

Critical Reading With Undergraduate EFL Students in Colombia: Gains and Challenges

Lectura crítica con estudiantes del pregrado de inglés como
lengua extranjera en Colombia: logros y desafíos

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This qualitative study explored the gains and challenges experienced by an interdisciplinary group of English as a foreign language students who participated in the implementation of a critical reading unit taught within a reading comprehension course at a university in Medellín, Colombia. To do this, video-recordings of all lessons, samples of students' work, and students' reflections were collected. Results show that students experienced several gains but also had some challenges related to aligning with the author's position, seeing positionality in factual texts, and taking middle positions. These results suggest that even though it is not only possible but beneficial to do critical reading with undergraduate English as a foreign language students, there are some specific areas in which these students need additional support.

Keywords: critical reading, English as a foreign language, English instruction, reading comprehension, undergraduate students

Este estudio cualitativo exploró los aprendizajes y los retos experimentados por un grupo interdisciplinar de estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera que participaron en la implementación de una unidad de lectura crítica en un curso de comprensión lectora en una universidad colombiana. Para hacer esto, se recogieron las grabaciones de las sesiones de clase, así como las muestras de los trabajos y las reflexiones de los estudiantes. Los resultados muestran que los estudiantes tuvieron varias ganancias, pero también experimentaron ciertos retos relacionados con su alineamiento con la posición del autor, y el no poder ver la posicionalidad en los textos fácticos, o tomar posiciones intermedias. Estos resultados sugieren que, aunque es posible y beneficioso hacer este tipo de lectura con estos estudiantes de este pregrado, existen áreas específicas en las que éstos necesitan un apoyo adicional.

Palabras clave: comprensión lectora, enseñanza del inglés, inglés como lengua extranjera, estudiantes de pregrado, lectura crítica

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This article is based on the master's thesis completed by Castaño-Roldán (2019).

How to cite this article (APA, 7th ed.): Castaño-Roldán, J. D., & Correa, D. (2021). Critical reading with undergraduate EFL students in Colombia: Gains and challenges. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, 23(2), 35-50. <https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v23n2.89034>

This article was received on July 10, 2020 and accepted on March 12, 2021.

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Introduction

In the last few years, the number of texts available in different languages, especially English, has increased considerably as a result of the development of technology around the world (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). To critical literacy scholars, even though these texts can increase and expand our knowledge of the world, they also have the power to deceive, delude (Haromi, 2014; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004) and misrepresent reality (Luke et al., 1994; Wallace, 2003). Moreover, they can contribute to the reproduction of stereotypes, unequal social structures and power relations (Janks, 2010; Wallace, 2003), discriminatory race relations, restrictive versions of gender identities, and one-dimensional versions of culture (Luke et al., 1994).

But how do texts do this? Critical literacy scholars believe they do it through the use of different lexical (e.g., choice of certain words), grammatical (e.g., choice of active instead of passive voice), and textual choices (e.g., fronting some information and putting the other at the end; Butt et al., 2000). These choices are situated in the authors' worlds and reflect their ideological biases (Wallace, 2003). For example, if authors privilege a certain way of seeing the world, they will represent it in a positive way by using positively charged words, putting it in the theme position (or at the beginning of the clause), supporting it with other views, and so on. On the other hand, if authors despise this way of seeing the world, they will use negatively charged words, put it in the rheme position (or at the end of the clause), and silence those voices that represent it in a positive way. To be able to unravel all these mechanisms used by authors, students need to be taught to read critically.

Reading critically means “questioning, exploring, and challenging the power relationships that exist between authors and readers in terms of gender, race, and social class, among others” (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2008, p. 54). It also means “understanding why the author wrote about a particular topic from a

particular perspective, or why they chose to leave some ideas in and others out of the text, among other things” (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 12).

Students who can read this way have a broader understanding of what is happening in texts (Janks, 2010). Besides, they are better equipped to do the following: (a) reflect on issues they face from different angles and develop a more accurate image of what these issues might be (Iyer, 2007), (b) avoid the passive reproduction of the ideas found in the texts they read (Comber, 2001), (c) question normalized, unfair representations of certain groups of people in texts (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2008), and (d) create counter-texts that represent these groups of people in a more just way and “to seek out the voices of those who have been silenced or marginalized” (Janks, 2010, p. 383).

On the other hand, students who are not able to do this type of critical reading (CR) can more easily fall prey to authors' manipulation and may inadvertently end up perpetuating unequal power relationships related to social issues such as race, class, and gender both in texts and society (Luke, 2000). They may also find themselves normalizing and reproducing stereotypes and ideologies embedded in these texts (Luke, 2012).

