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Encouraging Criticality through Academic Reading

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Abstract: The paper focus on the findings of one of the research questions of a larger research study. It explores the affordance of academic reading to invoke 'criticality' (Cope, 2002; Burns and Hood, 1998 and Brown 1999) amongst postgraduate students within traditional university classrooms. Anchored in a research study that roots itself in the broad area of English for Academic Purposes (or EAP), it probes into the process of reading and responding to academic texts written in English. With a qualitative orientation, the study uses a case study design to gather empirical evidence through the introspective method of 'stimulated think alouds' in both individual and group settings. For the purposes of this paper, only the group settings called 'reading groups' are discussed. These reading groups reveal a more dynamic and networked reading process with the participants engaged in 'critical explication' of the text. Reading groups thus exemplify Wallace's (2003:21) 'dialogic view of reading' that feeds in a critical orientation allowing opportunities and spaces of dialogue and resistance to the authority of texts. That this 'criticality' is a function of the discoursally constructed, multilaminated identities networked in a group setting is explained by the data. Informed by the dynamics of multilingual, globalizing contexts, the data evidences phenomenon like code switching and 'counter discourse' (Pennycook, 1994).

Keywords: Reading groups, counter discourse, genre, criticality

Background of the Study and Research Question

Despite being a foreign language for a majority, English is the medium of instruction at the Higher Education (HE) level in Pakistan. This makes many HE level students undergo frustration while performing the chore of reading academic texts in English. In the absence of any proper academic support, most students develop an 'uncritical' acceptance of texts involving a submissive deference to language forms and ideas coming from native speakers of English. This leads to a vicious circle of absorbing all sorts of ideas and later regurgitating the same in the name of reading. This presents a worrisome picture especially if the agenda of academic reading, as Wallace (2003)
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suggests should presuppose 'response to the text'.

In my experience of teaching Pakistani university students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, I observed that those who struggled with English relied on their first /background language as a strategy for meaning retrieval while reading academic texts. These students would spend hours at stretch in their independent learning time to wrestle with complex research-based journal articles. Many shared with me their struggle of trying to comprehend the 'author's intent' which remained for them a mind boggling exercise even after multiple readings. In these silent hours of private, concentrated study, the only resource at their disposal was a dictionary that helped them translate unfamiliar English words into familiar ones in their first/background languages. Considering what these students were going through, I used to encourage them to form reading pairs or groups so as to together 'decode' the academic texts in their own languages. This advice aligned with my bent towards Johns' (1997) "socioliterate” view of reading which she sees as closely related to Social-Constructivist (Cook-Gumperz, 1986) and Socio-Cognitive (Geisler, 1991 as given in Johns, 1997). Simplistically, socioliterate views are defined by their focus on literacies that have been acquired through discourses generated within a variety of social contexts that involve 'genre' (seen as a textual counterpart of discourse) and 'collaborative interpretation'.

Interestingly, I found some students using their reading groups as collaborative, critical spaces. Many of them used 'code switched' language in their reading groups and in so doing used their multilingual, discoursal identities as learning resource. A better understanding of the dynamics of these reading groups held for me the prospects of exploring new ways of improving traditional academic reading practices in university classrooms within multilingual contexts like Pakistan.

Though 'reading groups' have been explored as informal spaces for dealing with literary texts, few studies have used them with academic/instructional texts implanted in the actual classroom (see Kintsch and McNamara, 1996). A research study was thus designed to explore discoursal identities of English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners within academic reading groups (Hayat, 2007). One aspect of this study examined academic reading groups as spaces where university students from multilingual contexts
could critically engage with and respond to academic texts written in a foreign language (in this case English). In this space, the students were allowed to use their background languages (a.k.a local lingua franca).

In this paper, I have focused my attention only on one of the research questions from the larger research study: *how do reading groups enable university students to enact 'criticality' at the point of reading academic texts?*

**Methodological Design**

Empirically, the study benefits from qualitative research methodology for both data gathering and analysis whereby a deeper insight into the reading process is intended through case study method, following a theory-seeking (Bassey, 1999) or exploratory (Yin, 1993) multiple case study design.

