the official curriculum requires of them.

The nature of literacy is rapidly changing, yet one of the most important traits for teachers and parents try to instill in children is the love of reading. However, this is neither a simple nor a straight-forward task, and both teachers and parents may be heard complaining that a child who loved reading has suddenly lost all interest in doing so. One of the reasons for the lack of up-take in reading could be because learners do not sufficiently engage with the texts they read. Reading is a highly socialised activity, and schools are certainly agents of social change. Therefore it is important that learners be encouraged to read with meaning, and to engage critically with the texts they read.

The ideological model of literacy (Barton, 1994; Street, 1984) concentrates on specific social practices of reading and writing. The model recognizes the ideological and culturally-embedded nature of such social practices, and highlights the pivotal role of the socialization process in the construction of the meaning of literacy.

AIM, RATIONALE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main aim of this paper is to examine how a group of Grade 7 learners in an English classroom in Swaziland reflected and responded critically, in writing, on texts they read during an extensive reading programme. In fulfilling the aim, the authors examine what learners draw on from their personal experiences and social lives when they read.

The study sought to explore two main issues, namely: how do learners respond and reflect critically on what they read in an extensive reading programme, and what do learners draw on from their personal lived experiences and social lives when they read?

The rationale for the focus in this paper is that in many schools in Swaziland, extensive reading is not considered an integral part of the English curriculum, and often learners are certainly not encouraged to engage with texts on a critical level. The focus tends to be on intensive reading programmes, assessment, and grading. However, it was observed that a significant number of learners encounter reading and writing problems, not only at primary level, but as they enter the secondary phase as well. Learners also disassociate reading from writing, viewing them as separate activities, unlike the views of theorists in the field, such as Kroll (1990), Krashen (1993), Spivey and King (1994), Tsang (1996), among others, who consider these inter-connected activities.

The study was therefore prompted by the following questions: How do learners respond to and reflect critically on what they read? And what do learners draw on from their personal experiences and social lives when they read?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The paper draws on literature and theories from the following main areas of study: critical pedagogy, literacy as social practice, extensive reading, as well as selected reading theories.

Critical pedagogy: a brief overview

This paper is located within an overarching framework of critical pedagogy and literacy as social practice. Critical pedagogy is endorsed by Paulo Freire who advocates learners' ability to think critically about their education. Freirian notions support them in exploring and making connections between their problems and experiences and the social contexts in which they are embedded. At the essence of critical pedagogy are notions of liberation and transformation as reflected by changes in society, thus the importance of conscientization. These changes are reflected in language because language plays a vital role in all forms of social change. Language, however, is never neutral, and we are constantly constructed by and positioned through language.

The field of language teaching that focuses on the relationship between language and social power is called critical language awareness (CLA). Taking into account the relationship between language and social power when reading or writing a text, CLA can help us understand the relationship between language and power by showing how spoken and written texts are constructed from a range of possible language choices, and how or why writers and speakers choose one word or structure as opposed to another. These choices affect the way in which individuals are defined or positioned, especially by those who have social power. Advocates of critical pedagogy are therefore aware of the impact of social, political, and economic injustices in society, and explore how these influence classroom life.

Literacy as social practice

To examine reader engagement with texts, the concept 'literacy' needs some deconstruction. Traditionally, literacy is taken to refer to reading and writing. Gee (1996) argues that this view situates literacy in the individual, rather than in society. Street (1984) and others therefore view literacy as social practice and conceptions of reading and writing (page 1). Thus he presents two models of literacy: the autonomous and

ideological models (1984, 1985). The autonomous model is based primarily on a single direction in which literacy development can be traced, and associates literacy with progress, civilization, individual liberty and social mobility. Gee (1996) contests that it is a fallacy to assume that literacy on its own guarantees social mobility and the like, but it is effective in conjunction with historical factors and social practices. Gee (1996) and Barton (1994), among others, argue that literacy cannot be removed from social practices, hence the focus on the ideological model. Which focuses on specific social practices of reading and writing. The model recognizes the ideological and embedded nature of social practices such as reading and writing, and plays a pivotal role in the socialization process and the construction of meaning.