Aware of the importance of having students do a CR of texts, many universities across the globe have started to offer English as a foreign language (EFL) reading comprehension courses in which students are taught CR as described above (Giraldo, 2018; Gómez-Jiménez & Gutierrez, 2019; Haromi, 2014). Unfortunately, a review of studies published in the five main EFL Colombian journals reveals that, in the country, these courses have focused on the development of reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, and exploiting transparent words, among others (Aguirre-Morales & Ramos-Holguín, 2009; Bautista-Barón, 2013; Camargo & Orbegozo-Navarro, 2010; Gómez-Torres & Ávila-Constain, 2009; Lopera-Medina, 2012; López-Medina, 2001; Perdomo, 2001; Posada-Ortiz, 2004; Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2017; Ruiz & Arias-Rodríguez, 2009), not on the development of CR.

Given this gap, scholars from a university in Medellín, Colombia, designed and taught a CR unit to students taking a reading comprehension course at this university. As they did this, they conducted a qualitative study guided by the following research question: What are the gains and challenges experienced by undergraduate students during the implementation of this unit?

Theoretical Framework

The study described here drew on critical literacy theories, particularly those focused on CR, and used McLaughlin and DeVoogd's (2004) Strategy Instructional Framework to help students read community texts critically. These texts, as defined by Luke et al. (1994), are those that circulate in everyday life and are important in the wider cultural climate. Examples of these are newspaper reports, comic strips, memes, and magazine articles. Although they seem to be neutral, these texts document and shape social life and impose ideological agendas (Luke et al., 1994; Wallace, 2003).

Critical Reading

CR is a complex phenomenon that comprises at least four main principles, all of which were used in the CR unit presented here:

1. CR allows readers to identify the author's position in texts and how it influences readers: This involves recognizing how the linguistic and textual choices made by authors are helping them both establish their position and influence the readers' position (Cervetti et al., 2001; Janks, 2010; Luke, 2000).
2. CR helps readers think about texts from different perspectives: This means acknowledging that other representations of the world, apart from those of the author, are possible and valid (Iyer, 2007; Lewison et al., 2002; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004).
3. CR permits readers to uncover hidden messages in texts: This implies identifying other messages in texts, beyond the obvious, and the ideologies

behind these messages (Begoray et al., 2013; Kellner & Share, 2007; Luke, 2000; Molden, 2007).

4. CR facilitates the recognition of silenced and marginalized voices in texts: This refers to being able to pinpoint whose voices are being left out of the conversation by authors and the intentions that authors have with this (Luke, 2000; McDaniel, 2004; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004).

Although there are many definitions of CR, there are few studies showing how it can be done at the undergraduate level. These studies focus mainly on the following: (a) the results of teaching CR in English reading comprehension courses for undergraduate students with varied proficiency levels (Giraldo, 2018; Haromi, 2014; Huang, 2011; Liu, 2017), (b) undergraduate students' responses to CR instruction in English courses (Esteban-Nuñez, 2014; Gómez-Jiménez & Gutierrez, 2019; Kuo, 2014), and (c) EFL teachers' perceptions and difficulties when implementing CR (Belet & Dal, 2010; Gómez-Jiménez & Gutierrez, 2019; Rahimi & Askari-Bigdeli, 2015). They do not focus on the gains and challenges experienced by students with this pedagogy.

The few studies that have focused on these two issues have reported four main challenges: (a) inability to see authors' bias when stereotypes in texts apply to more than one social group (Giraldo, 2018), (b) problems to see textual organization as a tool for authors to position readers (Haromi, 2014), (c) difficulties to see stereotypes when these are rooted and tied to students' cultural identities (Gómez-Jiménez & Gutierrez, 2019), and (d) trouble to discuss political issues and challenge the status quo (Rahimi & Askari-Bigdeli, 2015).

As for gains, the studies have identified at least another four: (a) students' realization that all texts reflect authors' positions and, therefore, they always try to influence readers (Huang, 2011); (b) improvement of students' language proficiency level by increasing their motivation (Liu, 2017); (c) broadening of students' understanding

of issues such as racism (Esteban-Nuñez, 2014); and (d) students' development of multiple perspectives on issues (Belet & Dal, 2010).

The Strategy Instructional Framework

This framework, as described by McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004), involves five stages: explaining, demonstrating, guiding, practicing, and reflecting. In the first stage, the instructor "explains what a critical literacy strategy is and how it works" (p. 38). Two strategies proposed by these authors are "mind and alternative mind portraits" and "theme switch" (p. 47). However, instructors can use others such as analysis of appraisal devices used in the text (e.g., nouns, adjectives, adverbs; Butt et al., 2000, p. 120).

