



Teaching Critical Literacy Through the Use of Texts in the ESL-Classroom

A Review



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Degree essay: 15 hp
Course: L9EN2G
Level: Undergraduate
Term/year: VT2023
Supervisor: Marius Hentea
Examiner: Maria Olaussen

Keywords: Critical literacy, intercultural competence, ESL, texts, cultural awareness

Abstract

Teaching critical literacy through texts is not a well-researched method, despite the positive result of previous research. Critical literacy as a concept and as a method could be a factor in boosting intercultural competence, which should be considered highly desirable in an ever more diverse society. In this review, we analyze and present studies done on the subject of teaching critical literacy through texts in the EFL-classroom, while also considering the possible increase in intercultural competence when furthering students critical literacy skills. The findings show that teaching critical literacy through texts is beneficial at all levels of education and that an increased intercultural awareness, though not explicitly stated in the findings, is possible as well. In this review, we will conclude by suggesting possible pedagogical implications and areas for future research through conclusions drawn from our findings.

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	1
1 Introduction	2
1.1 Aim	3
2 Conceptual Framework	3
2.1 Critical Literacy	4
2.2 Intercultural Competence.....	5
2.3 Defining ESL	5
2.4 Text – a Discussion.....	5
3 Method	7
3.1 Criteria for inclusion.....	7
3.2 Databases	8
4 Method	8
4.1 Studies Conducted on Middle School Students.....	9
4.2 Studies Conducted on High School Students	13
4.3 Studies Conducted on University Students.....	14
5 Conclusion.....	17
5.1 Pedagogical implications	19
5.2 Further Research	19
References	21

1 Introduction

Since the 1990s critical literacy (CL) has increased in popularity in the field of English education. Initially, many English-speaking countries embraced the practice of CL in the English classroom, but in recent years CL has been regarded as important and beneficial for ESL learners as well, resulting in it being introduced in classroom practices in different areas around the world (Zhang, 2015). This area of education has gained interest and importance due to the need for increased understanding of global and multicultural perspectives due to the migration of populations, increased use of technology, and constantly changing political dynamics.

Contemporary research has resulted in theories and ideas which have shed light on a multitude of aspects which go beyond only fostering proficiency in writing and reading. One of these theories is critical literacy. Critical literacy has been defined by Andersson & Irvine (1993) as “learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one’s experience as historically constructed within specific power relations.” (p. 82), meaning that the reader becomes aware of different power relationships, attitudes, bias, discrimination, and values that are communicated through texts.

One of the challenges of the ESL classroom is engaging students of multiple ethnicities, cultural and religious backgrounds, with different beliefs and values. Teachers are supposed to choose relevant and appropriate materials for students. Those materials should preferably be a reflection of the variation present in the students’ backgrounds. Yet much of the canonical literature that has been used during the last few decades has been a reflection of the Caucasian, male voice (Thomas et al, 2017). Minorities are rarely included as the protagonist, which could negatively affect not only students belonging to said minority groups but also students belonging to the majority of the population. Being exposed to a wide variety of protagonists, and therefore a wide variety of religious and cultural backgrounds, is important for increased growth and understanding of other students. A skill of particular importance in a country such as Sweden where huge demographic changes have occurred during the last decades. One way of approaching these sensitive subjects is through the use of carefully chosen texts and critical literacy.

Critical literacy has become more popular over the last decades but seeing as it only recently has become a more implemented concept in education, there is still a lot left to research and develop. Research on the subject thus far, according to Heggernes (2021), has been conducted mainly in higher education while Banks (1993) argues for the importance of

early implementation of CL practices. This shows the importance of the examination of how CL practices could affect primary and, as is of interest in this review, secondary education.

In this review, the role of literary texts in fostering critical literacy and intercultural competence will be explored. This first section will briefly outline this literature review's aim and research question, its historical background, the focus and scope of the review as well as a brief explanation of the methodology used in acquiring the relevant data.

1.1 Aim

The aim of this review is to explore whether reading and working with texts can help in fostering critical literacy and intercultural competence in ESL classrooms. During the last couple of decades, globalization and immigration have led to a significant increase in the pluralism of students' languages, culture, and ethnic backgrounds in Sweden (Bijvoet & Fraurud, 2013). Understandably, engaging with diverse students requires an understanding of language and culture, both of which can be achieved through the use of critical literacy pedagogy. Critical literacy (CL), as defined above, is the process of becoming aware of the power relations constructed in texts and of one's own experiences in relation to this by reading and writing. It encourages the discussion of experiences related to racism, class discrimination, sexism, and other societal and historical issues in order to be able to transform them. Therefore, CL promotes students' understanding of the surrounding students' multicultural backgrounds through discourse, thus creating intercultural competence. In other words, CL can help create a democratic society in which cultural differences are affirmed and encouraged (Giroux, 1993), something which is stated explicitly as one of the main goals in the Swedish Curriculum (Skolverket, 2022). Literary texts, in different forms, have been and will continue to be used in the ESL-classroom.

