

# Implementing Critical Literacy in AI Undergraduate Students<sup>1</sup>

Implementando la literacidad crítica en estudiantes  
universitarios de nivel AI

Fredy Alexander Giraldo Mahecha<sup>2\*</sup>  
Universidad de Ibagué, Colombia

## Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyze the current teaching practices utilized with undergraduate students at a private university in Ibagué-Tolima, who are required to complete Reading Comprehension coursework to obtain their professional degree. Two different methods for Critical Literacy proposed by Clarke and Whitney, and McLaughlin and DeVoogd, are used as examples for piloting and implementation stages respectively. Two different groups belonging to the same level were chosen to perform the activities during the second academic year of 2017. The collected data was analyzed using Grounded Theory procedures. Results showed that critical literacy is not a task that has been well developed at the Language Center. Therefore, the author suggests that teacher education in the area of Critical Literacy should be implemented in pedagogical training.

**Keywords:** Journals, teaching history, critical literacy, reading comprehension, peer observation.

## Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es analizar las actuales prácticas de enseñanza con estudiantes universitarios de una universidad privada en la ciudad de Ibagué - Tolima, quienes deben tomar Comprensión de Lectura como requisito de su carrera profesional. Se utilizaron dos métodos diferentes de Lectura Crítica propuestas por Clarke y Whitney, y McLaughlin y DeVoogd, son utilizados como ejemplos para el pilotaje y la implementación respectivamente. Dos grupos del mismo nivel fueron los que realizaron las actividades durante el segundo semestre de 2017. Los datos recolectados fueron analizados utilizando procedimientos de teoría desde la base. Los resultados mostraron

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<sup>2</sup> fredy.giraldo@unibague.edu.co

que la Lectura Crítica no ha sido bien desarrolla en el Centro de Idiomas. Por consiguiente, el autor sugiere que los docentes se capaciten en Lectura Crítica a través de cursos pedagógicos en dicha área.

**Palabras Claves:** Diarios, historia de enseñanza, literacidad crítica, comprensión de lectura, observación de compañeros.

### **Resumo**

O propósito deste artigo é analisar as atuais práticas de ensino com estudantes universitários da Universidade Particular em Ibagué, os quais devem tomar Compreensão de Leitura como requisito da sua carreira profissional. Utilizaram-se dois métodos diferentes de Leitura Crítica propostas por Clarke e Whitney, e McLaughlin e DeVoogd, são utilizados como exemplos para a pilotagem e a implementação respectivamente. Dois grupos do mesmo nível foram os que realizaram as atividades durante o segundo semestre de 2017. Os dados coletados foram analisados utilizando procedimentos de teoria desde a base. Os resultados mostraram que a Leitura Crítica não tinha sido bem desenvolvida no Centro de Idiomas. Em decorrência, o autor sugere que os docentes se capacitem em Leitura Crítica através de cursos pedagógicos na mencionada área.

*Palavras Chaves:* Diários, história de ensino, literalidade crítica, compreensão de leitura, observação de colegas.

## Introduction

In daily teaching, it is common for teachers to reflect upon their practice, and the most common way to keep record of their experiences is by using teaching journals. Teaching journals are important because they often include aspects of the education process that cannot be seen, such as feelings, personal opinions, thoughts and perceptions of using techniques, students' reactions to such techniques, difficulties, likes and dislikes of new strategies, and frustrations. Gebhard (1999) defines a teaching journal as "a first person account of a series of teaching experiences... In addition, it can create an opportunity to confront the affective aspect of being a teacher, including what annoys, disconcerts, frustrates, encourages, influences, motivates, and inspires us" (p. 79). The journal I keep for the purpose of preparing my classes helped me discover one of the incidents I decided to analyze, because I want to make my teaching more process than product oriented (Porter, Goldstein, Leatherman, & Conrad, 1990).