In "mind and alternative mind portraits," students examine a text from two points of view which may or may not be present in the text (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 51). In "theme switch," after students read a text, they respond to selected questions, such as "what gender is represented in the text?" or "what race is represented in the text." Then, they imagine how the message would change after switching the race or gender of characters in certain texts (p. 48). In the analysis of appraisal devices, students examine linguistics elements, chosen by authors to represent reality (Butt et al., 2000, p. 120).

In the second stage, demonstrating, the instructor "demonstrates the strategy by using a think-aloud, a read-aloud, and an overhead projector or chalkboard" (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 38). In the third stage, guiding, the instructor "guides students to work in small groups or with partners to create responses" (p. 38). In the fourth stage, practicing, the instructor has students "practice by having students work with partners or independently to apply the critical literacy strategy" (p. 38). Finally, in the last stage, reflecting, the instructor encourages students to "reflect on how the strategy helps read critically" (p. 38).

Method

This is a qualitative study as it takes "an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world, . . . studying things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 5).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection resources included video-recordings of all classes, samples of students' work, and students' written reflection tasks. To collect these data, consent forms were procured from both the program coordinator and the students, and pseudonyms were assigned to all participants. Samples of students' work were collected at two different moments: (a) in the guiding stage and (b) in the practice stage of each cycle, which included text analyses done by students. Reflections took place at the reflection stage of each cycle and were carried out in Spanish so that students would feel more comfortable expressing themselves. In them, students reported what they had learned about the principle and if the strategies provided had helped them read more critically. Table 1 shows a summary of all data collected.

Data were analyzed using a deductive-inductive approach (Richards, 2003). That is, researchers used some preestablished categories (the four CR principles) and subcategories (gains and challenges). However, new categories (e.g., lack of cultural background, understanding the role of language in positionality, lack of grammatical knowledge) were allowed to emerge.

Context and Participants

The setting for this study was an English reading comprehension Level II course taught to undergraduate students in a public university in Medellín, Colombia. The original program sought to develop students' reading comprehension skills in English through the teaching of morpho-syntactic structures, vocabulary, general terminology as well as reading strategies (English reading comprehension program, I & II).

Table 1. Data Collected

Instrument	Principle 1	Principle 2	Principle 3	Principle 4	Total per instrument
Video recordings	4	4	4	4	16
Samples of students' work	17	17	15	15	64
Reflection tasks	21	21	19	20	81
Total per principle	42	42	38	39	

Nonetheless, the authors obtained permission from the program Coordination to reconfigure the course syllabus and make it more in line with these theories.

The students taking this course were a group of 21 undergraduates, 10 male and 11 female, coming mostly from low socio-economic backgrounds whose ages ranged from 17 to 24. They were pursuing different professional programs and class observations suggest their English proficiency level ranged from A2 to B1. In regard to their reading comprehension, students claimed not to have any experience with CR, as their previous reading comprehension course had mainly focused on grammar aspects, how to use dictionaries, and how to identify main ideas.

The Pedagogical Unit

The pedagogical unit comprised 16 classes, taught in the course of four weeks. To organize the unit, McLaughlin and DeVoogd's (2004) Strategy Instructional Framework was used in a cyclic manner (one cycle per CR principle) until all four CR principles were covered. Since students belonged to different fields of knowledge, we decided to use community instead of disciplinary texts. As for topics, we decided to include those that seemed appealing to a wide range of Colombians: Pablo Escobar, alcohol, use of guns, the ceasefire. We also used memes that displayed gender and race issues due to their currency in Colombian WhatsApp messages, and an article on vegetarianism, due to the explosion of vegetarian restaurants in the city.

Table 2 shows both the strategies and the texts that were selected to teach each principle.

For example, to familiarize students with the first principle, during the first class, the instructor explained how identifying authors' positions in texts could help them read critically (explanation stage). Then, the news report "Press Hails Uribe's Victory" retrieved from the BBC site was used to demonstrate the analysis of appraisal devices strategy, which consisted of looking at the adjectives and nouns used by the author to represent the characters and situations in this text (demonstration stage).

Next, during the second class, students were guided, in pairs to analyze another news report "Drug Boss Pablo Escobar Still Divides Colombia" retrieved from the BBC site. They wrote down the analysis they made using the strategy and presented it to the rest of the class orally for their feedback (guiding stage). Then, in the same pairs, and as homework for the third class, students were asked to find a similar text to practice the modeled strategy and to show their understanding of the CR principle that was being discussed. Once in class, they shared their analysis with the whole class and received feedback from both the instructor and their classmates (practice stage).

