

# Are we teaching critical literacy? Reading practices in a township classroom

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Received: 27 Aug. 2015

Accepted: 15 Feb. 2016

Published: 26 Sept. 2016

**How to cite this article:**Lloyd, G., 2016, 'Are we teaching critical literacy? Reading practices in a township classroom', *Reading & Writing* 7(1), a97. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/rw.v7i1.97>**Copyright:**© 2016. The Authors.  
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Despite improvements in educational provision in South Africa since 1994, the opportunities for learners from historically under-resourced schools to gain access to powerful English resources remain limited and unequal (Prinsloo 2012). In this article I will provide a detailed description of literacy practices in a township high school in Cape Town, specifically of the orientations to text that are made available to learners. I will draw on feminist poststructuralist theory, in which the subject is theorised as constructed and contested in language to construct difference. The analysis of classroom discourse and text-based tasks shows that the orientations to reading that were offered were characterised by a focus on the surface meaning of the texts and by an absence of critical engagement, despite the latter being required in the new Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement. The analysis reveals how the power dynamics of our racialised past and dominant ideologies about gender, class and race continue to define teaching in our classrooms in ways that limit access to the English resources that learners in under-resourced schools need for academic success.

## Introduction

The access to and acquisition of English are complex and uneven endeavours. Prinsloo's research (2012) in three different school contexts in South Africa shows that teachers and learners have access to different types of English, depending on the socio-economic profile of the school. Learners in privileged contexts generally have access, via their teachers, to the varieties of English most valued for educational and economic success. This is not generally the case in schools historically disadvantaged by the inequity of apartheid education policies. Thus despite poor learners' desire to learn the English they need for upward mobility, in other words the English of the elite and of the academy, social and historical factors are complicating their efforts.

This ongoing marked inequity requires researchers interested in language and learning to ask why that inequity persists and to develop a detailed description of how English is being taught and learnt. Research on classroom literacy practices in these contexts has, however, been limited, as Kapp (2004) has shown, limiting our understanding of the ways in which these practices impact on the possibility for success in higher education (Moore *et al.* 1998). To contribute towards the building of a detailed description of the teaching and learning of English, a case study of the reading and writing practices in a Grade 11 classroom in a township high school in Cape Town was undertaken, to describe and analyse the orientations to text that are constructed for English First Additional Language learners. The theoretical framework and concepts drawn on to understand how classroom discourse and chosen texts construct and position learners as particular kinds of readers, are presented in the first part of this article. Extracts of classroom discourse from observed lessons on the reading of and writing about a prescribed short story, and an analysis of the orientations to text that are offered, are presented in the second part of the article. The article focuses on the racialised and gendered subjectivities that prevail in the positioning observed. Finally, evidence is provided of learner profiles that suggests that the literacy resources that learners bring to the classroom are not being valued or accessed.

Recent classroom research in South Africa (Kapp 2004; Makoe 2007; McKinney 2007, 2011) has located school literacy practices within a social context and viewed the classroom as a site where two things happen: firstly, social relations that occur outside of the classroom are reflected in the classroom; secondly, teachers and learners act in ways that reproduce broader social inequality. These relations are marked by the complicated and racialised ways in which black learners are positioned and position themselves as speakers of English. In school contexts where learners study English as a home language, McKinney (2007, 2011) and Makoe (2007) have shown how hegemonic assimilationist ideologies filter through classroom discourse to position black learners

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in ways that reinforce the power of middle-class English speakers and deny black learners an opportunity to occupy positions that relate to their practices as speakers of different varieties of English and other languages.

In the context of township schools, where learners study English as a first additional language, dynamics and divisions within the social fabric of the township inform and construct the ways in which learners position themselves in relation to English, as Kapp (2004) has shown, and this positioning interferes with learner aspiration for upward social mobility. Learners position themselves in multiple and contradictory ways as township dwellers, young men or women, English learners and so on. Kapp's research points to the complex and uneven ways in which English learning is practised and to the ways in which social conditions impact on learning outcomes.

The focus of the research presented below is an investigation of the way in which learners in a historically disadvantaged school are oriented to text in their English lessons. The question that guided the study is: What orientations to text are learners afforded in a typical urban township Grade 11 class and how do those orientations construct the subject positions that learners take up? For a more detailed account of the research, see Lloyd (2014).