My research participants were three Pakistani students pursuing postgraduate studies in London who had English and *Urdu* as their foreign and background language respectively. Of them, two were males and one female. All three were non-native speakers of English, having learnt it as a foreign language. However, they used English in their official capacities back in Pakistan where they were working as professionals in the broader area of social sciences. While the female (pseudonym: Gul) is an experienced teacher trainer in her early thirties, one of the males (pseudonym: Shahid) is middle-aged and is pursuing his PhD in the area of educational management. The third one (pseudonym: Ahmed) is a twenty-some anthropologist with experience of working as a researcher in a developmental organisation.

Since my interest lay in studying ‘reading as process’, for my data collection, I found it important to employ a method that brought to surface the participants’ thoughts, interpretations and evaluations while they read an academic text in English. This aim formed the basis for using one of the introspective methods called ‘think aloud' protocols (see Gass and Mackey, 2000; Cohen, 2000; Pressley and Afflerbach, 1995; Færch and Kasper, 1987 and Ericsson and Simon, 1984/1993) which this study employs both individually and within a group setting. Data was collected in two stages (a) Individual ‘think alouds’ followed by retrospective interviews with each participant, and (b) Group ‘stimulated recall’ followed by retrospective group interviews; however, this paper
focuses only on an episode from the group stimulated recall data (see Appendix A) to substantiate response to the aforementioned research question.

An abbreviated (approx 700 words) instructional text titled ‘Development, Education and Language Teaching’ from an academic book was used as a stimulant. While using verbal report data for research into foreign language reading, Cohen (2000) emphasizes that the respondents are made comfortable with both the genre and topic of the textual material used as stimulus. Still, aware of Arksey & Knight’s (1999:77) caution that in a group setting “discussion can loop around itself and some issues can get quite brief attention”, I directed my participants by giving two questions that set the purpose for the exercise:

(a) What do you think the text is saying?

(b) What is your response to it?

The small size of the group proved to be a strength as I could focus on the participants’ reading behaviours thoroughly and in-depth. The sort of introspective data I was interested in justifies the makeup of such a small sample which is in line with other studies that have used a similar data collection method (e.g., Block, 1986; Cohen, 1998). The small sample together with multiple case studies method allowed for a rich and detailed profile makeup for each of the participants who formed another singularity in action where they came together as a reading group. Since the study was not located in a classroom, the data and findings provide a modest commentary on reading practice as embedded in a pedagogical setting.

**Conceptual Framework**

The term ‘criticality’ leads my conceptual framework and has been used by Cope (2002) who in turn recourses to Brown (1999) and Burns & Hood (1998). These scholars trace its reference to the root term ‘critical’ as seen from a social lens through which language is understood as a social phenomenon with connections between language and social conditions in their various dimensions, particularly the socio-cultural, economic, political and ideological. Criticality finds its basis in social critical theory whereby its defining orientation is sensitivity to the way power is distributed and
deployed through society by various means, language being just one.

In keeping with the term ‘criticality’, the conceptual framework of my study aligns with the socially defined Hallidayan perspective of language as ‘social semiotic’ (1985:3) wherein the text functions as both a process and a product in a multilayered ‘text in context’ environment. For this, I draw generously on Wallace (2005, 2003, and 1998) who establishes reading as social, reflexive process in the practical dynamics of a language classroom. She holds the view that in a space that allows for reading as participation, the writer’s intention gets reflected in the readers’ construction of it during both text interpretation and text response. Wallace (2005:88) assigns the reading process not only a sociocultural character but more specifically a sociolinguistic one being characterized by variability. In this, she discusses at length the various roles of readers; however, readers’ identities is an area she does not quite touch upon. For her, texts have generic identity by means of consistent, socially recognizable functions which a competent reader is expected to gauge. In this, her social view is largely determined by the social roles that readers bring to the act of reading.