While clearly a personal teaching resource, Richards and Farrel (2005) state that "the journal ... may be a source of information that can be shared with others" (p. 68). When one talks to one's colleagues about issues that have been found in one's teaching, the journal helps shed lights on certain important incidents that are happening in a given class and how to tackle these situations. Additionally, Griffiee (2012) defines the diary journal as "a document maintained by an individual writing a report to himself or herself on some topic area, such as learning a language or teaching a course" (p. 204).

Another source of information that was used was peer observation. This source was relevant to discover some of the incidents which were not perceived at first. Peer observation consists of watching another teacher's class in order to obtain understanding of some aspects related to teaching, learning, or classroom interaction (Richards & Farrel, 2005). After observation comes feedback. Giving feedback to one's peer is the most important aspect of peer observation because it provides teachers with another point of view of the class. There might be aspects that the teacher cannot perceive while he or she is teaching, but the peer will have a new more objective perspective. In addition, reflecting upon one's own class and having feedback can help a teacher in the process of self-evaluation.

A third source, which I never thought would be useful for finding incidents to analyze, is teacher history. The idea of the teacher history comes from the approach of reflective teaching as a means of improving classroom practice (Bartlett, 1990). The meaning of

reflection by Kemmis (as cited in Bartlett, 1990) states that “reflection is not just an individual, psychological process. It is an action oriented, historically-embedded, social and political frame, to locate oneself in the history of a situation, to participate in a social activity, and to take sides on issues” (p. 204). Through the teaching history, I narrated why I decided to become a teacher, and what inspirations I had during my practice, and also included experiences I have had during my life. Bailey (1990) asserts that collecting one’s personal reflections is practical for teachers because, in some cases, “we teach as we have been taught: The patterns that emerge in our current classroom behaviors may have been formed long ago” (p. 218).

### Theoretical Framework

Reading comprehension is a very important skill in everyday life because there are many things that can and need to be read and understood, such as news outlets, magazines, street signs, menus, newspapers, text messages, etc. Lopez and Giraldo (2011) state in a recent study that

There is an urgent need to increase the reading skills of school-age Colombian students. The ICFES test (Instituto Colombiano para el Fomento de la Educación Superior), a nation-wide standardized test for high-school students, shows that Colombian high school graduates do not reach high levels of reading comprehension (p. 46).

Repeatedly Colombian students in high schools do not achieve high results in exams. Thus, students go to higher education institutions feeling frustrated and not knowing what to do when faced with activities related to reading. Learning to read is instrumental in learning to think critically. The written word surrounds us daily. It enlightens and confuses, it amuses and depresses us, it heals and sickens us (Brown, 2007).

In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1972) states that “the word is more than just an instrument which makes dialogue possible; accordingly, we must seek its constitutive elements” (p. 87). In other words, students need to be more critical when they read a text, no matter what strategy they use to understand it. However, this is not easy because in Colombia, the majority of people are not used to being active critical readers.

Implementing critical literacy to A1 students is not easy. First, before teachers start applying strategies for critical literacy with

learners, it is important for them to learn or have a clear understanding of what critical literacy is and of why it is important. “Critical literacy is built on exploring personal, sociopolitical, economic and intellectual border identities” (Bishop, 2014, p.52). Once teachers become critically aware, they need to know how to teach learners to read from a critical view (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004).

A synonym for critical literacy is *analytical reading* (Molden, 2007, p. 50), and it is defined, according to McLaughlin (2004) “as not only a teaching method but a way of thinking and a way of being that challenges texts and life, as we know it” (p. 50, as cited in Molden, 2007). The origin of critical literacy evolved from the Frankfurt School of Critical Society Theory, which affirms that humans can change society through words and actions (Wood, Soares, & Watson , 2006).

The purpose of implementing critical literacy is to help students develop their capacity to use texts to analyze social fields and their systems of exchange (Luke, 2012). In other words, teachers need to teach their students how to analyze texts, so that students can discern patterns, designs and complexities, and to develop the capacity to redesign and reshape the texts.

