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Introducing Critical Literacy in Language Pedagogy: Developing Critical Stance in ESL and EFL Learners

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“Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferals of information.”

— Paulo Freire

Abstract:

The last few decades have witnessed great upheaval in the field of education and learning. There is a major shift in education from the paradigm of capitalist hegemonic framework of education to the praxis of liberated democratic system of imparting education. Critical literacy has developed as a new multi-dynamic approach to study language, it has emerged as a pedagogical revolution giving voices to the learners to think and to question the text and to figure out the cultural, political, social influences the text carries within. Critical literacy stems from critical social theory which explores the underlying autocracies prevailing in the contemporary world of education and learning. It has emerged as a multi dynamic approach of imparting education through gaining insights into power manifestations in education system. The paper highlights the need of fostering critical literacy in learners for establishing an environment of democratic learning. The study was conducted to examine the place critical literacy in classroom teaching. 20 participants involved were from ELT courses at a government university in India. The findings show that many learners find it difficult to comprehend the text and mostly the practice of critical literacy is not prior in most classroom teachings. The learners felt the need of discussing social and political issues in language classrooms to enhance their critical understanding of the world. The participant felt the need of developing critical attitude towards the text and understanding the possible biases and prejudices prevailing in the text. Thus, while throwing light on the theoretical framework of Critical Literacy this paper attempts to highlight the need of developing critical reading skills in EFL and ESL classrooms. The paper also lays its emphasis on the relevance of Freirean critical literacy for Indian Classrooms and its effect on learning.

Keywords: critical theory, Marxism, socialism, banking concept of education, pedagogy, power relations.

1. Introduction

Critical literacy has emerged as an important approach of teaching language since past three decades. It has emerged from multidisciplinary critical social theory which aims at emancipating education. The critical social theory cultivates ability in students to figure out the unjust practices and inequalities prevailing in our society. It lays an emphasis on the issue that the world is not an equal place, people are treated differently according to their race, culture, gender, colour and social status etc. Not everyone in our society gets equal opportunities because of various biases and prejudices that plays a prominent role in deciding what we will become. For instance, children born in lower classes get lesser opportunities for higher education abroad as compared to the privileged class. Our society presumes and compartmentalise human beings and tells them what they will read, learn, speak etc. Since the beginning of human civilisation such practices are very common for example, in Ancient Greek society the study of philosophy and liberal art was mainly for the aristocrats the other general population were taught to read, write, and to do basic arithmetic only. Even in India the caste system is practiced in various forms since centuries, people from lower classes are harassed and denied of their basic human rights as compared to the privileged class. Despite employing various laws in Indian constitution for protection of lower classes, the caste system is still alive and prevalent in our society. On the similar grounds, the practice of bigotry in pragmatics is commonly prevailing in the Indian education system, where the focus lies only on gaining employability and not intellectuality. Critical literacy has emerged as a multi dynamic approach towards imparting education through gaining insight into the power manifestations in education system. It has its genesis from Marxist critical pedagogy and the theory of socialism. There is a major shift from the paradigm of capitalist hegemonic framework of education to a much liberated system of imparting education. Critical literacy is a learner centred philosophy which aims at making all kind of learning through fostering critical thinking in learner's and it aims at learning through experiences i.e. the bottom up approach. Critical literacy helps an individual to think for themselves and to accept or reject the identities which the society has built for us. Giving the right of acceptance or rejection of the status and identities in the education system through critical literacy makes the learner autonomous, free thinkers, and democratic citizens. The learners are able to analyse and interpret the underlying depths of meaning presented in the text. The learners through critical

literacy go beyond the given text and figure out the local and global perspectives of the text. In case of ESL and EFL learners, critical literacy plays a vital role in deeming a new basic for navigating a text in the media saturated world by moving beyond and developing an attitude of questioning and constructing the text. It empowers the learners by emancipating them to identify the biases and prejudices in the text and critically reflecting on it. The learners with critical thinking moves from developing skills of cognition (comprehension) to the higher order skills of Meta cognition (questioning, re- thinking, re shaping). The learning at school is more focused on gaining theoretical knowledge rather than the practice one, the natural form of learning is ignored and learners automatized their learning passively rather than actively. In a developing country like India where majority of its population is multilingual the learners are expected to have knowledge of the world and the various technological advancement introduced in teaching and learning. Learning through critical literacy requires a learner to work on their interpersonal skills. The learners must keep in mind that there is nothing called as universal truth because the truth may change from person to person according to their situations and interpretations. The meaning of the text is not certain as John Dewey said that children's are natural language users, if not allowed to express themselves they will struggle with the proper usage of language. The classrooms which follows the approach of critical literacy are anxiety free where the teachers and learners share knowledge and think independently.