## Theoretical framework

### Subjectivity and language

Poststructuralist theorists such as Stuart Hall challenge the humanist conception of the fixed, unitary subject, positing instead a subject that is non-unitary and fluid. This subject, according to Hall (1996), is located in the material conditions of a particular historical context. Firstly, this idea has implications for understandings of the learner as the subject because subjectivity can shift and change across a range of positions. Secondly, the conditions that determine those shifts are social: it is in the relationships in the classroom, in the community and in the broader society that subject positions are constructed and in which the possibilities and limitations for subject construction are located. Those relationships are formed by and in turn form discourse, practices (in this case reading and writing) and positions. Thirdly, subjectivity is in flux and in conflict, as a result of the power struggles that take shape in discourse, because, as the feminist poststructuralist theorist Chris Weedon (1987:41) argues, '...discourses represent political interests and in consequence are constantly vying for status and power'. Finally, what is most hopeful about this definition is the possibility of change: where subjectivity is fluid and constructed in practices that are socially determined and determining, change is possible.

Central to this understanding of how subjectivity is constructed and how change might come about, is the role of language in defining who we are and who we could be. Language, according to Weedon (1987:33), gives 'voice' and

'meaning' to our experience. We are '... reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak'. It is through language that our conscious and unconscious thoughts and desires gain expression. Language in this framework is understood as a social construct, rather than a neutral, cognitive skill that can be acquired unproblematically.

If language and subjectivity are located within particular social and historical contexts, analysing those contexts and in particular their discursive features enables us to uncover the way power works to create or deny opportunities for learners to engage in a range of readings and in so doing, for their meaning making to be heard in the classroom.

### Discourse and subject positioning

Fairclough (1992:8) defines discourse as constituting the social and as 'invested with ideologies'. In this definition, discourse becomes the way in which language works in our social relationships. By emphasising the social aspect, Fairclough shows that language is a social construct and that it is linked with power. This understanding of discourse enables an identification of the ways that discourse works to entrench unequal power relations, or to challenge those power relations. Secondly, language in the classroom is structured as discourse and, as Hicks (1996:52) has shown, is both 'textual products' and 'constitutive discursive practices' – both what is said and produced, and how what is said affects those participating in the specific social interaction. Classroom discourse – the form that the teaching takes, the amount of talking the teacher does, the opportunities for speech afforded the learner, the types of texts chosen for reading and the types of tasks set – is the outcome of a set of choices that are made by teachers who are, themselves, subjects of ideological and historical forces. Those forces are the products of conflict and this conflict is reflected in the contradictory and shifting nature of classroom discourse.

Discourse, as used here, is understood to provide us with subject positions. Through discourse we come to be 'constituted' as female, black, a reader, and so on and, as Weedon (1987: 119) says, we become '...subjected to the power and regulation of the discourse'. The concept of positioning rests firmly on the idea that '...acts of positioning may be multi-layered and ambiguous...' (Deppermann 2013:3). That ambiguity, that multiplicity of positioning and position taking, stems from the power struggles taking place in the broader social context. As explained by Davies and Harré (1990), a subject position has two aspects: it constructs our thinking about ourselves – who and what we are - and it locates us within a hierarchy in relation to others. Each subject position defines our place in a social structure. This enables an understanding of how learners make sense of text, by looking at their responses and analysing the stories they tell about themselves, in relation to the text. It is their lived experience that adds up and contributes to the subject positions they take

up, and it is their relative power or powerlessness that makes those subject positions available in the first place.

### Orientations to text

The reading of and writing about text are discursive practices in which learners are apprenticed as readers. Through these practices, teachers model different kinds of readings and authorise what they deem a 'successful' reading. The curriculum (Department of Basic Education 2011), the official national choices of set texts and the final Grade 12 examinations all impact on the selections teachers make of the kinds of readings they will model in their classrooms.

How then do classroom discursive practices construct learners through the reading of text? How are learners positioned to read and which of the multiple ways of reading a text are made available to them? Janks (2010:21) has defined the reading process as having three different aspects: 'decoding', 'reading with the text' and 'reading against the text'. Decoding necessitates 'language competence', in other words a knowledge of the written code. Reading with the text requires comprehension. When learners read with the text, they bring their own ideas and values to the text as they make sense of what the author is saying. Reading against the text involves critical engagement and an interrogation of the impact the text has and the opportunities for writing the text differently. Reading against the text requires an understanding that texts construct the social world in particular ways that are value laden and selective. It is in this critical engagement that the possibility exists for learners to resist and challenge the ideological effects of texts. Critical engagement, then, holds the possibility of empowerment because learners come to ask questions about whose view is being privileged, whose interests the texts and text choices protect and promote, or disregard.