2 Conceptual Framework

This section includes an overview of the principles of critical literacy, intercultural competence, a definition of ESL as well as a discussion of what is included in the term texts.

2.1 Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is a practice through which texts' context and their complexity of traditions, histories, knowledge and politics are analyzed. This practice allows the sharing and discussion of experiences related to racism, class discrimination, sexism, and other societal and historical issues. By bringing to light issues marginalized groups experience, this way of working with texts allows for a broader understanding on these topics by individuals belonging to dominant groups (Giroux, 1992).

Critical literacy developed out of Freire's (1970) theory that since reality is a product of human action and inaction it can therefore be transformed. One way this transformation can be achieved is by utilizing practices introduced in what Freire refers to as critical pedagogy. This particular pedagogy aims towards "the development of consciousness toward education's role in reproducing or disrupting social power hierarchies" (Bacon, 2017, p. 426). One such critical transformative practice is critical literacy. Freire and Macedo (1987) conceptualize literacy by referring to it as reading the word and the world. This means that societal values can be decoded and reproduced, or, as is the goal with critical literacy, reproduced. This process is performed by using different texts, whether literature, media or other (Luke, 2012). Therefore, critical literacy is a useful practice that encourages both teachers and students to analyze, critique and transform society's present norms and systems that apply to different parts of everyday life (Luke, 2012; Nieto, 2002). Ergo, using this practice should apply to all students, no matter what language, cultural or ethnic background. The idea of achieving transformation through discourse connected to text is closely related to the ideas of multicultural education, which aims towards achieving a pluralistic perspective incorporated in every aspect of education such as school climate, curriculum and the relationships among and between teachers and students (Nieto, 2002). Therefore multicultural education's goal of a pluralistic perspective permeating all aspects of education recognizes the importance of including all voices and all perspectives in teaching, an idea regarded as similarly important by critical pedagogy. Compared to classic English language education, which focuses mainly on proficiency, critical literacy moves beyond that and aims toward creating democratic students who possess tools to become aware of, analyze and transform different aspects of society. Which is not only an important aspect of the Swedish Curriculum, it is perhaps of even greater importance in creating democratic students for society as a whole (Skolverket, 2022).

2.2 Intercultural Competence

Brown and Lee (2015) note that intercultural competence has become increasingly important in foreign language acquisition. An interculturally competent person is able to understand culture in relationships and has the ability to interpret different cultures from the perspective of other cultures. They are also aware of their own culture and their own perspective. Zhang and Zhou (2019) state that intercultural competence has become increasingly important “with individuals expected to perform appropriately and effectively during intercultural exchanges” (p.31) in an increasingly globalized world. They also note that many students lack sufficient intercultural competence, making it necessary to identify methods which may help further individual’s intercultural competence. Furthermore, Blommaert (2013) notes that register development, which is the acquisition of different social environment norms, is important, whilst also being highly complex. The complexity lies in successfully understanding varying groups’ specific norms. In relation to intercultural competence, register development is necessary in order to adequately understand different cultural perspectives. This is of great importance in classrooms that are becoming increasingly heterogenous regarding culture.

2.3 Defining ESL

English as a second language, or ESL, is a term used to describe those for whom English is not the native language. In addition, EFL, ESOL, ELL and EAL may also be used in reference to those for whom English is not a first language (Yook, 2017). This review covers multiple studies in which different abbreviations are used to refer to ESL. However, in this review it will only be referred to as ESL, unless otherwise stated.

2.4 Text – a Discussion

Storytelling has, for centuries, been one of the main ways to make sense of not only our world but also the way others perceive and experience the world (Wiessner, 2014). It has been and still is considered an effective method to improve our ability to understand other states of mind and can therefore be seen as an effective method for improving students’ understanding of others, which is included in the Swedish Curriculum (Skolverket, 2022). Therefore, reading different texts can help readers gain social knowledge and other important abilities for understanding others (Murray & Puchner, 2012).