Finally, during the fourth class, students answered some questions posed by the instructor to help them reflect on the gains and challenges they experienced while working with the principle (reflection stage). Once this cycle was over, a new cycle with a new principle would begin. Each cycle lasted about four classes.

Table 2. Principles, Strategies and Texts Used to Develop Critical Reading (CR)

CR principles: CR is being able to:	1. Identify the author's position in texts and how it influences readers.	2. Think about texts from different perspectives.	3. Uncover hidden messages in texts.	4. Recognize silenced and marginalized voices in texts.
CR strategies	Appraisal strategy	Mind and alternative mind portraits strategy	Theme switch strategy	Mind and alternative mind portraits strategy
Texts used	"Press Hails Uribe's Victory" (BBC) ^a "Drug Boss Pablo Escobar Still Divides Colombia" (BBC) ^b	"Can Alcohol Help You Live Longer?" (Time Magazine) ^c "How a Vegetarian Diet Could Help Save the Planet" (Time Magazine) ^d	Memes and comic strips from the internet dealing with gender and race issues	"Father Challenges Marco Rubio on Guns" (CNN News) ^e "Colombia and FARC Sign Historic Ceasefire Deal" (Al Jazeera English News Channel) ^f

^a (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/5026808.stm>). ^b (<https://bbc.in/38y1rCe>). ^c (<https://bit.ly/3vfkPLI>). ^d (<https://bit.ly/38woZCo>). ^e (<https://bit.ly/3bFWUuj>). ^f (<https://bit.ly/3lighje>).

Findings

Findings suggest that during the CR unit, students experienced both gains and challenges. The following paragraphs describe what these were and present evidence from the unit.

Gains

In regard to gains, the analysis suggests students were not only able to understand the four CR principles but also went beyond them by understanding the following: (a) the role of knowledge and language in positionality, (b) the importance of multiple perspectives in unveiling both authors' positionality and hidden messages, and (c) the reasons why authors give voice to certain characters and silence others.

Understanding the Role of Knowledge and Language in Positionality

This gain refers to students' realization that readers are less easily influenced by authors when they have knowledge about the topic, character, or situation being presented and when they are aware of the language being used. Nine students showed understanding of the first

part. An example of these students is Valeria. As practice for the first principle—CR is about identifying the author's position in texts and how it influences readers—students had been asked to look for a text and analyze it using the appraisal strategy taught in class. Valeria brought a text about crash diets. When discussing this and other texts that students had brought, Valeria said,¹

Since I did not know about the topic, it was hard for me, to a certain extent, to identify the author's position because I did not have a reference point to know if I could believe what I was reading or not. So, I assumed it was true in a way.

As can be seen, Valeria realizes that when readers do not have knowledge about the topic, it is not only hard to identify the author's position but also to adopt one themselves, which makes them more easily assume that what the author says is true.

Valeria's realization was confirmed in the reflection task for the first principle where, in response to Question 1 ("What did you learn about the author's position and how it influences readers?"), she wrote,

¹ Excerpts have been translated from Spanish.

Authors use certain linguistic elements to give readers clues about their position on the topic of the text. However, *if the reader does not know much about the topic, the author can make them change their opinion or interest in the topic in a negative or positive way.*

In this reflection, Valeria expands on what she had stated in class by explaining that knowing little about the topic is also dangerous as the author can make readers change their position very easily.

As for the role of language in positionality, 16 students showed understanding of this aspect. An example of these students is Tomás. For the guiding stage of the same principle, the instructor provided students with the article about Escobar from *BBC News*. In this article, the author takes a negative position against Escobar by describing him as “infamous drug lord,” “drug boss,” and “crime boss.” He also takes a negative position against the fact that some people still affectionately refer to Pablo as “Pablito.” To show students how authors influence readers positively or negatively through the linguistic choices they make, the instructor asked students to read the article and complete a table with questions about how the author was positioning Escobar. Table 3 shows how Tomás responded.

Tomás’s answers show that he was able to understand how the author was using specific linguistic resources, such as adverbs, adjectives, and nouns to “persuade

readers to believe that Pablo was a bad person.” During the reflection stage for the first principle, Tomás commented on this new understanding. He said,

Teacher, when I was...looking at the example that you gave us about Pablo and the one that I did, I realized *that the language that the author uses either adjectives or whatever makes you believe because it causes emotions in you that make you agree or disagree and mainly when you read in a hurry which is like you read the news. [sic]*

As is evident from this intervention, Tomás did not only understand the role of language in positioning readers but also how it achieved this positioning. Besides, he was also able to identify that readers are more susceptible to this positioning when they do not read carefully.