2. Objectives of the Study

In today's globalised world it is more likely that people are becoming more and more indifferent towards each other's sufferings, critical literacy can help citizens of a democratic society to exist in cooperation and sustainability. In the age of digitalisation were extremist ideologies like white supremacy, islamophobia, lynching, ethnic cleansing etc. is on a rise it's the foremost duty of a critically aware citizen to behave in a sane way by reciprocating sensible thoughts of progress and peace in the society through education. An individual can only be a part of a democratic society if he is not politically charged to marginalise the weaker sections of the society by force. This understanding of marginalising and marginalised can be a part of language classrooms. This study aims at highlighting multicultural education in language classroom by employing critical literacy. This study aims to create a need of learning environment free of all biases and prejudices, where creative thinking is encouraged by the teachers. Generally in ESL and EFL classrooms, the voices of the students remain absent. It is mainly because they are not properly guided to give

directions to their learning. Learners mostly end up by automatizing their learning without having any practical implications. The learners and teachers are expected to have a critical frame of mind to assess their comprehension skills. The study aims to help learners to develop such skills of learning which help them to critically evaluate their learning. Most of the learners are quick enough to learn the linguistic discipline of a language, but their knowledge remains incomplete unless they develop an insight for the culture to which that language belongs. Critical literacy can help them to understand the insights of the language by learning about the cultural implications and power relations.

3. Theoretical framework

The last two decades has witnessed momentum in historical neoliberal policies in education which paved the way for the development of critical education. The father of progressive education moment, John Dewey in 1900s articulated his pragmatic philosophy by explaining the purpose of education in democratic society. He emphasised on thinking and reflecting on real life experiences and individualism as central to democratic teaching and learning (Antonio et.al, pg. 3, 2017). The progressive educators and liberals such as Malcom X, Martin Luther King, and John Dewey among many others worked against the oppressed conditions of the people in the United States of America. Their contemporaries Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal worked for the development of critical pedagogy in Latin American countries. The works of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire had a great impact on the spread of critical education across the globe. Freire worked extensively on the need of developing critical consciousness in learners in order to acquire proficiency over language. His works were influenced from the postcolonial and postmodern theories, where he laid emphasis on the spread of social justice and equality in education. He presented the urge to bring up political issues in teaching so that the learners can relate with it and outside. The idea of including cultural, social and economic realities in classroom teaching in order to make it more effective learning, was an innovation in pedagogy itself. Paulo Freire (1972), he worked on the philosophy of education which talks about social justice, equality and solidarity in human society. Based on this principle and his own experiences Paulo Freire published his book “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” in 1968, which was first published in Portuguese later translated into English and Spanish in 1970. The book emphasized on the issue of education; he called it as “banking concept of education”. Freire in his book gave justification for the need of developing pedagogy for the oppressed and also talked about the teacher-student contradictions. He says:

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. (Freire, 1968, pg. 72).

Freire's banking concept of education represents a behaviouristic kind of approach toward learning where learners are considered as passive recipients or empty vessels with no knowledge of their own and the teachers are supposed to fill these vessels in order to make learners knowledgeable. Freire strongly condemn this traditional approach towards teaching and he proposed the "problem-posing model" as an antidote to banking concept of education. This model works on forming a new liberated kind of relationship between the learner and teaching by developing critical consciousness and understanding of one's being and identify as a part of a big social system he says;

Through dialogue, the teacher of-the students and the students of the teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in their turn while being taught also teach. Thus they become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow (p.53).

Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* explains that how power practiced by oppressors by making it justified to the oppressed class that they are to rule them. The oppressed section internalize the rules made by the oppressors and they establish a fear of emancipation. The concept of being part of democratic society is challenge by the mainstream education system by making learners fit into the compartments made by the teachers and society. Critical pedagogy analyse the socio-cultural practices operating in the society and what impact they create in education. It aims at exposing the power relations in society such as patriarchy, racism, elitism, gender biases etc.