Literacy traditionally means the ability to read and write. This definition of literacy is variously depicted as 'mainstream' by Heath (1983), 'schooled' by Street and Street (1995) or 'official' by Dyson (1997). However, it is very difficult to find a single and definite definition for 'literacy'. Theorists, such as Street (1998) and Blackledge (2000), started to question whether literacy is the same for everyone or there can be co-existent literacies; whether literacy can be learnt only at school or it is also learnt in students' homes and communities, what role the literacy plays in societies where there are unequal relations of power between different groups (in the case of this project, immigrant families). Thus theorists, such as Street (1998), Gee (1996), Heath (1983), started to take a sociocultural perspective of literacy, "challenging approaches which emphasize decontextualized basic skills" (Stephens, 2000: 10).

The notion of literacy as social practice is shared by Street (1998) and Barton, Hamilton and Ivanič (2000). The concept of literacy as social practice sees literacy not only as technical skills to be learnt at formal education institutions but as social practices that come about in everyday (Stephens, 2000: 10). Similarly, according to Street, literacy happens "naturally in social life, taking account of the context and their different meanings for different cultural groups" (2003: 79). Since we cannot diminish social practices to only one action to be learnt, literacy also cannot have only one form; and it changes according to social and cultural contexts in which people find themselves. Therefore, the concept of literacy as social practice displays a move from literacy being an individual quality to probing ways in which people in groups and communities use literacy. In other words, literacy practices are parts of larger social activities.

Extensive reading

Extensive reading (ER) as defined by Davis (1995), is a supplementary class library scheme, attached to an English course, in which learners are given the time, encouragement, and materials to read pleasurably, at their own level, as many books as they can without the pressures of testing and marks" (1995: 329). The focus is meaning, rather than language (Carrell and Carson, 1997). General principles include: self-selection of reading materials, variety of reading materials, material interesting to the learner, minimal use of dictionaries, freedom to stop reading if interest wanes (Day and Bamford, 1998, Bell, 1998).

The benefits, according to Renandya and Jacobs (2002: 298) include: spelling, vocab, grammar, text structure; knowledge of the world; improve R and W skills; enjoyment; positive attitude; reading habit; comprehensible input.

Schema theory

Schema is the background knowledge and experiences readers bring to texts. Readers draw on prior knowledge and experience to help them understand what they are reading, and use that information (schema) to make connections. Harvey and Goudvis (2000) suggest that by teaching learners how to connect to the text they are better able to understand what they are reading. They use Keene and Zimmerman's (1997) strategy to make connections to help learners understand texts. They categorise these connections as follows:

- Text-to-self
- Text-to-text
- Text-to-world

In the text-to-self connection readers make highly personal connections between reading materials and their own life experiences. The text-to-text connection helps readers gain insight from the reading, by thinking about

how the information relates to other texts. The arger connections that readers bring to the texts that go far beyond personal experiences and into the ideas we have about how the world works are the text-to-world connections. These connections we make through what we have learnt through television, movies, magazines and the Internet.

THE STUDY: RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative case study, the aim of which is to examine the reading and text engagement of learners at a Swazi primary school using data collection methods such as interviews and dialogue journals. Interviewing is a valuable source to access the participants' views. The main purpose of an interview, according to Henning , is "to bring to our attention what individuals think, feel and do and what they have to say" (2004: 52) about their experiences and opinions. In this regard, both focus group interviews and individual interviews were conducted. Focus group interviews are beneficial to encourage debate and discussion among the participants, while individual interviews give the participants more privacy and freedom to express what they really think. The interviews were voice recorded and transcribed.

Dialogue journal writing is a written conversation in which learners and their teacher communicate (Peyton, undated). The learners write to their teachers and the teacher responds. Either of the two may initiate conversation. Peyton (undated, pp.1) says that learners and teacher become engaged in meaningful, non-threatening dialogue through the written page". The journals also encourage learners to become reflective readers, and give them multiple authentic writing opportunities (Huddleston, 1988). They further provide learners avenues for conversational exchange and engagement with teachers.

The journals allow teachers to respond personally to the learners. However, Atwell (1984) warns that teachers should limit their personal responses to learners. In accordance with this view, Toby Fuliwer's (1987) guidelines on the uses of dialogue journals and teacher responses was used in this project, that is, the journals were not used to test reading and writing, rather they were strictly used by learners to respond and reflect on their reading.