Realizing the Importance of Multiple Perspectives in Identifying Author’s Position and Unveiling Hidden Messages

As the lessons progressed, students were able to not only adopt multiple perspectives but also realize how these could help them both understand what is going on in a text and unveil hidden messages. One of the nine students who was able to use multiple perspectives to identify the author’s position was Anibal. In one of the activities carried out to help students understand the second principle—CR is about analyzing texts

Table 3. Tomás’s Analysis of a News Article

Article: “Drug Boss Pablo Escobar Still Divides Colombia.” Principle 1		
How is the author positioning Escobar?	What linguistic elements is he using to do that?	What image of Escobar is he trying to imprint on readers?
The author positions Escobar as someone for whom he feels disdain. He also positions him as a cruel and ruthless criminal.	Adverbs: sadly, shockingly Adjectives: infamous, criminal, richest Nouns: greatest outlaw, ruthlessness, crime boss Verbs: terrorised, bribed, attacked, killed	<u>The author tries to persuade readers to believe that Pablo was a bad person</u> who does not deserve to be admired in the Colombian culture. I can say that because of the way that he describes everything related to Pablo.

from different perspectives—the instructor asked students to read the article about vegetarianism from *Time Magazine*. In this article, the author takes a position in favor of vegetarianism by portraying it as the possible solution to environmental and health problems. Students had to select one of the author’s statements related to the topic and then apply the “mind and alternative mind portraits” strategy, which meant analyzing the statement based on what people like scientists, housewives, and activists would think. By the end of the exercise, Anibal was able to think about the topic of the text from several perspectives that were both in favor and against the author’s position. Table 4 shows his responses.

Table 4. Anibal’s Response to a Magazine Article

Article: “How a Vegetarian Diet Could Help Save the Planet.” Principle 2	
Alternative perspective	
Author’s statement	Reducing meat consumption improves human health.
What other people say about this statement?	<p>In favor: Nutritionist: Reducing meat consumption helps avoid a lot of heart problems. I can help you design a diet plan to reduce meat consumption. Scientist: This is scientifically proven. With more studies, we can tell you more information about it.</p> <p>Against: Mother: Meat cannot be reduced. It has a good amount of protein and it is easy to prepare. Butcher: Humans have always eaten meat and if we stop eating it, it will <u>affect many people’s economy.</u></p>

As can be gathered from Table 4, Anibal was able to think about the arguments other people would provide against or in favor of this statement and the interests that these arguments would support. In the reflection stage for the second principle, he confirmed that he saw

how important being able to identify these positions was in identifying the author’s positionality:

Teacher, you generally think that *the information that you have is the truth just because, and that it is not an opinion like everyone else’s*. When you start *considering what different people can think about a certain topic in a text, you can even realize the way that the author believes things should be concerning the topic in the text.*

This statement shows Anibal’s realization that it was easier for readers to identify the author’s position when they considered other perspectives about the topic of the text.

As for being able to use multiple perspectives to unveil hidden messages, one of the six students who presented this gain was Catalina. To help students understand the third principle—uncovering hidden messages in texts—the instructor explained the “theme switch” strategy, which basically asked students to look at the issue from the perspective of a person from a different gender or race. To practice this strategy, students were asked to bring random memes or comic strips to be analyzed in class. Once these were gathered, each student was assigned two. Catalina got the ones shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Once assigned, students were instructed to apply the switching strategy taught in class and then answer a question about stereotypes (Table 5).

Table 5. Catalina’s Analysis of Memes and Comic Strips (Principle 3)

What is the stereotype?
<u>Men are unfaithful and irresponsible.</u> <u>Black people are thieves.</u>

Table 5 shows how by using “gender switch,” or putting herself in the position of a man, Catalina was able to unveil the stereotype about men being portrayed in Figure 1. Similarly, by using race switch, she was able to clearly see the stereotype about black people shown

in Figure 2. During the reflection stage for the third principle, when asked, “have your views of memes changed after analyzing them with these strategies, how?” Catalina said,

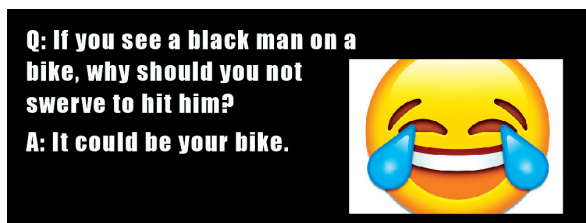
Now, I am more aware of the fact that *many memes reproduce stereotypes and when we laugh because of them, we are not aware of that and this can be due to the fact that we are used to looking at everything from a single perspective. To unveil the hidden messages, it was necessary to think like other people and adopt other perspectives that had different beliefs concerning men and black people.*

Figure 1. Comic Strip on Gender Stereotypes



Note. From ME.ME (<https://me.me/>)

Figure 2. Comic Strip on Racial Prejudice



As can be seen, Catalina sees how dangerous it is “to look at things from a single perspective” and the need “to think like other people and [take] other perspectives” to unveil hidden messages.