4. Defining Critical Literacy

Critical literacy can be defined as an attitude towards text and discourses that questions social, political, and economic conditions under which particular text is constructed (Freire, 1970). Critical literacy can be traced back to Marxist critical pedagogy, a philosophy of education that talks about a critical viewpoint towards the text. It provokes the critical

attitude of the readers towards the text and how they should analyse a text. The reader may use his background knowledge to have the better understanding. Critical literacy talks about the relationship of language and its culture; there are certain values with which we attach our language. The readers are expected to decode the wide array of meanings hidden in the text. There is always a very narrow line between what we read and understand and the actual fact. Hence all it needs for a reader to be an active decoder, the true interpreter, to comprehend the layers of meaning and to question the text like, what is it the writer trying to say? , how much do I agree with it? Is there any prejudices or biases by which the writer is influenced? Etc. Critical literacy gives power in the hands of the reader to synthesise his reading and understand the author's knowledge in contrast to his multiple viewpoints about the text. The understanding of the text should be reflected on the reader's literacy and it should cultivate a voice in them to be an active participant and to think beyond cognition i.e. to be analytically aware.

Students who engage in critical literacy become open-minded, active, strategic readers who are capable of viewing text from critical perspective. (McLaughlin and DeVoogd, 2004).

Critical literacy specially plays a vital role when it comes to learning a language as second or foreign learners. Every language represents its culture in which it is spoken and it is also an important part of social semiotics.

Critical literacy is language use that questions the social construction of the self. When we are critically literate, we examine our ongoing development, to reveal the subjective positions from which we make sense of the world and act in it (Shor 1999).

Critical literacy is not just a teacher-centric or learner-centric approach it is rather an eclectic way of teaching and learning, where the learners are exposed to such exclusive environment which help them to learn and grow their cognitive ability and they practically begin developing such skills which help them to question the text, rather than getting away with the notion implied in the text. They begin developing strength to expose all the hypocrisies which are surrounding the text, by questioning the text and authors viewpoints. The text no longer remains a piece of author's writing as soon as it is exposed to the reader; s/he is free to analyse it, to make judgements about the text. The author's job is already done while producing a text, now it is up to the readers to take it the way they want to. Thus Maclaughlin and DeVoogd remarks:

The principle of critical literacy helps us understand what critical literacy is and how it functions. It is a dynamic process that examines relationships, expands our thinking, and enlightens our perceptions, as we read the words and the world – as we read from a critical stance (2004).

5. Survey and the data collection

5.1 Methodology

The present study follows the qualitative as well as quantitative methods of data collection. Questionnaires were prepared to find out their views on critical literacy and how far they are able to figure out the biases and prejudices present in a text. The name of the university is kept as anonymous and will be referred as xyz. The learners were asked to fill the questionnaires to complete a short survey.

5.2 Participants

The participants who took part in this study were 20 learners who are enrolled in post-graduation course of English Language teaching at Aligarh Muslim University, India. The learners were in a training programme to become teachers of English language in future. Most of them were 23-25 years of age and have been exposed with the notion of critical literacy already. The student participants range from different social, educational, economic, religious and geographical background. Most of the learners were of ESL background and very few were foreign students.

5.3 The Learners' Questionnaire

The questions were framed to find out participants' views on critical literacy, and how far they feel the need to develop it in the present curriculum. The questionnaire was selected as the data collection instrument because they are easy to analyse and students are mostly familiar with questionnaire. The student's questionnaire deals with 10 questions. The learners were expected to score the statement indicating the degree of their agreement and disagreement. Item number 1-5 were in the form of statements discussing critical literacy. These statements were designed to make the learners aware of critical literacy and to make them understand the importance of it. Item number 6-10 were in the form of questions, asking about how often the learner asks himself such questions while approaching a text. 20 respondents shared their views and the results were obtained according to their opinions. The outcome of the study was indeed a revelation. All of the students were graduates of English

language. And there teaching and learning was highly influenced by the Communicative Language Teaching approach.