While the initial idea was to solely include studies relating to the use of literary fiction, it soon became apparent that not enough research has been done in this area. Therefore, the decision to include studies with a text source other than fiction, such as newspaper articles, picture books and graphic novels, was made to ensure that enough studies on the subject of critical literacy in the ESL-classroom could be found. However, the focus of this review is based mainly on novels and short-stories' but also other texts and their possible implications in the ESL-classroom.

While textbooks provided for the students in class vary; Alshammari (2015) states that they traditionally do not include activities during reading but focus mostly on comprehension. Comprehension questions would not encourage critical reading, considering Giroux's (1992) definition of critical literacy, and neither do they allow the student to practice their critical literacy. Though Alshammari (2015) acknowledges the merits of the tasks in a typical textbook, they argue that textbooks only encourage comprehension reading, offering tasks for the student which only require searching the text for information and answering true-false statements. This exclusion of any notion of CL practice further merits the inclusion of additional texts in teaching, such as texts chosen by teachers combined with critical literacy practices.

3 Method

This literature review examines peer-reviewed articles reporting on research on ESL-classroom practices related to the use of different kinds of texts, such as novels, short stories, poetry, etc. The articles all look at the use of critical literacy teaching practices.

3.1 Criteria for inclusion

This review is a summary of evidence for using literary texts in the English as a Second Language(ESL)-classroom aiming to achieve critical literacy and intercultural competence. The review brings together empirical studies examining critical literacy' as an effective method in fostering knowledge and acceptance of varying cultures. All the included studies were conducted on students of similar, or estimated to be similar, proficiency levels to that of an average Swedish high school student. Therefore, the studies covered are not included or excluded based on age, but rather on proficiency level. Other than proficiency level, the level of heterogeneity, whether cultural, religious or other, in the respective ESL-classrooms was favored when selecting relevant studies. This was done to achieve a wide scope of possible implications that CL can have in the ESL-classroom as well as being able to generalize the findings to the very heterogenous Swedish ESL-classrooms. Furthermore, the review is composed of studies conducted in the ESL-classroom, which is used as a cover term to include EFL and also studies using the term ELL.

Although some of the studies included accounted for the participants' proficiency level, referring to CEFR or the number of years of English education, most did not. In the cases where it was not accounted for, the EF EPI (2016) rankings as well as statistics from Eurostata (2019) were taken into consideration when determining whether or not a study was suitable or not. In some cases, quite a large age difference was accepted due to the estimated proficiency based on the EF EPI and Eurostat data.

What we adhered to in terms of the selected studies was that they had to contain elements of critical literacy, preferably including novels or short stories, but other forms of text were also acceptable, and the subjects of the studies had to be ESL-learners.

Additional requirements considered were inclusion or exclusion based on the participants' proficiency level.

3.2 Databases

To initiate our search for articles, the search engine Google Scholar (GS) was used. This provided a wide variety of articles related to our topic which allowed us to narrow down and specify the thesis statement and research question. After the initial use of Google Scholar, articles were found by using systematic database searches as well as using relevant references from already included articles. The systematic databases used were Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), a comprehensive database of research related to education; Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts (LLBA), a database of research related to theoretical and applied linguistics; and Journal Storage (JSTOR), an online fulltext archive covering several subject areas.

The keywords used in the searches consisted of three parts and their synonyms. The searches were aimed to identify peer-reviewed articles published during the last two decades in order to maintain a certain level of significance for this literature review. The three core parts of this review included:

1. Critical literacy
2. ESL/EFL
3. literary fiction

We started with a total of eighteen studies, though while reading through the articles some had to be excluded due issues of relevance in regards to our aim. We did find additional studies of relevance through references provided in previously found studies, which was added to our existing findings resulting in a total of thirteen studies.

4 Method

In this review we analyze thirteen case-studies which have been grouped according to the participants' ages in the studies. The methods for the data collected in the included studies vary and in this review we argue for the studies' general viability in terms of their empirical strength, regarding size of test groups, strength of method and contextual viability. We account for the geographical location where the studies have been conducted for contextual relevance, while also flagging for contingencies which may affect reliability. Furthermore, when possible, we also discuss and evaluate the demographics of the test groups, mainly by establishing the students average age and dominant cultural background.