**Three Frames for Analysis**

Since my study proposed conceptualization of reading as a sociocultural collaborative act, it sought to help redefine the way reading is perceived, practised and taught in an EFL situation within a multilingual context. Such a context, marked by diverse, fluid, multilaminated identities, occasions a dynamic makeover of reading as a social, interactive act. For a meaningful analysis of the data, the conceptual framework used for this study was translated into analytical frames. These frames represent the various dimensions of enabling ‘criticality’ at the point of reading academic texts. From these, I am using only three frames that address the research question set out in this paper:

1. Social/ critical participation
2. Collaborative talk
3. Performativity

For the purpose of this paper, in Appendix A, I have excerpted some part of my data that
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emerged as part of the ‘group’ stimulated recall protocols. In the next section, I selectively analyze chunks from this data with reference to the aforementioned frames.

**Data Analysis and Discussion**

1. Dimension of Social/Critical Participation:

   Within the reading group, where reading occurs as a collective enterprise, the writer’s intention realizes itself in the readers’ dialogic construction of it during both text interpretation and text response. Thus the text is seen in terms of discourse as ‘language in use’ (Brown & Yule, 1983) or more aptly ‘social text’ (Wallace, 2003) that authorizes the readers a ‘social role’.

   For instance in lines {1-7} Gul questions Shahid at the point of reading,

   “So I have a question…if you may respond Shahid Bhai? What about development? Is it only with education or was it before education too”

   This invokes Shahid to participate in her deliberations and in turn triggers off ‘participatory mechanisms’, one of the six characteristics of discourse community as it appears in Swales (1990). Her invitation emphasizes the ‘critical’ aspect of reading and highlights the text and the reader as participants in this relationship of critical exchange. This takes us to Bakhtin (1986) who upholds the dialogic nature of all texts that require the readers to assess and reassess their responses both individually and socially. In this sense, reading becomes a loaded concept whereby understanding subsumes response. This social view of reading as ‘critical interpretation’ (Wallace, 2005) allows a participatory role to the EFL learner where she is as equal an owner of English as a native speaker. Moreover, it affords EFL learners a deeper critical understanding of texts by making available spaces of dialogue and/or resistance to the authority of texts originating in an academic culture different to theirs.

   This discoursal, participatory view of reading forms a link to discoursal construction of identity through participation in reading. In effect, all participants fit the profile of Wallace’s (2005, 2003, 1998, and 1992) reader who is centrally placed in a social, reflexive, critical reading situation within the larger project of Critical Language Awareness (CLA). The CLA in turn finds its roots in the Foucauldian accounts of
socially embedded identity. The selected episode shows how Shahid, Ahmed and Gul enrich the text itself at the point of reading and discussion, each approaching the text with a distributed yet collective set of identities. The reading group affords them a space to complement each other's frame of reference and in this reverberates Wallace's (2003) position that "readers read not, ultimately, as private individuals but as members of interpretative communities" (p 25). This view of participatory identities is based on the assumption that subjects approach an activity equipped with a socio-cultural history that has shaped them. This socio-cultural shaping that Ivanic (2006) calls 'context', is coded in a language that has ideological trappings, an idea well-rooted in Lave and Wenger's (1991) 'Communities of Practice' theory that acknowledges the shared experiences of people in the context of their participation in social practice. In this, participants' knowledge and experiential frames both condition and are conditioned by social interaction, an example of this being Ahmed's assertion (111-112),

"No I don't think it's us who decide....it's those with power!"

In the context of reading groups, it is observed that the academic text written in a foreign language becomes a sociocultural artefact forming a nexus between the writer who produces and the reader who interprets. This aligns with the socially defined Hallidayan perspective of the text as both a process and a product functioning in a multilayered 'text in context' environment whereby the participants probe the ideological workings of the terminology (in turn the language), the basic assumption being that language is not neutral or a transparent medium. Hence, Ahmed's reiteration of Gul's concern in (89-90) as:

"do you think what Gul was pointing out that development is now a different construct?"

and in (99-100) as:

"Gul's point is, I think that values should be included in the construct called development".

Hence, we see the notion of 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1987) enacted in Ahmed's act of 'scaffolding' (Bruner, 1990) Gul who struggles while
articulating her intent in English. Both Vygotsky (ibid) and Bruner (ibid) establish social interaction as a key to learning, emphasizing that learning through working with supportive, capable peers can assist learners to reach the next stage in their mental development.