6. Data analysis

6.1 The curriculum of your studies is influenced by western culture.

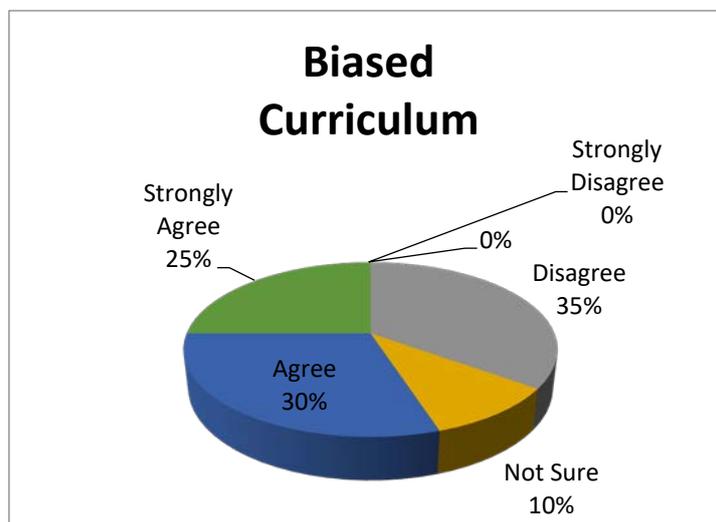


Figure No.1

Almost 55% of the learners agreed with the statement that the curriculum of their studies is influenced by the western culture. And 35% disagreed to it while the rest 10 % were not sure about it. Hence, the biased view in the curriculum should be revised and the curriculum should be made according to the needs of the learners.

6.2. Critical literacy is an important approach to teach language, literature and social sciences. Hence, it should be the important part of your curriculum.

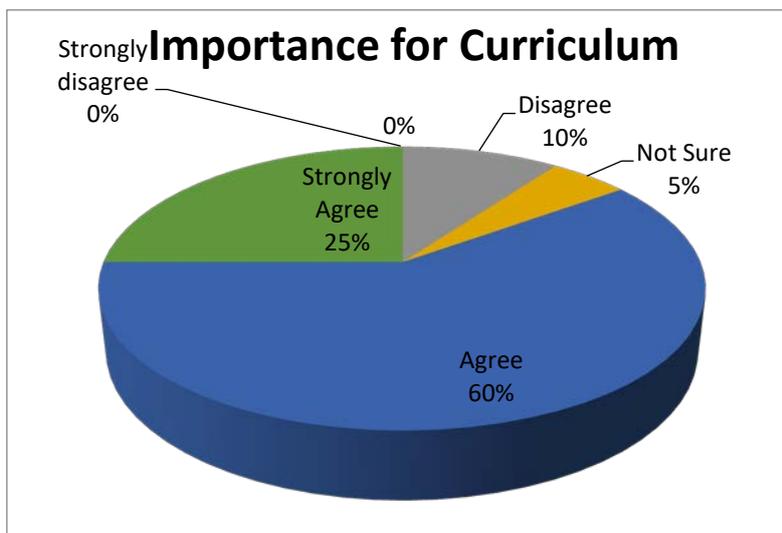


Figure No. 2

Around 85% of the students agreed that critical literacy is an important approach to teach language, literature and social sciences and only 10% were not in favour and the 5% were not sure about it. Therefore critical literacy should be an important part of teaching and learning language. It should be included in classroom teaching.

6.3 Critical literacy helps ESL, EFL learner to critically examine the text they are dealing with.

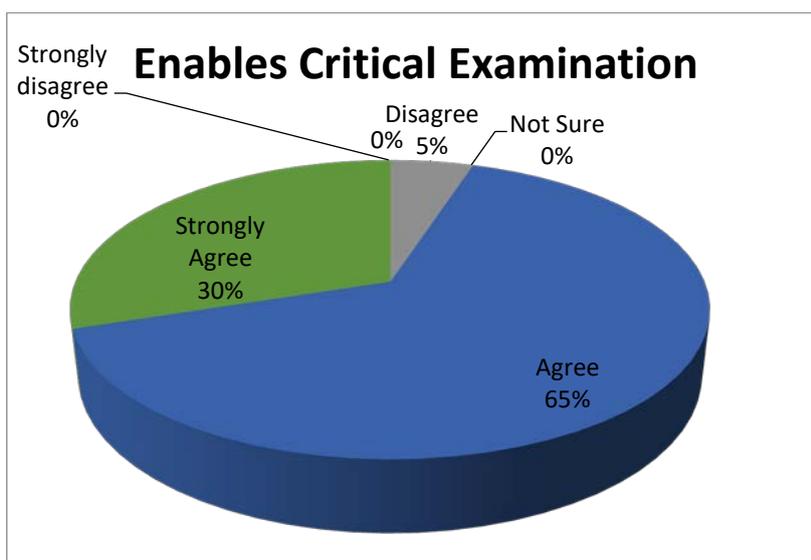


Figure No. 3

95% of the students agreed that critical literacy can help ESL and EFL learners to critically examine the text while the rest 5% didn't agree. But the high percentage agreed to it and it reveals the fact that in case of English being taught in ESL and EFL setup, cultural knowledge is important which can be imbibed through the critical literacy approach.