The term critical literacy is not new among educators. Critical literacy is often confused with critical thinking, but Lee (2011) mentions that “critical literacy practices differ from critical thinking skills in that the former are set in a sociopolitical context oriented toward identifying unequal power relationships and serving social justice” (p. 97). In his article, Lee also states that critical literacy is not only for higher level students, but that lower level students can also engage to these practices (p. 98); that is why I decided to implement some strategies for critical literacy in reading comprehension with my A1 level.

According to King (2010) it is important to keep four variables in mind when it comes to learning how to read successfully: the reader, the text, the strategies, and the goal. Reading, in other words, is not only comprehending a text, but also about how to address said text. There are four steps in practicing critical literacy with younger and less proficient learners (Abednia, 2015). Those steps are: 1) familiarizing learners with critical literacy, 2) negotiating readings, that is coming to an agreement with students about the texts that are going to be read, 3) asking critical questions, and 4) discussing questions collaboratively. With these four steps “critical literacy facilitates not only the integration of different ingredients of a second language but also a meaningful synthesis of language practice and development of critical consciousness” (p. 87).

As for the techniques to teach critical literacy, there are various authors who provide teachers with a great variety of activities to tackle reading. Amongst these activities, Clarke and Whitney (2009) propose to work with Jones's framework and multiple perspective text which has three parts: *deconstruction*, *reconstruction*, and *social action*. Also, McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) suggest some strategies such as problem posing, the rest of the story (which is an adaptation of problem posing), switching, alternative texts, juxtapositioning, mind and alternative mind portraits, and theme-based focus groups. The choice of the strategy depends directly on the teacher, and the context in which the teacher works.

After having analyzed the three sources of information – teaching journal, peer observation feedback and teacher history – I found that one of the most critical drawbacks I had during the instruction of my classes was the lack of activities to analyze texts in my Reading Comprehension class. This class belongs to a group of students who study at a private university in Ibagué – Tolima, and according to the new curriculum of the institution, need to take three semesters of reading comprehension in English. They are required to complete the levels before they finish 50% of the credits of the degree they are studying. My students make up part of Reading Comprehension III, a class which concludes with the writing of an essay.

During the first two semesters, students explore important strategies to analyze a text. The texts are taken from authentic readings, not from coursebooks – which use texts for specific levels of learning – and the activities proposed in the booklet students follow in class are related to the strategies the students are studying. In the third semester, they have to review the strategies seen in the previous two semesters in order to place themselves in the position of writer. I tried to make this class different by implementing games such as *kahoot*, in which students are provided with multiple choice questions about the text they are supposed to read, and they have to answer to win points. It was only when I discovered my lack of activities that I decided to take action.

### **Piloting**

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For the purpose of this exercise, I implemented features of Action Research, which “specifically refers to a disciplined inquiry done by a teacher with the intent that the research will inform and change his or her practices in the future” (Ferrance, 2000). The approach used in this exercise is a qualitative approach.

First, I started to read about critical literacy and decided to apply some of the strategies I found. For the piloting, I based my activity on the lyrics “So Good,” a song performed by Louisa Johnson (Mac, Gimes, & Drewett, 2016). According to Wood, Soares, and Watson (2006), song lyrics “help students to key in on their interests and aspects of popular culture” (p. 58). Beforehand, I decided to take some words out of the lyrics for students to complete after listening to the song twice. They were delighted to do this listening activity for the first time in their Reading Comprehension III. I do not know if they had done something similar in the previous semesters. After the second listening, I went through the lyrics and students told me the answers to the gaps. They did better than I expected (see appendix A).

After the initial listening activity, I asked students to read the lyrics of the song and find the message the writer intended to deliver. I provided learners with pieces of paper and markers in order to do the activity. While they were analyzing the lyrics, I wrote on the whiteboard the following questions: “With your partner, discuss: 1) Who is the intended audience? 2) What does the author like doing?” The idea of this activity was to engage students to the song. After that, they worked in groups to develop more ideas via these questions: “1) What is the message of the song? 2) If you could ask the author any question(s), which question(s) would you ask?” They had to discuss the questions in small groups and write down their answers. After some time, students taped their work on the walls around the classroom and I had them walk around in order to see and read everybody’s answers to the questions. I call this activity “a gallery-walk”. See Figure 1. Sample 1 and Figure 2. Sample 2.