Discerning Why Authors Give Voice to Certain Characters and Silence Others

One of the most notable gains, shown by 14 students, was the realization that authors give voice to certain characters and silence others based on their intentions. One of these students was Juliana. During one of the activities prepared to explain the fourth principle—CR is about identifying silenced and marginalized voices in texts—the instructor asked students to read the news report about the peace agreement in Colombia from *Al Jazeera English news channel*. In this news report, the author takes a position in favor of the peace agreement and tries to align readers with his position by giving voice to those who agree and marginalizing those who disagree. To analyze the voices in this text, students were asked to complete a table with questions about them. Table 6 shows the answers Juliana provided.

Table 6 shows how Juliana was not only able to identify marginalized voices in the news report (ex-President Uribe’s followers and the victims of the conflict) but to see the intentions behind the omission of those voices (“not to change the objective of the text” and “to keep his argument valid”).

Juliana’s realization that authors give voice to certain characters and silence others based on their intentions was captured again in the reflection task for the fourth principle where, in response to Question 1 (“What did you learn about marginalized voices in texts?”), she wrote,

Table 6. Juliana’s Analysis of a News Report

News Report: “Colombia and FARC Sign Historic Ceasefire Deal.” Principle 4		
Who is included and excluded?	What would these marginalized voices say?	Why did the author decide to exclude these voices?
<p>Included: Colombians who agree with the peace agreement.</p> <p>Excluded: <u>Victims of the conflict, FARC rebels, people who disagree with the peace agreement.</u></p>	<p>Ex-president Uribe’s followers: It is not possible that these people can reach the Congress after harming this society so much.</p> <p>Victims of the conflict: There are no guarantees. They must tell us where our beloved ones are to bury them. It is not fair that they are being rewarded after all they did.</p>	<p>He omitted them not to change the objective of the text. The author saw the sign [<i>sic</i>] of the peace agreement as something positive and omitted those disagreeing voices in order to keep his argument valid.</p>

I learned that *according to the author’s intentions and what you want to transmit, voices are marginalized because the author wants to transmit a specific image of the topic and some voices would not favor this image.* I also learned that *the author includes or excludes voices based on his/her intentions.*

In this excerpt, Juliana realizes that authors do not just leave voices out for a purpose, they also include them for a purpose.

Challenges

Data analysis suggests that during the course of the unit students experienced three main challenges: (a) aligning with the author’s position, (b) seeing positionality in factual texts, and (c) taking middle positions.

Aligning With the Author’s Position

This challenge refers to the fact that some students were not able to see positionality on the part of the author or themselves (three students) or to identify marginalized voices in texts (six students) due to their alignment with the author’s position.

One of the three students who presented this challenge was Ana. In the activity referred to before, which intended to raise students’ awareness about the first

principle—CR is about identifying the author’s position in texts and how it influences readers—and had students analyze Escobar’s news article during the guide stage, Ana showed that she was able to identify the linguistic elements that the author used to position Escobar as a drug lord and a violent person. However, she had problems recognizing that these elements positioned both the author and herself. When she was asked, “What image of Escobar is he trying to imprint on readers?” she answered,

A commercial image as one of the biggest drug-traffickers, murderers, and terrorists... However, I already knew this and therefore, this text doesn’t influence me that much because what it says is not an opinion but the truth. Since it is written in English, it is possibly for foreign people that could be influenced. [sic]

As is obvious from this excerpt, the fact that Ana coincided with the author in his representations of Pablo Escobar, stopped her from seeing that: (a) it was an opinion and therefore a position, and (b) regardless of her response, the author was still trying to position her.

As time progressed, Ana remained in the same position that she expressed before, as the reflection task for the first principle confirms. Indeed, when she was asked, “What did you learn about author’s position and how it influences readers?” Ana answered,

I believe that *authors do not always influence readers, it does not matter if they use praising or aggressive language. Things are as they are, and authors cannot express their opinions there.* For example, in the case of scientific articles and Pablo’s text, *I did not feel I was being positioned because I know that all they say there is true.* [sic]

As is evident in this answer, Ana continued to maintain that what is “true” cannot be seen as a position and that regardless of whether or not they accomplish it, authors do not try to position readers.