6.4 Critical literacy helps in all over personality development of the learner.

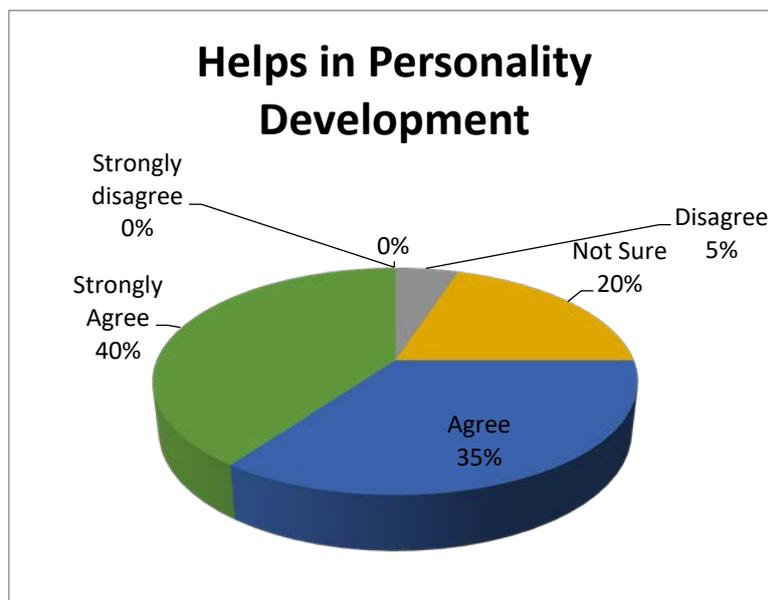


Figure No. 4

75% students agreed that Critical Literacy can help in all over personality development. Only 5% disagreed to it and the rest 20% were not sure.

6.5 The CLT classroom teaching ignores the sociolinguistic aspect of Communicative Competence

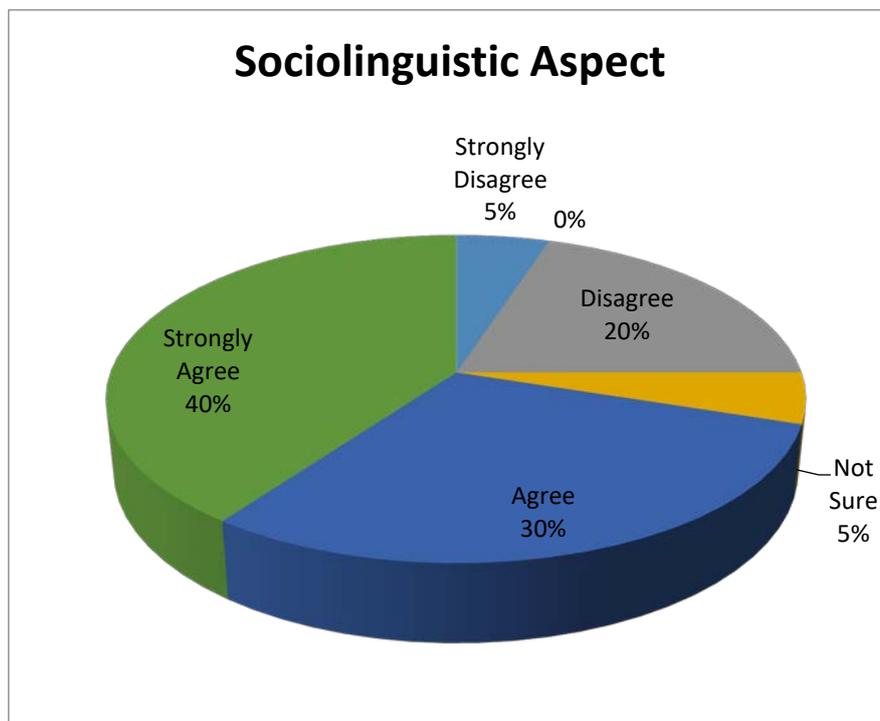


Figure No. 5

70% of the respondents agreed that they feel that the sociolinguistic aspect of CLT is ignored in classroom activities. While the 25% disagreed to it and the rest 5% were not sure about it. Hence the sociolinguistic aspect can make the learning and understanding of the text better.