In the early 2000's not many studies had been conducted on critical literacy in the ESL-classroom, and until the 2010's there was seemingly a lack of interest in exploring critical literacy in an ESL context. Furthermore, up until the mass migrations of the 2010's, most studies were conducted in largely homogeneous classrooms which is exemplified by the following case study by Correira (2006). She begins by stating that, through discussion, students' may be able to voice their opinions and contextualize themselves as readers in a broader social context. To establish whether that is applicable in practice, she conducted her study at a Brazilian university, in a class with eight students who had studied English for five years. The method used to conduct the study was to include a pre-reading discussion introducing the topic of the text, a newspaper article, followed by a second phase in which the students received instructions to give the reading a purpose. An additional phase was included where the students were given exercises as well as the opportunity to discuss the topic and the author's reasoning. They ended the exercise by writing a summary of the article.

To begin the exercise the students were asked to analyze how a typical reader may deal with the text at hand, the aim of which was to activate their background knowledge and for them to find out whether their presumptions were correct. Correira (2006) also gave the students three different questions to discuss. One of the questions was regarding the purpose that metaphors served in the article, with the aim of making the students rely on their previous knowledge and backgrounds whilst also enabling the students to discuss the author's bias. She states that the exercise did receive positive feedback from the students and concluded that critical reading could be achieved through exercise (Correira, 2006) and in turn the students gained a greater critical literacy.

No general conclusions can be drawn from the study due to the fact that it does not account for the small student group, which consisted of 8 students and was homogenous. However, it does offer an early insight into the use of critical literacy in teaching, while also providing an example of CL discussions of texts, which potentially could offer students knowledge of aspects influencing writers. Studies conducted later do include a greater focus on CL's potential in fostering intercultural awareness and awareness of different social issues.

4.1 Studies Conducted on Middle School Students

Methods for teaching CL differ to a degree at different levels of education, some of the studies, conducted at a middle school level, will be reviewed now to see whether or not CL is effective in middle school students. One of these studies was conducted by Lee and Gilles

(2012) when critical literacy had piqued more interest and was included more in ESL teaching. Critical literacy and texts can be a useful tool for bridging cultural divisions according to Lee and Gilles (2012) and should therefore be embraced by the English teaching community as a means towards greater intercultural competence among students. In trying to promote critical literacy through discussions of different texts, Lee and Gilles conducted a case study that included 15 American fifth-graders and 23 Taiwanese tenth-graders, of different ethnic backgrounds. The majority of this group was either Caucasian or Chinese; however, there were multiple ESL-students with varying backgrounds as well.

Lee and Gilles (2012) began the program, which lasted two years, with the material for reading which was picture books. They argue that picture books “enhance literacy learning, cultivate social awareness, and develop critical thinking in both older and younger students” (p. 165), as well as being more easily read in one sitting. In presenting the assignment to the students they presented the platform on which the students were to communicate and discuss their readings with each other. When discussing the texts, the students were asked to reflect upon themes such as specific cultures.

Through reading and analyzing the students' discussions on the platform, Lee and Gilles (2012) learned that not only did they become aware of issues relating to culture in the texts, they were also able to relate their readings to their own life and offer an insight into their partner students' culture. From reading they were also allowed to access “cultures unfamiliar to them in an authentic way” (p. 169), while also asserting a confidence in viewing their own cultures in a positive way, thereby gaining both a greater understanding of foreign cultures and further perspectives of their own.

Another study conducted in a middle school setting was performed by Yol & Yoon (2019), which offers further insight into CL role in the ESL-classroom at a middle school level. In this study, they investigated ELL students at a middle school in New York. English Language Learners (ELLs) are learners of English as a second language but have various cultural and language backgrounds. Three sixth-graders participated in this study. They were from Ukraine, Thailand and Pakistan; all had been in the United States for at least 5 months or more and all had the English proficiency to state what they think, feel, and understood with minimal help. To be able to observe the students' progress, the researchers conducted 20-minute student interviews before the first lesson and after the fourth and final lesson, audio recordings of their in-class discussions, the researchers' own observations, and field logs of the class activities and discussions of the four lessons that were held. The lessons included discussions based on local and global problems, videos based on a global problem, and texts

written from global and cultural perspectives. Their findings showed that the students became “engaged participants and (...) socially and politically conscious (global) citizens while responding to their practices of critical global literacies” (p. 7).