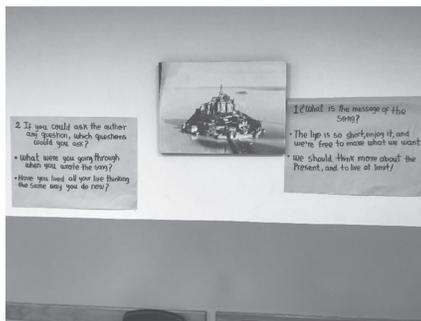


Figure 1. Sample 1

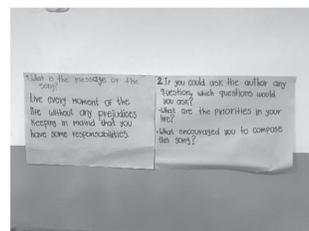


Figure 2. Sample 2

After the class, I started to reflect upon the activity and I decided to use the same one with my other Reading Comprehension III class.

I wanted to see how different my classes were when analyzing from a critical stance. To my surprise, it was a little bit more difficult for this group, but I could see they were having fun while doing the activity. After reflecting upon the level of difficulty the second class had, one problem arises; are the classes being successful for the purpose of the University? This question requires to do a more specialized research project.

Once I had seen their work, I made the decision to apply a new strategy, but this time I was going to use two different texts for the first group, and only one for the second, because I observed that the second group had more difficulties developing their ideas from the questions I posed.

### Implementation

The strategy I chose for this implementation was *switching*, which is, according to McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004), a strategy that can help show biases in the text as well as make the reader more aware of the author's intention (as cited in Molden, 2007). Among the different switches, I decided to use gender switch and ethnic/race switch. The idea of gender switch is to tell the story using the opposite sex, and as for ethnic/race switch, it is to change character's racial or ethnic characteristics. (p. 54)

Two of *Aesop's Fables* (Aesop, 2017) were given to different groups; *Androcles* and *Frogs Desiring a King*. Those who read *Androcles* had to identify the moral of the story. Then, they had to rewrite the story, this time telling it as though *Androcles* were a girl. For *Frogs Desiring a King*, students had to tell the story with different characters, but following the same moral. (See appendix B)

Students in the first reading class had one hour to read each fable and rewrite the story. At the beginning, they were asking questions to confirm that what they were doing was what I had asked them to do. This first group was very committed to doing a good job, and they were working very well. After one hour, they asked me for more time because they had not finished. After seeing how well they were working, I granted them more time.

Unlike the first class, the second only had the fable of *Androcles* and they were supposed to do the same activity the first class had done. They had to find the moral and tell the story changing the gender. This group had more difficulties when rewriting the story. Some students did not know what to do and they expressed this to me. I had to give them

more examples in order to help them write. Some groups said, “Nothing would change. The story would be exactly the same.” So I posed the question, “Are you sure a girl would act the same way Androcles did?” After that, they started to change the story. At the end of the class, I collected their pieces of work so as to analyze them.

Later, I started to reflect upon the activities I had done and wrote in my journal “the second group needs more input and they need to be taught how to think from a critical stance. On the other hand, the first group was more engaged and it was easier for them. What is happening?” After writing the entry, I knew I had to do a focus group to hear their voices regarding the activities. In order to analyze the data, I used the grounded theory, which involves the construction of theory through data collection and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### Outcomes

Hearing students’ opinions about the activities was very important for the results. In the focus groups, students from both groups expressed their feelings towards the ambience of the class.<sup>3</sup> They commented that “And it was more fun. Both activities were good...,” “we try our best. We like to do the activities, it is not only reading and being bored because we have to.” They also stated, “The activities were more didactic,” “it is not an ordinary activity; read a text and answer questions related to it, but there were activities that made us learn. Hence, these kinds of activities encourage us to learn English in a different way.” Others said, “I found the activity interesting, particularly the fable because it was something different from what we were doing” and “The activities were very good. We utilized new techniques that helped with the comprehension of English because they were not traditional activities mainly focused on reading and answering questions. To name one, the poster.”