5.6 Who has written this text?

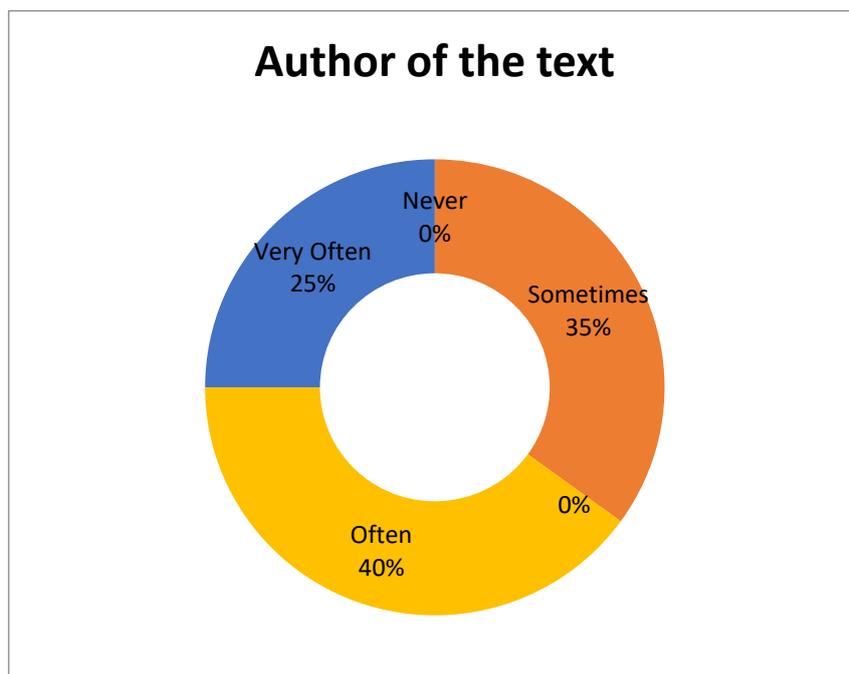


Figure No. 6

Around 40% students agreed that they always seek information related to the author before reading any text. And that is why we have so many best sellers of the same author because often it's the name that sells.

6.7 Does text exhibit any biased view?

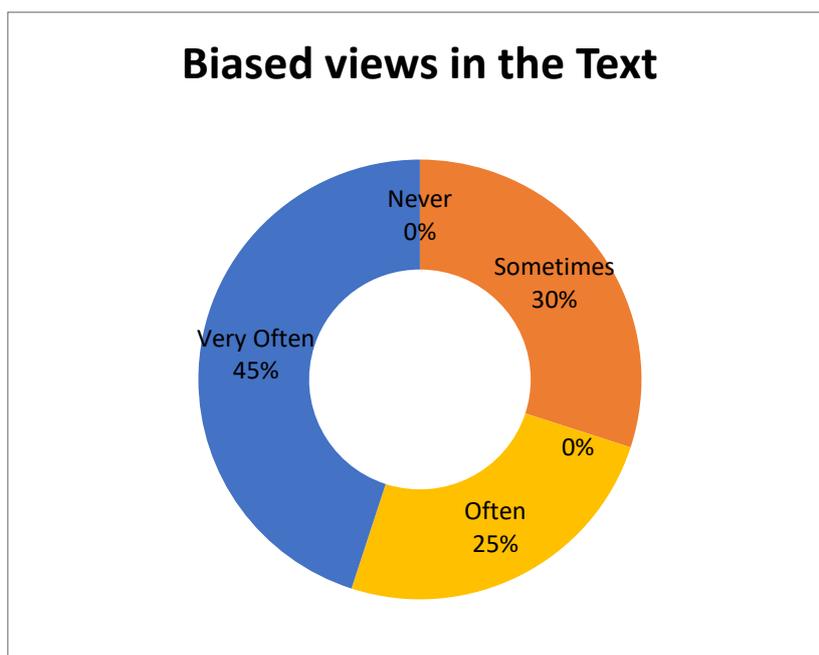


Figure No. 7

Around 70% agreed to this question and shared their views that they often like to figure out the biased viewpoints present in the text. The rest 30% were not sure but there was no one who never asked this question.