Site and participants
The research site is Melbrook Primary School (pseudonym) in Swaziland. The school, which is located among the rolling green hills of Swaziland is a co-educational government school where about 90% of the learners are Swazi, while the remaining learners are from other regions throughout Africa. English is taught as a second or additional language. English is also the medium of instruction. The policy of the school stipulates that reading is an integral part of the English curriculum. It has a well-resourced library and computer laboratory through donor funding. The school is considered one of the best in the country according to the academic performance of the Grade 7 learners in the external examinations set by the Exams Council of Swaziland. The learners are from different socio economic and socio cultural backgrounds.

The seven participants of the study were Grade 7 learners, ranging in age from twelve to fourteen, and self-selected into the programme. Two were male and five female.

Implementation of the programme
The extensive reading (ER) programme was implemented over four months. Participants were required to read three to five books during this period (or more if they wished). Time-tabled reading and library periods were used. The table below reflects the books read by the participants:

Table 1: Books read

Thandi	High heels and hijack (N. Nalam)	Through the looking glass (L. Carroll	Arthur's mystery story (M. Brown)	So little time (A and MK Olsen)	David Copperfield (C. Dickens)	Otherwise known as Sheila the Great (J. Blume)	Loverboy (P. Williams)
Tina	Ten emalangeni and a yellow dress (G. Ngwenya)	Stranger danger (S. Donnelly)	The bad dream I had				
Vuvu	What could go wrong? (W.D. Roberts	The story of Solomon's ring (P. Anderson)	The Aztec temple (A. Wood)				
Bob	Henry and Mudge in puddle trouble (C. Rylandt)	On the road to the north (S. McCullagh)	Watchers in the yard (S. McCullah)	Joseph and the coat of many colours (D. Campbell-Todd)	Dunc's Halloween (G. Paulsen)	Goosebumps: Say cheese and die (R.L. Stine)	
Mvula	The white wolf (S.McCullagh)	Friends forever (A. Basby)	Madiba (L.J. Maxin)	Joseph Jenkins Roberts (J. Milsome)	A visit to the maritimes (J. Boubuffe)	Fancy that (J. oldfield)	Kagiso meets the music maker (L. Protenhauer)
Zoe	Dakota of the white flats (P. Ridley)	Double Fudge (J. Blume)	The naughtiest girl wants to win	The street detectives (J. Fork)	James and the giant peach (R. Dahl)		
Lue	Preface (M. Liebeson)	Listening to the lama	The plague at my door	Otherwise known as Sheila the great (J. Blume)	The Jamton stories (S. Banda)		

Ethical considerations

Permission letters were sent to the School Governing Body and principal. Participants' parents were also sent letters of consent. Learners were voluntary participants, and were able to withdraw from the study at any time should they so wish. Permission was also obtained for recording interviews with learners.

Analytical framework

Journals were collected and entries were coded into broad categories, such as HiV, crime, heroes. Keene and Zimmerman's (1997) text-to-self and text-to-world were also used as broad categories.

FINDINGS

Text-to-self

This section deals with the personal connections that a reader makes between a text and his/her own life experiences (Keene and Zimmerman, 1997). Specific themes include HIV/Aids and homosexuality and homophobia.

Deconstructing HIV/Aids

HIV/Aids appeared as a major theme in many of the learners' journals, indicating their grave concern about the pandemic. Zoe said "Aids is something that affects all of us. We have seen it with our neighbours, relatives and friends relatives" (interview). The statement shows that Zoe, and possibly other learners as well have personal experience of the pandemic and regard Aids as a communal problem.

After reading the book "A plague at my door," Lue made the following observation in her journal "Aids is a plague at *my* door" (my emphasis), indicating the severity of the disease which has the potential to destroy those inflicted. Metaphorically, she also mentioned the illness, like death, "knocking on doors". Like Zoe, she also commented "Aids is everyone's business, not only the infected". To fight the pandemic, Lue and Zoe appear to say that we must all join forces to fight the illness, which shows remarkable awareness and maturity for twelve-year olds.

Lue further demonstrated awareness of issues like promiscuity, such as adultery and cheating, which may be included, though not limited, to possible contributing factors to the illness, and are always included in the media in discussions about the pandemic. She wrote "Ngosa didn't believe that his own father would cheat on his mother……though people can be trusted, they can still do something bad." Here Lue comments on Ngosa's father who cheated on his wife and contacted HIV/Aids, which he then transmits to his wife.