2. Dimension of Collaborative Talk:

Therefore, the 'critical' aspect of this discoursal participatory reading group is articulated in the form of collaborative talk wherein the cognitive and social dimensions of interaction are inextricably linked. By virtue of this, reading groups have every potential to form, in the Vygotskyan sense; a site of 'collaborative knowledge construction'. Here, we also evidence Mercer's (1995: 105) three modes of talking and thinking with peers in educational settings where {102-112} exemplify 'disputational talk' marking the starting point of discoursal conflict among the three participants which leads to further enrichment of the text. The whole episode is interspersed with 'exploratory talk' for example {24-31; 84; 109} requiring each group member to reason out their statements. Cazden (2001) in her classic discussion of classroom discourse calls this 'accountable talk' (p 170) and emphasizes its significance as the most effective talk that activates exploratory thinking which in turn has educational implications for learning in groups. For both Mercer (ibid) and Cazden (ibid) encouraging exploratory talk is fundamental to accessing oral fluency and critical thinking. Interestingly, instances of 'cumulative talk' that involve unquestioning acceptance of peer contributions are evident in the participants' individual turns rather than the group turns.

Academic reading groups fit well with the Bakhtinian view of dialogism in which individuals are continuously formed through conversation but which, unlike the Foucauldian view, upholds agency of the subject. Also, dialogic texts, presupposing a response, find their place within the context of reading wherein dialogism gets equated with criticality. It is observed that the participatory mechanism of the reading group gains more 'criticality' as the participants settle in with the text and with each other. We evidence instances of what Wells (2000) defines as the principle of responsivity whereby "a structure of meaning is built up collaboratively over successive turns" (Wells, 2000: 72), e.g. from the point Ahmed takes on Gul's query about the construct and definition of
development and then education (as linked to development) the three start pooling in ideas. For instance, we see them analyzing the constructs, as we move from Ahmed’s supernatural “Djinn” [17], “manufacturing of citizenship” [62-translation] to Shahid’s “education is only one aspect of development” [70], “cope with life”, “how to earn their livelihood” [82-83] and to Gul’s advocacy to include “values” [98] and “free ideas” [101] in the construct. This principle of responsivity lends a critical dimension to the otherwise neutral enterprise of collaboration.

3. Dimension of Performativity:

Since the participants belong to a postcolonial context where English has an elite status as compared to the other languages, including the national language Urdu; data analysed under this frame helped me to understand the ‘language resistance’ factor that was observed in the participants. For the analysis of this episode, I try to look at the interaction and comments of my participants vis-à-vis Pennycook’s (2000) view of ‘postcolonial performativity’ which sees English coming off clear from its western monolithic image, appropriated by the ‘locals’ in the postcolonial/globalized contexts with their own intentions and purposes, such as acquiring a socially upward identity. This is a modification on Pennycook’s (1994) earlier stance of ‘talking back’ as an event of ‘counter-discourse’.

In this episode and elsewhere in the group setting, the participants code-switch between English (foreign language) and Urdu (background language) to contribute their critical insights at the point of reading and discussion in reading groups. Exemplars are found between lines [19-69] where the dialogue between Ahmed, Shahid and Gul brings forth their critical side where they opt to switch to a ‘code switched’ variety (known popularly as Minglish, Urdish or Engdu) to articulate themselves better. This presents an interesting contrast to the individual turns where despite having struggled, each of them relied on English and ended up submitting unquestioningly to the ‘author-in-the text’. The retrospective group interviews also revealed that the ‘group setting’ challenged the participants into putting forth their best critical tools, which they could best access in their own language. They also found it ‘proper’ to place their own language (in this case Urdu) in the framework of English so that their discourse retains an ‘academic touch’.
Conclusion

The paper analysed and discussed a particular episode where the three participants are seen to enact 'criticality' in the context of an academic reading group. Moreover, the code-switched discourse observed within the reading groups embodies the fluid, diverse, dynamism of a fast globalizing multilingual context where diverse languages exist alongside each other. We observe a transition (or the tension thereof) as our participants move from 'decolonized' identities towards 'global' identities that get articulated in their code-switched discourse. Canagarajah (2005, 2000) cognizant of the influential processes of globalization, proposes his idea of 'linguistic appropriation' through which he questions the way languages are perceived as discrete and rigidly defined entities. This view shifts the function of languages from simply being 'identity markers' to being used as viable resources in teaching-learning situations. Code-switched discourse manifests this shift as seen in the third frame (above).