One of the six students who struggled to recognize marginalized voices due to their alignment with the author’s position was Tatiana. During the guide stage for the fourth principle—CR is about identifying silenced and marginalized voices in texts—while doing the analysis of the news report from *Al Jazeera English news channel*, Tatiana was able to identify marginalized voices in the news report. However, she did not recognize them as such due to her alignment with the author’s position. Table 7 shows the analysis she provided for the news report.

Even though Tatiana can identify that the voices of *Uribe and his followers* have been marginalized and exactly what those voices would say when it comes to explaining why the author marginalized these voices, she responds in a way which shows that her alignment with the author’s position is preventing her from recognizing the fact that the author did purposefully exclude some voices.

As time progressed, Tatiana remained in the same position. This is confirmed in the reflection task for the fourth principle, where, in response to Question 3 (“Have your views of voices in texts changed after performing this analysis, how?”), she wrote,

In a way, they have, because I know that in some controversial topics, authors can marginalize and silence voices because these voices would *tell a truth* that they [the authors] are trying to hide. But in some other cases, authors do not include someone’s voice because *they have nothing that is true to contribute to the topic that authors are trying to develop.* I mean, certain voices are *unnecessary.* As in the case of the news report about the peace agreement, *Uribe’s followers would tell lies to try to convince people.*

In this excerpt, Tatiana is still struggling with what voices to consider as marginalized. She seems to have developed a theory that if the voices are “telling the truth,” that is, they are aligning with her position, they are marginalized. Contrarily, if they are “telling lies,” they are not marginalized, they are just “unnecessary.”

Seeing Positionality in Factual Texts

Another interesting challenge that, although not very prevalent, was still very salient was that concerning students’ difficulty to see positionality when texts appear to be factual. One of the two students who presented this challenge was Andrea. During

Table 7. Tatiana’s Analysis of a News Report

News Report: “Colombia and FARC Sign Historic Ceasefire Deal.” Principle 4		
Who is included and excluded?	What would these marginalized voices say?	Why did the author decide to exclude these voices?
<p>Included: Colombians who agree with the peace process.</p> <p>Excluded: Followers of Uribe and Álvaro Uribe.</p>	<p>Álvaro Uribe: There are too many concessions for these murderers. They must pay and we must declare war on them.</p> <p>Uribe’s followers: Uribe is right. FARC rebels do not deserve to be forgiven. They are terrorists.</p>	<p><i>The author did not marginalize them, he already knew what those voices thought, and he knew that Uribe and his followers would say <u>or do anything to stop the peace agreement because all they want is war.</u></i></p>

Lesson 4, when students were sharing their answers to the reflection task for the first principle, Andrea said the following about authors of scientific texts taking a position: “Teacher, but in certain texts, I think it is hard to do this kind of analysis. For example, I would not question scientific texts, I do not think authors can take a position in them.”

Andrea’s intervention shows she thinks positionality is only present in other kinds of texts, not in scientific ones, which are supposed to be objective, and to present unquestionable truths.

As time progressed, Andrea stayed in the same position and the reflection task for the first principle confirms this. Indeed, when she was asked, “Have your views of authors’ and readers’ positionality changed after analyzing them with these strategies? How?” She answered: “In certain texts such as scientific texts, *I do not think that [an] author’s position can be identified because authors are describing something objectively and there is no room for describing it subjectively.*”

Her statement demonstrates that, by the end of the cycle, she still equated positionality with opinion and had not realized that even factual scientific texts position readers and include biases.

Taking Middle Positions

Another main challenge that, even though not too prevalent, was still very salient was that of students’ difficulty in taking middle positions. That is, six students could only think of either pros or cons, or of agreement or disagreement with the author’s position.

An example of these students was Pedro. During the guide stage for the second principle—thinking about texts from different perspectives—when students were asked to take a statement from *Time Magazine* about vegetarianism and try to take other perspectives, Pedro could only take perspectives that were either in favor or against the statement. Table 8 shows the perspectives that he provided and how he classified them.

Table 8. Pedro’s Response to a Magazine Article

Article: “How a Vegetarian Diet Could Help Save the Planet.” Principle 2	
Alternative perspective	
Author’s statement	Reducing meat consumption improves human health.
What would other people say?	In favor: Vegetarian person: <u>Since I have stopped eating meat, I feel healthier and energetic.</u>
	Hinduist: Meat is disgusting and is not natural to eat it. Why would we eat it?
	Against: Carnivorous person: <u>Meat is delicious and life is to be enjoyed. We will end up dying anyway.</u>
	Butcher: Human beings have always eaten meat. People can do many other things that are also healthy. They do not have to quit eating meat.