The central concern of this research is with the way in which orientations to text produce particular kinds of learning, gendered and racialised subjectivities. The analysis of the orientations to text observed during the course of the study draws on the view that texts are 'constructions rather than reflections of meaning' (Weedon 1987:167), and that as constructions they impact on the reader by positioning her and/or him in different ways and making different subject positions available. This understanding of texts has particular implications for the reading of literature: does the orientation to text made available in the classroom enable an acceptance of those positions, or is resistance possible? Weedon (1987:171) has identified the potential productive power of reading fiction, as a way for learners to take up or resist subjectivities that the text 'offers' in ways that can challenge inequality:

Fiction has long been seen as a powerful form of education in social meanings and values, as an effective purveyor of beliefs about gender, race and class. Yet if it is this, then it is also a powerful resource for those interests which to date had been marginalised, excluded or silenced by the dominant culture. The effectivity of fiction lies in the reading process itself.

## Methodology and data collection

In this study, a single case, namely, a Grade 11 English class, was used to explore the orientations to reading constructed for learners. The case study design enabled observation in one class over a period of 5 weeks and facilitated a focus on the 'particularity and complexity' (Stake 1995:xi) of the case while locating it in a specific context. This design was used to develop an understanding of how learners are situated in relation to texts, what resources they bring to their reading and how specific orientations might create an engagement with text that prepares learners for academic success. This focus on a specific situation is '... particularly suited to understanding complex, contemporary phenomena that other methodologies (e.g. quantitative survey) cannot provide' (Knobel & Lankshear 1999:96). The heuristic potential of the case study identified by Knobel and Lankshear (1999) and Bassey (1999) allows for conclusions about educational practice to be drawn beyond the boundaries of the single case. The case study research design was situated within a qualitative, critical ethnographic framework, in order to '... analyse the words [of the informants] in relation to the larger historical processes and social contradictions, searching for hidden forces that structure life' (Canagarajah 1999:48).

Data were collected employing a number of tools: participant observation and audio recording of 15 lessons; field notes taken during the lessons; a semi-structured interview with four learners; informal discussions with the teacher; and artefact collection, in the form of learners' written work.

## Data analysis

In analysing the data, critical discourse analysis (CDA) and poststructuralist discourse analysis (PDA) were drawn on. Critical discourse analysis (Janks 1997:329) provides theoretical tools to analyse classroom discourse and to focus on both the spoken discourse of classroom teaching – 'classroom talk' – and the texts that are selected for reading and writing. PDA (Baxter 2008) helps to make some sense of the way in which the speaking subject is constructed, and this understanding comes from the conception of discourse as drawing on a combination of competing, sometimes antagonistic ideologies. PDA is an 'effective methodology' (Baxter 2008:69) for analysing the '... highly complex and ambiguous nature of classroom discourse as it unfolds moment-by-moment' (McKinney 2011:7). PDA provides us with a method of detailed analysis of how classroom subjects, both teachers and learners come to speak, what their 'utterances' might mean and to identify moments of resistance. PDA is a tool that helps uncover the subtle shifts that learners make as they read and are subjected to discourse as well as to identify '... the ways in which speakers ... constantly shift between positions of powerfulness or powerlessness within competing cultural and educational discourses' (Baxter 2008:69). These two approaches to discourse analysis, CDA and PDA, are complementary. Both foreground issues of power, while PDA provides specific tools for the analysis of subjectivity and subject positioning in spoken discourse.

In the next section of this article, data from observed literature lessons are presented, and the reading process, as it unfolded in a classroom while reading a short story, is analysed.

## Presentation and discussion of data

During two of the observed lessons, the Grade 11 class read a short story *The Toilet*, by Gcina Mhlophe. At the time of the research, the story was officially prescribed for Grade 12 literature study.

The teacher read the story aloud to the class, adding her own commentary as she read. This was followed by a writing task, in which learners had to write answers to a set of 16 'contextual' questions.

The story, set during the height of apartheid, is about a young black woman who is secretly and illegally staying in her sister's domestic quarters in white suburban Johannesburg. The young woman has rejected the idea of becoming a nurse or teacher – the only two professions open to black women at the time – and is trying to find a way to become a writer. 'People thought that these professions were respectable, but I knew I wanted to do something different...' (Mhlophe 1987) and later she is determined to keep writing. The story focuses on the exclusion and loneliness of the young woman, who finds warmth and privacy in a public toilet where she is able to read and write poetry and stories.

### Reading apartheid in a short story

The teacher introduced the story with a long commentary about literary features: the setting, the plot, the themes and the characters. She described the impact of the pass laws on black women, how this creates the backdrop to the themes of isolation and separateness in the story, yet how the main character 'makes the best of her situation' and the story ends on a positive note.