Wary of the manifold complexities that reading groups could invite even in a formalized adult teaching-learning set up, this study seeks to profile reading groups as purpose-led spaces (purpose being defined by focused tasks or questions). It thus informs about the three dimensions (social/critical participation; collaborative talk; performativity) through which reading groups enable university students to enact 'criticality' at the point of reading academic texts. Academic reading groups thus function as viable spaces that afford opportunities for critical engagement with academic texts. Such spaces should be further studied to examine which kinds of discussion or student talk facilitate critical response at the point of reading which would inform us about ways to offer better learning opportunities for EFL students across all academic levels in Pakistan.

Appendix A:

Excerpt from Group Stimulated Think Alouds

Text Given: Abbott, G. Development, Education and Language Teaching

Stimulant for this Episode:

Perceptions of Development
First, and perhaps still foremost in the public eye, is the view that development must be indicated by economic growth; the higher the GNP, the greater the development.

A later view of development as a matter of distributing justice, of spreading national services across social and geographical barriers, seemed more appropriate than the mere transfer of technology from outside.

Transcription Key:

Participants: Ahmed, Shahid, Gul* (pseudonyms)
Lost while transcribing: (.............)
*Italicized*: Language other than English – code switched English & Urdu
[.............]: Translated into English
#: overlap
{n}: line number

{1-7} Gul: So...I have a question...if you may respond Shahid Bhai? What about development? Is it only with education or was it before education too? Yea, for example...when we talk about or when the writer talks about development and education....yee...so....was there no development before education? Like our parents yea? They were uneducated.....just I'm talking about my life in Gilgit...yee....there was nobody educated..... years back, 50 years back or 100 years back, was there no development?
Shahid: In terms of what?

Ahmed: She’s talking about the concept of development.*keh concept thay nahi thay* [whether or not the concept was there?] Gul: Yes...

Shahid: There was economic growth....right?

Gul: Yea there was economic growth? #there was.....although there was no education

Ahmed: #So again the writer is saying that it’s a complex issue....development is a complex issue...how we will define it, whether it is GNP, it is economic growth, whether it’s education, what is that? What is that big *djin* that we don’t understand...do you remember *Djin*? #

Gul: #yea

Ahmed: # (laughs) that we don’t see but just.....are scared of him or her...But what Gul is saying is that.....*yeh kya development ka concept education sey pehley thay nahi thay? Matlab* [Did the concept of development exist before education or not, meaning]....label is development but #

Shahid: # *education tu khair hamesha rahi hai* [*Education has always been there, right?]

Gul: # *people were progressing....yea? even education dekha jaye.....khana khana seekhna bhi bachay.... who aik education haina?* [if you look at it, teaching kids how to eat is one form of education, right?] that is part of education....informal education.....education ka matlab kya hai.....jaana....to know something....tu yeh tu literacy aur numeracy hoi na jo hum baat kartey haina*[ education means to know....to know something...this is literacy and numeracy what we talk about, right?] ....what....what about education? Was it not there? And what about the development?
Ahmed: *Nai waisey education...*jo formal setup ki baat hoti hai...education mein informal ko nahi dekha jata...hamari jo values hoti hain.....yahan pe jo aik term use kia hai bhai ney....modernity ka....“importation of modernity”....education bhi usi context mein dekhi jati hai...jo industrial aur developed countries ki education hain uska curricula hai...usko woh important samajhtey hain....jo logo ki values ko change kardein....hamari jo Islamic values hain who in sey agree nahi kartey ...yahan keh....developed keh...jo hamein course book mein idhar udhar sekhai jati hain tu hamarey curricula ko bhi change karney k liye kafi sari cheezain hamarey mulk...hamarey education system mein la rahey hain...tu who kiya karein gay....woh values ko change kardi geen, bachon ki sooch ko change kar dein geen...jo hamarey...hamarey yahan jo aik hain....mein samajhta hoon aik concept hai....jo buhat rigid Islamic hai...jo anti Hindu hai....tu it's not surprisingly keh....manufacturing of citizenship aisey hoti hai jaisey hum....hum sab sey behtar makhloog hain...mulk mein.....aur...usko dekhtey hoye jo hum seekhtey hain tu hum samajhtey hain keh Hindu kuch nahi hain...india kuch nahi hai....aur dosrey mumalik ke log kuch nahi hain ....hum hi behtar hain...aik nationalism bhi ubhartey hain aur uskey saath religious....religious thinking hain usko bhi mazboot karthey hain....tu kehney ka matlab yeh hai keh yeh jo baat kar raha hai who formal set up ki baat kar raha hai, who informal set up ki baat nahi kar raha....agar informal set up ki baat ho tu phir tu development tu har jaga hai.....development tu kuch bhi ho sakti hai...per capita income bhi hosakta hai*