These impressions were entered in my teaching log. During the class I noticed how students were engaged in doing the activities. They seemed to enjoy what they were doing. “I felt my class was different. Students were working well and they looked happy doing the activities,” I wrote.

I also received feedback that was not wholly positive. Some students believed that the activities were not easy at all, especially when they were asked to make the gender switch. Some groups stated

<sup>3</sup> Students’ comments were translated by the author for publication purposes.

that the story would not change at all, because a woman could also behave as a man does. “It was difficult because we have a previous concept. For example, we said that she would never escape, but I said to her that that was something ‘chauvinistic’.” Also, they mentioned that it was a different experience because the activities made them doubt as expressed in the focus group: “We start to doubt. We all doubted about the audience,” and “I think that it was more like a bittersweet feeling because we, as women, would act differently.” I appreciated that and wrote in my log that “I could see in their faces that they were thinking and thinking”, and asked myself, “was their level too low for the activity, or was the activity too difficult?”

Moreover, students felt they were doing a different activity in which they had to be in the author’s position, as if they were talking to the author. “I really liked the activity of being in the author’s feet because it helps infer what we understand.” Another said, “Cool. We already had an idea of what the fable was about and we put it in another context,” and another, “As for the questions, I think it was innovative because I had never wondered about the author.”

Ultimately, students reflected upon their daily reading practice and they think these kinds of activities should be used more often. One remarked, “These kinds of activities make you feel like attending class... like learning.” Another commented, “In the regular courses we do, but not in Reading Comprehension.” The implementation of critical literacy strategies for readings was definitely effective, given the joy students felt, as well as the new things they learned in order to enjoy a reading class. “I think that we learn other abilities apart from learning English.”

### **Conclusions**

Even though the activities were implemented in two different groups, I could see that the aim of having students read from a critical stance was accomplished. The difference in the level was not an obstacle to perform such activities; I just had to work differently in each group. As for the students, they realized that reading critically has many deviations and it depends on the readers to decide how to tackle the texts. Both, students and I, were able to see how differently a text can be aimed and how fun a reading class can be.

Additionally, students were very committed to participating in the activities and they expressed their sympathy for having a fun and different class. As for the posters, they showed that aspects such as

grammar and vocabulary do not affect the result of the activity, but it is an issue that needs to be tackled in further classes. (Picture C, D, and E)

### **Recommendations**

Once the analysis of the focus group and the teaching log were done, one issue arose: Teachers in the Language Center of the university where the strategies were applied may not know how to teach critical literacy. In order to overcome this situation, it is advisable to train teachers in this area of knowledge, so they can implement a critical view in the Reading Comprehension classes. For this reason, I have asked the director of the Language Center to create a space to share this concern and to have a workshop based on critical literacy in reading. The idea of training teachers in this aspect will help improve teaching situations so that classes may become more interesting and meaningful, without leaving aside the main purpose of the course, comprehension of texts – no matter what they study, they can analyze any kind of text.

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**Appendix A**  
**So Good – Louisa Johnson**

I said I'm 'bout \_\_\_\_\_ minutes away  
 One more stop and I'll be off this \_\_\_\_\_  
 I'm free any day of the week, always losing some \_\_\_\_\_  
 I told myself I'll be back by 10  
 Trying to save myself for the \_\_\_\_\_  
 But I know me, I hate to miss a \_\_\_\_\_

Don't say, don't say I didn't warn you  
 Don't say I didn't warn you  
 I live for the moment