As part of her commentary before she read the story, the teacher constructed a reading that privileged a particular idea of black subjectivity:

46 Teacher: 'Because during apartheid, when you were addressing a person who employed you - a white person, you called them "Madam".'

47 Learner: 'Yes, Miss.'

48 Teacher: 'They were not calling them by their first names or by their surnames. They called them "Madam".'

49 Male Learner: 'They respect them.'

50 Teacher: 'This shows the way they were respecting the people that employed them...'

In this reading, all black people are characterised as respectful, a reading that serves to limit how the actions of the main character, who challenges dominant ideas of 'good black women', can be read. In line 49, the learner accepts this positioning in this limited reading, as do the rest of the class, who remain quiet and attentive throughout the lesson:

50 Teacher: ... [reading] 'Sometimes I wanted to give up and be a good girl who listened to her elders'. [Teacher commenting]: 'You know *mos*, we black people, we've got respect. We respect our elder people. You must always show respect no matter what. Not like people of these days who question everything. But that time, they were just obeying the rules.'

Both the story '... a good girl...' and the teacher's commentary set up an idea of goodness that means obeying elders. The teacher extends this idea to mean accepting rules and showing respect, 'no matter what'. Yet by choosing to focus on the main character's choices: staying illegally in her sister's quarters and exploring alternative careers, the story can be read as a celebration of resistance to the constructions of black women subjects during apartheid. The teacher's commentary, though, does not allow for an exploration of the way in which black women challenged their limited career options. Rather, the teacher emphasises the main character's loneliness and isolation. In her repeated use of the pronoun 'we', for example, in '... we black people', she positions the learners as respectful black people and instructs them 'you' to be respectful, 'no matter what'. This injunction denies the learners an opportunity to explore ideas of resistance – both on the part of women to their very constricted lives and on the part of black people in general to apartheid. There is also evidence here of a confusion between subservience and respect that reveals a strong ideological orientation of acceptance of unequal power relations, and a reluctance to interrogate the ways in which the character's experiences as a young woman challenged power relations between powerful privileged white people and their black servants.

Neither the teacher's commentary nor the questions that were set afforded the learners an opportunity to explore these power relations. The 16 questions showed little variety in the cognitive demands that were made of the learners and privileged an orientation to the text characterised by limited engagement with its possible meanings: nine of the questions required factual recall from the text (e.g. 'Where does the story take place?'). One of them, Question 3, asked, 'Which two professions were regarded as respectable by people?' which underlines the idea that 'respectable' women were nurses or teachers, professions that extend the work of women as carers and nurturers. Three of the questions tested vocabulary and punctuation knowledge (e.g. 'Give the opposite of the word temporary'); three of the questions required a level of inference (e.g. 'How did she feel about staying with her sister?'); and just one question, Question 6, 'What do you think would have happened if the "Madam" had seen her?', opened the possibility for an engagement with the relationship between the white madam and her employee's sister, and an investigation of how power worked (and still works) between black and white women in domestic contexts.

### Reading gender in a short story

In the short story, the main character manages to get a job in a factory and in the extract below, she recounts a conversation



she has with another worker, about going out with a 'lunch boy' – a city boy who could buy her lunch:

54 Teacher: [reading] 'She told me it was wise not to sleep with him because then I could dump him any time I wanted to. I was very nervous about such things.' [Teacher commenting]: 'Why she was nervous? It's because she was coming from upcountry.' [Teacher reading]: 'In city life I thought it was better to be a *bari* than to be stabbed by a city boy for his money.'

55 Learners: 'Yes!'

56 Female Learner: '*Unyanisile*.' [She's right.]

Here the girls identify with the narrator's resistance to the sexual demands made of them by city boys, retreating into the relative safety of the unsophisticated position of country girls. The learners understand the sexual threat from powerful city boys, even though the teacher has (mis)directed them in turn 54, choosing to focus on the narrator's rural background (she had explained earlier in the turn that a *bari* was a label used by city people to derogate people from the rural areas), rather than on the sexual implications of befriending a 'lunch boy'. This section of the story has touched the girls directly. The past is with them; the experiences of black women are their experiences. In turn 56, the learner's use of the present tense creates a sense of immediacy and identification with the young woman in the story, who, like many of them, has come from the rural areas to the city, where she has to negotiate the risks of sexual violence.