6.8 Is the writer trying to influence me with his/her opinion?

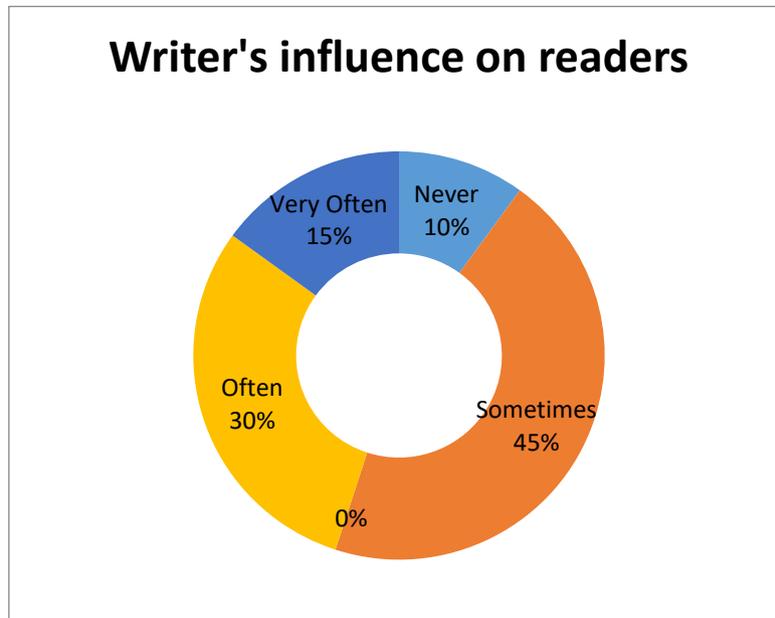


Figure No. 8

45% admitted that they raise such question to themselves often or very often and 45% ask this only sometimes and only 10% claimed that they never ask such questions.

6.9 What is the relevance of this text in accordance with the topic I am dealing with?

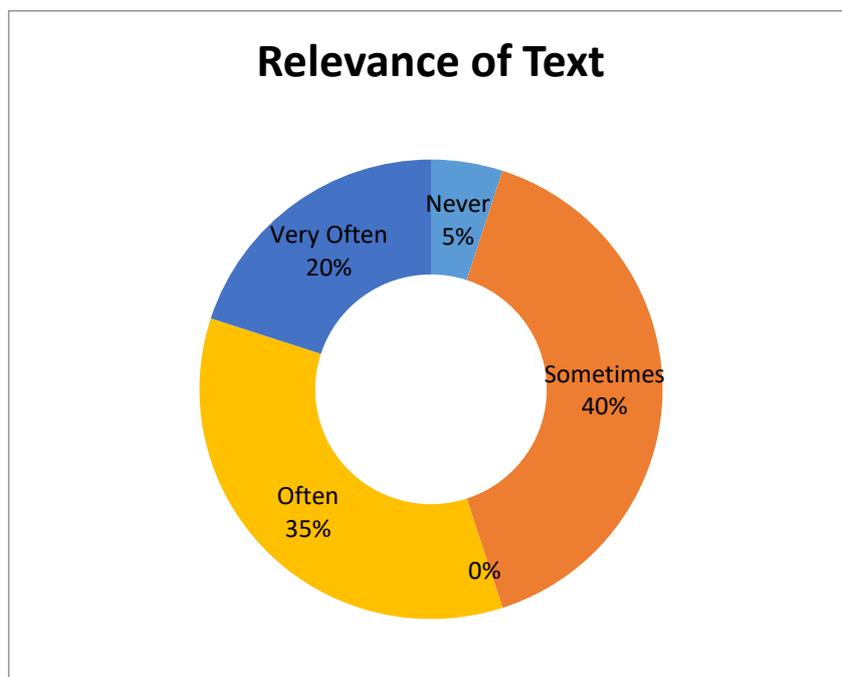


Figure No. 9

55% students always ask this question to themselves while 40% ask it sometimes while 5% never ask such questions.