Hayik conducted a study in 2015 which suffers from the same issue as Yol and Yoons’ (2019) study in terms of the size of the group of participants, however, it does emphasize the use of texts as a great tool in that it provides the students with portrayals of lives of people from minority groups, diverse cultures and varying religions. Hayik (2015) focuses specifically on choosing books that would “provide opportunities for students from nonmainstream cultures to understand and develop pride in their heritage and (...) familiarize all students with cultures other than their own” (p. 95). The goal was to develop the students’ understanding of others and prepare them for a life among people with diverse cultures and religions. Hayik conducted the study during an intensive six-week-long English course in a village in Israel. 10 students from the advanced-level ninth grade class chose to participate, 4 of whom ended up participating in every session. Although very few participated, the students’ backgrounds represented the religious backgrounds of the village inhabitants very well with both Muslim and Christian students participating. Data was collected through the use of videotaped sessions, student responses, Hayiks’ reflective journal and photos of students working, interacting and sharing. Using picture books promoting tolerance of different religions, Hayik found that, although the project lead to some new thought, beliefs and feelings inside “students’ heads, souls, and hearts” (p. 104), it did not lead to any change in the way the students viewed the religious conflicts in the country. Conflicts based on religion and culture are more likely to occur in Swedish schools due to the increased amount of religious and cultural variation (Lindblom & Karlsson, 2014). Those conflicts could be negative but potentially also positive. They provide a great opportunity for discussions regarding the matter at hand. Although Hayik did not achieve any visible, long-lasting results during the six weeks it was conducted, it did lead to students looking and talking about their religious similarities. Talking and discussing differences and similarities openly could increase the chances of these potential conflicts being turned into a learning opportunity instead of merely being a sensitive and avoided topic.

To further our insight into how critical literacy can be used in a middle school setting, we looked at the study conducted by Lau (2012) which studied the impact of instructional critical literacy in a group of fifteen ethnically Chinese middle school students in Toronto, Canada. She acknowledges the importance of CL in that it enables students to create “their own meaning to shape and transform their social condition” (Lau, 2012, p. 325).

Lau (2012) and the students' ESL teacher began by planning the CL curriculum which made up the project. The project, which spanned over a year, was begun by setting up routines which encouraged extensive reading and writing. The topics that they picked concerned areas which were of interest to the students. For every topic introduced to the students, they were first taught basic CL comprehension tactics and more complex CL strategies to formulate opinions and support arguments.

They began by reading and subsequently discussing a story about an immigrant EL's experiences of bullying in school. This was met by great enthusiasm which led to discussions as it connected with many of the students' personal experiences (Lau, 2012). Since the students found themselves in a similar social environment, CL was more easily applicable. The students subsequently wrote stories about their own experiences of bullying, in which they were encouraged to change the outcome of the story. By doing this, they were able to utilize their CL skills in making it possible to illustrate a potential for change (Lau, 2012). To further their CL, the students' were asked by the author to read and compare two different adaptations of the same story and then to rewrite the story. The resulting discussion of the students' rewritten stories resulted in them both acknowledging and challenging stereotypes in the original story, proving that through reading literary fiction, these ELL's were able to challenge what, in this case, were sexist stereotypes. Lau concludes that CL, besides having a transformative impact on the students' linguistic skills, also gave them a sense of their own voice, in spite of their linguistic limitations.

Building on her previous study, Lau (2013) published another case study a year later. Elaborating on her previous findings, she further researched the impact of the CL program she had conducted in collaboration with the ESL teacher in a middle-school in Toronto. Lau (2013) goes into detail as to how the previous study had been conducted and states that while trying to further her research, she interviewed the participating students, as well as the teacher from the previous year. Through her post-program interviews a year later with the same students, she learned that the students felt that the discussions in the CL program had been beneficial in building their language skills and knowledge, while also allowing them to critically discuss social issues such as segregation and racism. The students added that they also valued "their full participation in this learning community, not just as beginning ELLs but also as competent researchers and active agents of change of their own social conditions" (Lau, 2013, p.24), all of which provides further support for Lau's previous findings.

The studies reviewed above all show the positive effects of using CL in a classroom setting at the middle school level. Even students with slightly lower language proficiency felt

that they were able to participate and learn from the exercises. As concluded by Lee and Gilles, the students became more appreciative and knowledgeable of cultures different from their own as a result of the project and Yol & Yoon (2019) mention that the students were excited to share their own stories, both negative and positive, to learn from one another about their experiences and strengthen their relationships. As Lau (2012) showed in her study, the amount of awareness and interest generated by using CL in the classroom is affected by how relatable the texts are. The more relatable the issue, the higher the engagement from the student group was. Texts, no matter what type, can therefore be seen as an important part of the lessons' content and therefore an important part in promoting critically literate students.