I wasn't supposed to go out \_\_\_\_\_  
 I should be at home, I got work at 9  
 Shouldn't be out here doing what I \_\_\_\_\_  
 But it feels so good, so good  
 I was only gonna be an hour or two  
 I guess that now I'm here I'm going down with you  
 But it feels so good, so good  
 \_\_\_\_\_ on my shoulder's giving up on me  
 No listening to him and I can hardly speak  
 The \_\_\_\_\_ they play makes me this way, oh yeah  
 It was only 10, how did it get to 3?  
 It's like I'm in my ow \_\_\_\_\_ machine  
 But you know me, I'll never leave  
 Don't say, don't say I didn't warn you  
 Don't say I didn't warn you

Just live for the moment  
I wasn't supposed to go out \_\_\_\_\_  
I should be at home, I got work at 9  
Shouldn't be out here doing what I \_\_\_\_\_  
But it feels so good, so good  
I was only gonna be an hour or two  
I guess that now I'm here I'm going down with you  
But it feels so good, so good

Cause everyone I know is here  
\_\_\_\_\_ sours, crying tears  
Living out the best years  
So keep on toasting shots, cheers  
\_\_\_\_\_ know it feels So good

I wasn't supposed to go out \_\_\_\_\_  
I should be at home, I got work at 9  
Shouldn't be out here doing what I \_\_\_\_\_  
But it feels so good, so good  
I was only gonna be an hour or two  
I guess that now I'm here I'm going down with you  
But it feels so good, so good

## Appendix B

### The Frogs Desiring a King

The Frogs were living as happy as could be in a marshy swamp that just suited them; they went splashing about caring for nobody and nobody troubling with them. But some of them thought that this was not right, that they should have a king and a proper constitution, so they determined to send up a petition to Jove to give them what they wanted. ‘Mighty Jove,’ they cried, ‘send unto us a king that will rule over us and keep us in order.’ Jove laughed at their croaking, and threw down into the swamp a huge Log, which came downrplashto the swamp. The Frogs were frightened out of their lives by the commotion made in their midst, and all rushed to the bank to look at the horrible monster; but after a time, seeing that it did not move, one or two of the boldest of them ventured out towards the Log, and even dared to touch it; still it did not move. Then the greatest hero of the Frogs jumped upon the Log and commenced dancing up and down upon it, thereupon all the Frogs came and did the same; and for some time the Frogs went about their business every day without taking the slightest notice of their new King Log lying in their midst. But this did not suit them, so they sent another petition to Jove, and said to him, ‘We want a real king; one that will really rule over us.’ Now this made Jove angry, so he sent among them a big Stork that soon set to work gobbling them all up. Then the Frogs repented when too late.

Better no rule than cruel rule.

### Androcles

A slave named Androcles once escaped from his master and fled to the forest. As he was wandering about there he came upon a Lion lying down moaning and groaning. At first he turned to flee, but finding that the Lion did not pursue him, he turned back and went up to him. As he came near, the Lion put out his paw, which was all swollen and bleeding, and Androcles found that a huge thorn had got into it, and was causing all the pain. He pulled out the thorn and bound up the paw of the Lion, who was soon able to rise and lick the hand of Androcles like a dog. Then the Lion took Androcles to his cave, and every day used to bring him meat from which to live. But shortly afterwards both Androcles and the Lion were captured, and the slave was sentenced to be thrown to the Lion, after the latter had been kept without food for several days. The Emperor and all his Court came to see the spectacle, and Androcles was led out into the middle of the arena. Soon the Lion

was let loose from his den, and rushed bounding and roaring towards his victim. But as soon as he came near to Androcles he recognised his friend, and fawned upon him, and licked his hands like a friendly dog. The Emperor, surprised at this, summoned Androcles to him, who told him the whole story. Whereupon the slave was pardoned and freed, and the Lion let loose to his native forest.

Gratitude is the sign of noble souls.

#### **Author**

**\*Fredy Giraldo** has a B.A. in Biology and Chemistry, is a Specialist in Translation English - Spanish, and is a candidate for the title as a magister in English Didactics at Universidad del Tolima. Fredy, a former ICETEX Scholar in France, is a Professor at Universidad de Ibagu e at the Language Center and at Universidad del Tolima. He has written articles, essays, and a course book on reading comprehension.