Tina demonstrated her awareness of promiscuous behavior by writing: "I must not be attracted to sugar daddies," sugar daddies being older men who have sexual relationships with young girls, often in exchange for money and other amenities. This observation demonstrates her awareness of behavior occurring in the community, and she dissociates herself from it. For instance she wrote about the character in the book she read who gave up her life and virginity "just because of ten rand and a yellow dress."

The above extracts resonate strongly with Barton and Hamilton's (1998) principle that literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals. The learners show their awareness of the disease and its effects despite their youth. They also focus on community awareness and communities joining forces to fight the pandemic together.

Homosexuality and homophobia

Homosexuality was one of the themes that Thandi wrote about, after she read a book in which one of the characters is gay. She wrote "I don't really like this gay thing" It's stupid! But they can dance!…….He was GAY!" Her use of exclamation marks and capitals is a way of expressing her deep disapproval. Although she commends the character's ability to dance, she does not approve of his homosexual lifestyle. In an interview she elaborated "I don't approve of it. God made man and woman, and this gay thing is just wrong." Her disapproval is based on religious beliefs and teachings. The argument she presents is also similar to high profile politicians and religious leaders who disfavor homosexuality. Thandi therefore demonstrates her awareness of discussion and dissent in the media. Her disapproval is also in accordance with Luke and Freebody's (1999) four resources model where they say that texts represent certain people's views and silence others, therefore potentially influencing peoples' ideas. Thandi has developed her own schemata, but as Singhal (1998) says, schemata change as they develop, and are reshaped and reorganized to accommodate new information.

Text-to-world

Text-to-world brings forth broader connections that a reader brings to the text, involving the readers' experiences that are brought into the text, from society or community (Keene and Zimmerman, 1997). This resonates with sociocultural theories that literacy is socially embedded.

Constituting heroes

After reading an abridged version of Nelson Mandela's "Long walk to Freedom" Mvula wrote about heroes, and brought about many comparisons with Swazi royalty. . She wrote "Mandela didn't give up on his country, which was good, the same as Sobhuza II." Essentially Mvula makes the comparison between the heroic actions of former South African president Nelson Mandela, who led the country to democracy and freedom in 1994, after spending 27 years imprisoned by the apartheid government for his political activities, to those of the late King Sobhuza II of Swaziland, who led the country to independence in 1968. What is not explicit though, is that she is also comparing the actions and behavior of King Sobhuza II to those of his son and current Swazi King Mswati III. Learners also commented that they felt the current king was not doing as much for his country as his father had done.

"I think he (Mswati III) is not doing enough……he does not care enough about other people" (Zoe).
"We cannot compare him (Mswati III) to Mandela, they are not the same" (Lue).
"Ja, he is not Sobhuza" (Thandi).

According to schema theory "people's understanding and remembrance of events is shaped by their expectations or prior knowledge" (Bartlett's (1932) in Ajideh, 2003: 3-4), and these expectations are presented in some sort of schema fashion. Thus Mvula has shaped her response using her schemata, and has modeled what she perceives to be a hero, and heroic acts, and how a hero ought to behave. The extracts also resonate with the proposition by Barton and Hamilton (1998: 8), that "literacy is historically situated". The learner draws on her knowledge of history, and what has shaped countries such as South Africa and Swaziland.

CONCLUSION

From the data analysed, it is evident that the young participants engaged critically with the texts. Reader response theory overlaps with schema they, which highlights readers' use of prior knowledge and experience to make meaning or text-connections. The learners' also responded to the texts making use of Keene and Zimmerman's (1997) categories of making connections. The learners drew on their personal experiences and social lives to respond and reflect in writing on what they had read, by gathering information from different domains: school, home, community.

While findings from a small-scale project such as the one described in this paper cannot be generalizable, it does serve as a starting point to make recommendations about its value. It is obvious that schools should promote not only intensive reading programmes, but extensive reading programmes as well. The importance of post-reading tasks are equally important, as is the necessity of giving learners' voice in the classroom, to ensure that they are not just peripheral participants, but central to the learning process.

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