4.2 Studies Conducted on High School Students

Similar to the studies conducted in a middle school setting, studies conducted in high schools provide additional insight in teaching CL using texts. In Sweden, for example, as well as in many other western European countries, most texts that have been used in schools belongs to the White-normative Western canon. By using texts that repeatedly showcase the story of the same voice, it conveys to the students that this is the only voice that matters. Findora & Hammonds (2021) study investigated the effect of introducing students to authors and protagonists that do not look like them. The 200 participants, of whom 90% were white and 77 completed all parts of the study, were randomly assigned to read either white-male texts (control) or non-white-male texts (intervention). By analyzing the students' online discussion posts and responses, Findora & Hammond found that the students made more positive comments about interracial texts, were able to make connections with characters regardless of race, and were more likely to discuss issues of discrimination when reading interracial literary fiction. This was achieved without teacher intervention, as the only instructions the students had received besides having to read the text was “(m)ake an analytical/evaluative discussion post about your reading” (p. 10).

Even though these students possessed proficient or advanced reading and analysis skills, which could perhaps be higher than that of a typical high school student in Sweden, the goal of increasing critical thinking and starting discussions regarding interracial issues such as prejudice and discrimination was achieved. To connect these findings to the Swedish ESL-classroom, the connection between the choice of texts and the discussions following the reading are very strong and should be taken into consideration when selecting appropriate texts.

Other than texts such as novels, graphic novels have also shown great promise in helping increase critical literacy in students. One study showing exactly this was published in 2009 by Christian W. Chun. He prepared lessons on the graphic novel *Maus* with the aim being to improve the ELL students' critical literacy. Most of the students were immigrants from Central America, but they all belonged to the advanced level class. The findings in this collaborative study were solely based on teacher observations and therefore need to be replicated. However, the lessons based on *Maus* had a positive impact on the students' critical literacy according to Chun. Not only were the students intrigued and interested in finishing the graphic novel, it had also piqued their interest regarding the history and the real-life events the novel is based on. Chun concludes by saying:

a critical literacy approach to these stories on substantive topics also deepens students' engagement by connecting these stories to students' own experiences. This can encourage critical reflection, which in turn leads to students' acknowledging their own power as co-creators of knowledge in the classroom and beyond. (p. 152)

4.3 Studies Conducted on University Students

As previously mentioned, many European countries have experienced an influx of students with varying cultural, religious and social backgrounds in the last years. It is therefore relevant for all these countries to adapt to the new challenges that have arisen due to this phenomenon. Working with critical literacy (CL) could be an effective practice that not only invites these new cultural backgrounds but also includes them in the education. One study working with CL, conducted by Bobkina & Stefanova (2016), argued that "the analysis of fictional work in the process of foreign language acquisition offers a unique opportunity for students to explore, interpret, and understand the world around them" (p. 677). While providing a concrete illustration of teaching critical thinking skills, the pair also conducted a study using their aforementioned illustration. 19 students, on average 20 years old, taking a Master's course at university level were included in this study which aimed at enhancing these EFL/ESL students' critical thinking skills. By using a poem, the students were given questionnaires which evaluated six different aspects. Results of these questionnaires showed that four of these aspects: 1) the interpretation of the world; 2) self-reflection; 3) critical awareness; 6) language use, received the highest scores meaning that the students viewed the activities as effective in increasing those aspects. Problem-solving and intercultural awareness

were the two factors which received the lowest scores, meaning they need to be further examined and researched. Bobkina & Stefanova (2016) therefore claim that a model of teaching critical thinking skills bears with it many advantages in the EFL/ESL classroom. While claiming this, they also include the suggestion of the need for further research in this specific area with “further, more ample sampling and quantitative research (being) needed in order to reach definite conclusions” (p. 692).

Expanding on earlier findings, Abednia and Izadinia (2010, 2013) investigate how a critical literacy approach to reading may influence the students’ intellectual development. The studies are both based on a case study conducted at a university in Tehran, Iran. The students are reported to have been between 18 and 21 years old, with about 80% fluent in English (Abednia & Izadinia, 2010, 2013) Abednia and Izadinia explain that the CL approach was implemented in a ‘English Reading Comprehension’ course and that in planning the curriculum for the course, students were allowed to take part in selecting the literary texts. The included material varied in terms of topic, as to take into account different students’ interests. Once they had read the texts, they followed up by having discussions in class, problematizing and discussing social issues with the help of CL questions such as “Who is missing from the text?” (Abednia & Izadinia, 2010, p.56). In combination with the reading and discussions during class, they were also asked to write journals.

