

Recovering the Power Inside: A Qualitative Study of Critical Reading in an Iranian University

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Abstract

A fundamental goal of critical literacy approaches is to bring a change and empower students as critical agents and subjects of decision making. Students are expected to do more than simply accumulate information; they are encouraged to challenge their 'taken for granted' belief structures and transform themselves as well as their immediate social environment. In this article, we present a qualitative enquiry in a university reading course based on critical literacy. We explored how learners reflected on their individual/community and word/world concerns through critical understanding of texts and how they challenged and shattered their 'taken for granted' beliefs and started to transform into critical agents of voice and position. The data consists of 400 concept maps, called *webs*, and personal journals by fifty undergraduate English literature students at an Iranian University, as well as oral and written interviews. The data was qualitatively analyzed in search of themes that could illustrate students' early thinking structures and their empowerment and transformations into subjects of decisions. The study revealed that, through webbing words/worlds and critically challenging texts, students took the opportunity to approach the knowledge and information presented to them analytically and critically. On this basis, we discuss how students were able to gain the power of critiquing, freeing their thoughts, finding and expressing their voice and position, discovering personal meanings in texts and contexts, cooperating and participating, and understanding learning for meaning through the critical act of reading.

Keywords: *Critical literacy; language learning; webbing; journal writing; qualitative research*