In this exercise, Pedro could think about the author’s statement from different perspectives. However, these perspectives reflected extreme positions: either completely agree or disagree. He did not provide any middle positions such as ovo-lactovegetarians or lacto-vegetarians. Then, when presenting his perspectives to the class, he expressed,

I believe there are topics without middle points. For example, in vegetarianism, there are always those saying that you must always eat meat because of the proteins. Or, there are those saying that you must not eat meat because animals suffer or because it is bad for your health.

The statements show that Pedro had problems thinking about middle positions or positions that consider arguments both in favor and against the author’s position. To him, “there are topics in which there are not middle points.” [*sic*]

As time progressed, Pedro continued to show the same difficulty. The reflection task for the second principle confirms this. In response to Question 2

(“To what extent did the strategy help you understand the topic of the text from different perspectives?”) he answered,

This strategy has helped me put myself in the shoes of others. However, *there are topics that can only be seen from one or two positions and not from so many*. For example, the text about vegetarianism that we analyzed, I could not think about perspectives that were different to those that agreed or disagreed.

His assertion that certain topics “can only be seen from one or two positions and not from so many” demonstrates that he remained unable to see middle positions. Nonetheless, as he himself suggests in the quote, the question remains whether or not he would have had this difficulty had he been confronted with another topic for which he had more background knowledge or interest.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results above show that EFL students in this reading comprehension course experienced various gains and challenges during the CR unit. These findings are important for several reasons: First, they demonstrate that it is possible to do CR with undergraduate EFL students who are not very proficient in the language if instructors provide students with proper instruction and scaffolding before they approach texts (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004; Wallace, 2003). In a country where many EFL reading comprehension instructors focus on grammar rules and reading comprehension strategies (Aguirre-Morales & Ramos-Holguín, 2009; Bautista-Barón, 2013; Gómez-Torres & Ávila-Constain, 2009; Lopera-Medina, 2012), it is important to show how reading instruction can be done differently and that EFL students have the potential to become active users of the information they read in English texts, to avoid being passive reproducers of the ideas in them (Luke, 2000; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004), and to even go further in their analyses than expected.

Second, the results of this study complement or expand on those reported by other EFL scholars (e.g., Esteban-Nuñez, 2014; Giraldo, 2018; Gómez-Jiménez & Gutierrez, 2019; Haromi, 2014; Huang, 2011; & Liu, 2017) in the sense that they provide information on other possible gains and challenges of CR. For example, the studies by Huang (2011), Liu (2017), and Esteban-Nuñez (2014) found that undergraduate EFL students taking reading comprehension courses experienced some gains, such as realizing different types of discrimination, using multiple perspectives to gain a wider perspective of what is going on in texts, and improving their language proficiency thanks to an increase in their motivation. However, they did not find gains such as those reported here.

Similarly, the studies by Giraldo (2018), Haromi (2014), and Gómez-Jiménez and Gutierrez (2019) showed that EFL students can experience some challenges while reading, such as failing to see authors’ biases when stereotypes apply for more than one social group, being unable to contradict stereotypes when they are deeply tied to their cultural identities, and difficulty in reading critically due to the lack of identification with the topic in texts. Nonetheless, they did not find the challenges observed in this study.

Third, these findings point to specific aspects of CR which might be easy or troublesome for EFL students. This is important because, once alerted about these aspects, EFL instructors can prepare more effective units and activities. For example, to help their students see positionality when texts appear to be factual, instructors may consider providing them with scaffolding on how they could identify the author’s position in different types of texts other than news reports. Similarly, to assist students with the identification of marginalized voices in texts, when these align with the author’s position, EFL instructors can bring more texts that have different positions towards the same topic in order to show students that there are indeed many positions about the topic and many voices that are excluded from each

text. Finally, to support students with the challenge of taking middle positions, EFL instructors may consider bringing texts based on topics that are more related to students' ages, backgrounds, and so on, or allowing students to bring their own texts based on their interests. This way, they will not have to analyze texts chosen based on the instructors' opinions of what could be engaging to students, as was the case with this study.

Finally, the study opens new possibilities for further research. Such research could explore, for example, how this methodology would work with other types of EFL students, such as teenagers or even children with different levels of proficiency in English, since both age and level of proficiency may have an impact on the success of the unit. Also, it could investigate how the methodology would work with other texts, such as disciplinary texts, since, as this study shows, students tend to have the belief that these are completely objective. Additionally, it could explore how the methodology employed here would work with topics that are found to be of interest to students beforehand, so that topic selection does not become a possible source of difficulty.

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