Through the critical literacy approach to reading, the students’ journals showed that what they most frequently had reflected upon and written about was freedom of speech and opportunities to voice their opinion in class. Abednia and Izadinia attribute the success of the course to the fact that the students were allowed to take co-ownership and that particular focus was given to critical thinking. Additionally, the authors state that the students’ ability to think critically and to become more conscious of themselves and their thinking had improved. They state that students’ critiqued the authors of the texts’ ideologies, based on their own religious beliefs. Over time, there was a change in the students’ social interactions with each other, which the authors believe may promote similar change in society (Abednia & Izadinia, 2010). Though no explicit connection is made to whether this is equivalent to an increased intercultural competence, they did make the argument that discussing different social issues in connection to the students’ reading did make them more conscious of their thought process. Thus, the argument could be made that they also become more aware of their own prejudice, which in turn may lead to a greater understanding of different people and cultures. Furthermore, Abednia and Izadinia (2013) explain that a student, through the CL approach, redefined “supporting women’s rights as a humanitarian rather than a feminist action” (p.

346), which the authors suggest that the student felt is a less biased political position. By the authors' suggestion that a CL discussion may enable the students to better analyze their reading, they should also be able to bring forth different perspectives on social issues.

Students' development of language skills has long been neglected in direct connection to critical literacy according to Huang (2011), who explored the way critical literacy and conventional literacy could be promoted at the same time in an EFL reading and writing course. The case study by Huang was conducted in a class of 36 students who were non-English majors at a university in Taiwan (2011). The data collected consisted of students' written reflections in regards to their reading, writing and learning as well as the teachers' journal, which contained lesson plans and summarizations of group discussions with the students.

At the beginning of the course the students were asked to read an article and whilst reading the material, tasked with examining it with the help of questions such as, "What was not said about the topic?" and "Whose interests are served by the text?" (Huang, 2011, p. 148). In applying the same method for all reading during the course, they collected data which then was separated into "three categories: (1) what critical literacy means to the students, (2) how critical literacy helps their reading and writing, and (3) how their EFL literacy improved as a result of the course" (Huang, 2011, p. 148).

According to Huang (2011), the students felt that, among many positive responses, that CL had given them both better reading comprehension whilst also giving them a reason to write. And whilst not mentioning the potential for cultural insights or intercultural learning and competence, they did conclude that CL gave them greater tools for examining and analyzing both their reading and writing skills.

Another study conducted by Bobkina & Stefanova together with Pérez, investigated the effectiveness of teaching critical thinking skills in a bilingual state school in Spain (2017). Bobkina, Stefanova & Pérez assessed the effectiveness of teaching critical skills on 21 students in an EFL classroom through the use of Caryl Phillips's novel *The Lost Child*, which includes themes such as rejection and isolation. Their work, which focused on activities based on multiliteracies pedagogy, shows that both teachers and students perceive the CL model as "highly effective, in particular, in terms of self-reflection" (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2017, p. 254). In addition to this, their research also shows that discussing literary texts and relating them to current issues broadens the students' perspectives and helps them interpret real-world problems. The research results were based on teacher assessment and questionnaires, involving self-reflective questions, which were filled out by both students and teachers. The

data collected was both qualitative and quantitative, something Bobkina & Stefanova (2016) pointed out was needed in further research on the subject. In addition to this, their research also shows that discussing literary texts and relating them to relevant, current issues broadens the students' perspectives and helps them interpret real-world problems.

5 Conclusion

While our findings chapter is categorized based on school level, the findings in all studies show similarly positive results regarding the use of different types of text to promote CL and intercultural awareness. This suggests that CL-work through the use of text and discussion can successfully be implemented at any age or proficiency level. It could therefore be said that it should be equally beneficial in a Swedish context.

A discussion regarding the differing levels of education in the reviewed studies is necessary. Although the age difference, middle school to university, might at first glance indicate a large difference in English proficiency as well, this is not the case. On one hand, most studies conducted at middle school level were conducted in a native English setting or included mostly native English speakers. Their proficiency level was therefore considered to be of a similar level to that of a high school student in Sweden. On the other hand, studies including university level students were all conducted in non-native English-speaking countries such as Spain, Taiwan or Iran. According to EFs English Proficiency Index (2016) as well as the statistics found on Eurostat (2019), these countries generally have a lower English proficiency level, even at university level, and the studies' findings can therefore be seen as relevant in this review as well.