6.10 For whom is the text produced?

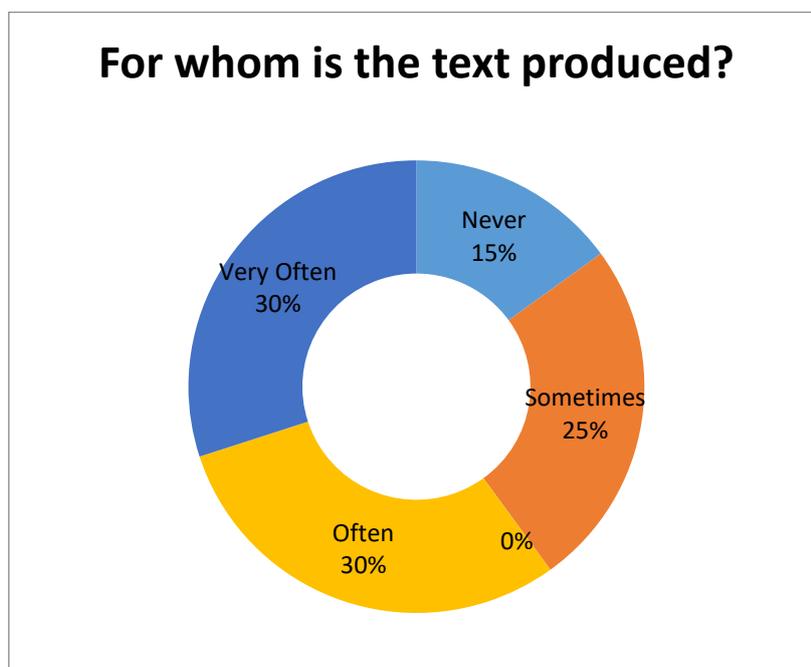


Figure No. 10

60% of the students ask such questions while 25% ask it sometimes and 15% never care much for whom the text is produced.

Conclusion

The learners surveyed at Aligarh Muslim University had started learning English for approximately more than 10 years. Critical Literacy helped them to identify the different perspectives a text can deal with. Students were aware of language but the idea of associating things back to its culture was a new way of looking at the language. Critical literacy has its role in making learners responsible citizens; it is not just the teaching of how to read and write but it is the way of telling them how they should look at things. It helps in identifying the injustice prevailed in the society, and how the social status can actually make a difference. The study developed during this project was only to make learners aware that they are a part of a system, they should strive hard to make it better. It is very important to have a balanced society which acknowledge the needs of every individuals and not the society oppressed by the particular group of people. Teaching critical literacy is also a big challenge for teachers as it is not a neutral activity; they have to create such learning atmosphere where the text is explored in a new light. The learners and teachers expand their thinking horizon to reason the text. Critical literacy helps in forming the link between the text and the surroundings. It gives the new multiple perspectives to read a text and to look at various underlying meanings of the text. It makes students aware by making them to associate things to their background. To become critically literate is a developmental process which needs practice and reflection. In case of ESL and EFL learner, critical literacy can be a boon which can help them to understand the language better. Any literary piece can become a great source of knowledge not only from the aspect of gaining information but also from the aspect of looking things differently. The purpose of this study was to find out how far the students and teachers feel the need of developing critical literacy in classroom teaching to make learning more effective. The findings of the survey made it obvious that the teachers and learners were in favour of this approach of teaching.

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APPENDIX I

Dear respondent:

I am conducting a survey on Critical Literacy, a popular analytical technique to teach and study literature and language. Critical Literacy helps in identifying the different hidden shades of the text and creates an atmosphere of learning which is free of all biases and prejudices.

Kindly fill up the questionnaire. The name of the institution and your identity will be kept confidential and the information provided by you will be used solely for research purposes.

Thanks

A. personal information

Name –

Profession –

Mother tongue –

Currently enrolled in which course –

Bilingual Multilingual

ESL EFL ENL

B

B. Following is a statements discussing critical literacy. Indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with these statements.

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree

Rate	1	2	3	4	5
1. The curriculum of your studies is influenced by western culture.					
2. Critical literacy is an important approach to teach language, literature and social sciences. Hence it should be the important part of your curriculum.					
3. Critical Literacy helps EFL and ESL learner to critically examine the text they are dealing with.					
4. Critical Literacy helps in all over personality development of the learner.					

C. Have you ever asked yourself such questions while dealing with the text?

Questions	Never	Sometimes	Often	Very often
1. Who has written this text?				
2. Does the text exhibit any biased view?				
3. Is the writer trying to influence me with his opinion?				
4. What is the relevance of this text in accordance with the topic I am dealing with?				
5. For whom is the text produced?				