No, education is about formal set up; it is not concerned about informal. Our values....here my brother (the author) has used this term of modernity..... “importation of modernity”....education is also seen in this context....the education in industrial and developed countries and its curricula is considered important which changes the values of people. They (developed countries) do not agree with our Islamic values and what is learnt ‘here and there’ in the course books is also being brought into our countries, in our education system to change many things. Then what these (course books) will do; they (course books) will change the minds of children. In our country, the concept.....I think the concept which is a rigid Islamic and anti Hindu one.....and it’s not surprising that the manufacturing of citizenship is such that we are the best creatures around and with this
feeling, what we learn is that Hindus are nothing, India is nothing, the people in the rest of the countries are nothing.....only we are the best. It is for nationalism and to strengthen religious...religious thinking....so what I mean to say is that what he (the author) is talking about is formal set up and is not talking about the informal set up.....if the topic is informal set up then development is everywhere.....development could be anything, could be per capita income.....anything.....]

{70-83} Shahid: # but education is only one aspect of development....it’s not the aspect of development. Yea? Or they may be not be educated in the way we think or we now understand what education is....the concept of education is....again....is changing...right? it’s not same....so in their time the concept of education could be different like for example they emphasized more on values, of family harmony, social cohesion, okay....all those aspects were regarded as part of education.....and skills development was most important at that time.....if you were a farmer you got to have skills of ploughing land , okay....or growing trees....so if you have those skills you are educated in that....agricultural economy....you’re talking about agricultural economy....see.....so it’s.....agricultural economy will have it’s own kind of education....so we are saying that education has been there always in a different form and so...aahhhh...whether...aahhh.....if they were not educated in the terms we understand today, they were educated in their own terms ahhhh....and they knew how to..... cope up with the life.....(..........) but they....they knew how to earn their livelihood

{84} Ahmed: And you think that was ‘development’ in some ways?

{85-88} Shahid: Well, if...if...if a farmer was able to nourish his 8 of his children and wife from 1 to 3 or 4 I don’t know....and also support other family members and was a respectable member of the society, contributing to the society....in that way this is development.....you see # development is not just in monetary terms

\{89-90} Ahmed: # and do you.....do you think what Gul was pointing out that development is now a different construct?
Shahid: It's the same....that development...the concept of development changes

Gul: And even values....like when we are talking about values like I saw the national curriculum of..... Pakistan’s national curriculum...in primary level..... it has written good muslims, Islamic ....there are lots of things....honest modest......*pata nahi kiya kiya hai* [Who knows....what and what not!] but you see in practical life even in formal schooling, where....where are these values? Now days you will see most of the educated people.... they are in prisons...so what is education...He (the author) doesn’t...he’s not talking about values....just was...considering....#

Ahmed: # Gul’s....Gul’s point is, I think that values should be included in the construct called development

Gul: yea in the construct called development, even free ideas

Shahid: But that is what should be taught and should require a curriculum, that’s a different point...what she’s arguing I think is that....ahhhhh....whether education really contributes to development and I responded to Gul’s point that you know....there was no time when there was no education

Ahmed: is it?

Shahid: But education was considered differently...what was the concept of education in those times? It must have been different...

Ahmed: But who determines the concept?

Shahid: The society for example.....

Ahmed: Like our society, *jahan sey hum a rahey hain?* [Like our society, where we come from?] No I don’t think it’s us who decide....it’s those with power!
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References


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