This literature review has provided a brief review of studies conducted during the last two decades related to the use of texts in the ESL-classroom to promote critical literacy. When taken together, the findings support the view that a variation of text sources can be important factors in creating critically literate students in the ESL-classroom. This has, however, not been the subject of a large amount of empirical studies which is needed based on the research on the subject as well as the studies included in this review. Although the use of CL in teaching ESL has significantly increased during the last few decades, most research has, as this review shows, been conducted in either Asia or the Americas. While the research reviewed all illustrates the positive effects of the use of different text sources as a means to increase students' critical literacy, the small amount of participants in each study does not allow for the generalisation to different age groups. Even though the participants had

significantly different backgrounds; some belonging to religious and culturally heterogeneous communities, while others belong to mostly homogeneous communities, the amount of students' involved in each study was notably smaller than would have been desirable. Therefore, further research in the already researched communities is necessary as well as initiating research in previously non-researched areas, such as the majority of Europe. Of particular interest to us would be Sweden and the Nordic Countries, other than the clear lack of larger, generalisable participant groups, the method of data collection in the studies varied widely. This further increases our view that the current findings are not entirely generalisable to populations outside of the ones included in the studies.

Regarding intercultural competence, while not all studies explicitly include this as an area of interest, conclusions can be drawn from the results of the studies that critical literacy leads to an increased understanding of different cultures and religions. Exemplified in the Lee and Gilles (2012) study, which reported that through discussions of the chosen texts, students were able to reflect upon their own culture and discuss each other's cultures. Through these discussions, the students were able to better understand both their own culture, their partner students' culture, and acknowledge their stereotypical views of each other's cultures (p. 169). Although no longitudinal studies were found on the subject, which would have been interesting to see, the short-term effects of the use of a variation of texts to promote CL shows the positive effects on the students' openness to discuss differences and similarities. Sharing and discussing their experiences of discrimination, racism and religion shows their capability of increasing their understanding on these topics, both from their own perspective and other perspectives such as those of a classmate or a character in a literary text. This understanding of similarities and differences and the increased openness towards topics such as the aforementioned is very relevant when looking at the Swedish Curriculum (Skolverket, 2022) where democracy, all humans's equal worth, furthering understanding of others, as well as respecting people's differences are all mentioned as important.

5.1 Pedagogical implications

Although none of the studies which were included in study were conducted in Sweden, nor any of the other Nordic countries, some general conclusions can be made in terms of possible pedagogical implications in a Swedish ESL-classroom. All studies have in one form or another concluded that a CL approach to ESL learning is beneficial in many regards. This would suggest that similar approaches in ESL-teaching could prove to be beneficial in a Swedish context as well, when adhering to the Swedish curriculum which states that students' education should be incused with an acceptance for people's differences, whether it be of cultures, ethnicities, sexualities, or any other minority (Skolverket, 2022).

The type of text, meaning short-story, poem, picture book or novel, has shown to be of less significance when it comes to increasing CL and intercultural awareness, seeing as all types of text in the reviewed studies showed positive outcomes. The choice of appropriate types of texts should therefore be based on the students' proficiency level, the chosen topic for the CL-exercises, and the teacher's knowledge of the class in question. In implementing a CL approach including texts in the Swedish ESL-classroom, we would therefore suggest using texts which the students easily could relate to in terms of the text's themes instead of the text's type. The appropriate thematic choice requires a deep understanding from the teacher of their students' interests in order for them to be engaged in the classroom CL-practices. Some topics used in the reviewed studies which intrigued a lot of students were bullying, racial issues, and religious and cultural differences. Such topics could be considered universally interesting seeing as all students, in some way, shape or form, are faced with these issues. With the help of critical literacy questions whilst reading and subsequently discussing their readings, the students could be encouraged to utilize their critical literacy skills to acknowledge these social issues, differences in culture, or other aspects illustrated in the text. This could possibly further the students' intercultural competence, which the curriculum deems highly desirable considering the increasingly multicultural societies throughout the world (Skolverket, 2022).

5.2 Further Research

Very few studies have been conducted which investigate text's role in fostering critical literacy (CL) and even fewer that explicitly include CL implications for furthering students' intercultural competence. Furthermore, none of the studies found or included in this study

were conducted in Sweden, which further illustrates the lack of research on the subject. Therefore we believe that conducting more geographically and contextually relevant research on the subject is relevant for future research. Further suggestions for research should also be to make large scale replications since most, if not all studies conducted on the subject of critical literacy, are done in relatively small participant groups.

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