## Learner responses

A few days after this lesson, I interviewed four of the learners in the class. In the interview, one of the female students showed a thoughtful and considered response to the story, in which she explored in a more nuanced way than had been possible during the reading or in the classwork, what the story meant for her:

198 Y: 'I felt the pain that the people were in, in that time because the lady couldn't stay with her sister at that moment because her sister was employed. So I felt the pain she had to go through. Early in the morning, she had to wake, go and stay in the toilet, wait there for her time for her to go to work. So it was very painful but it showed that black people are very strong. What she believed in, she do what she believed in. She wanted to help her family, she went to find work. Even though she had to wake up early, she did wake up early.'

199 Interviewer: 'And does it make you think about your life?'

200 Y: 'Yes. It shows us that we as young children take things easily. The stories tell us that if you believe in something you have to work for it. We as young children give up easily. If we want something and we don't get it we just quit. It shows us that there are people who do things that they believe in. They are our mentors. We look to them.'

In her response, what is significant is her use in turn 198, of the word 'pain', which she uses three times, an indication of the strong identification she felt with the character. She also identifies with the character's strength and emphasised that the character did what she believed in, that she

showed discipline. She identifies here with someone who has overcome tremendous adversity and when she says 'black people are very strong', her use of the present tense signals her membership in that collective.

Yet there is a shift in her response in turn 200, where she distances her peer group from the oppressed of the past. In making an explicit connection with her life, she elevates the character in the story and describes herself and her peers as those who 'take things easily'. 'We as young people give up easily'. Her use of first person plural pronouns: 'They are *our* mentors. *We* look to them' suggests at once a separation from the heroes of the past and a sense of a collective agency. The youth of today are different from their predecessors and are bound together in the here and now and need to act together.

What she says here in turn 200 echoes the moralistic overtones in the discourse and the orientation to reading that requires that learners find a message in the text. Once again the authority of the text is paramount and Y in her reading is shifting in and out of the position of obedient and respectful black person. While she can feel the character's pain, the dominant ideology that paints young people as spoilt and 'giving up easily' has overtaken and disrupted her identification and ruptured her attempt to link the character's struggles as a black woman, with her own. The classroom discourse has constituted her as a particular kind of reader, who can find surface meaning in the story. But it has not given her the language to talk about the underlying power relations that the story is all about.

During the teacher's reading of this story in class, the learners were very attentive. They clearly enjoyed and were gripped by it. The issues it raised about professions and identities available to black women, sexual exploitation by sophisticated urban men and the complexity of racial relations all afford great potential for learners to connect with their lives. But neither the reading and discussion of the text nor the questions in the writing task afforded the learners the opportunity to explore those aspects of the text that could have been meaningful for them, especially in ways that could develop them as critical readers who are learning how to challenge dominant power relations.

In the lesson observations and in the interview with four of the learners in the class, this researcher encountered young people who were able to draw on a range of resources to complete the tasks set for them in their English lessons. The class were in the commerce stream, studying Accounting, Business Economics and Economics, and in a group of lessons on advertising, a number of learners were able to draw on their understanding of commercial practices, in creative ways, to realise the production of an advertisement. Yet those resources were not explicitly recognised by the teacher. In the interview, the four learners (two men and two women), when asked about their future career hopes, said, 'My goal is to become an economist, like in statistics...', '... after Grade 12 I will go into university where I will do sales marketing

or accounting'; 'I also want to be an entrepreneur. There are so many things, but that is one of my biggest goals'; 'I want to be a sound engineer. So that's my career field'. In the expression of these desires, we see learners who are looking way beyond the constraints of their gender (in the case of the two women) and class positions towards a future that holds a wide range of potential for them and they tell a story about themselves that challenges and contradicts the subject positions made available in the classroom discourse and reading orientations, of knowing their place. These learners are drawing on political narratives of freedom and equality, in which black youth are told they can strive for and achieve the academic success previously denied to their parents. In telling the story of their career ambitions, these learners have drawn on multiple sources, including their positions as commerce students, as members of 'a new generation' and on their imagined future selves. These future selves contradict the positions of 'respectful' young people afforded them by the classroom discourse in their lessons in the previous week.

## Conclusion

The literacy practices and discursive positions described and analysed in this study can be situated in a long history of unequal access to resources, including access that has been denied to generations of teachers in their schooling and teacher training. How then can the resources afforded by critical orientations be made available to all schools? One focus has to be on teacher training and within that attention needs to be paid to the curriculum – to developing understandings of what it means to do critical literacy and of why it is important. Secondly, teacher training needs to take into consideration the way in which our apartheid past continues to speak through teachers in the present: how their discursive practices are contingent upon their own subject positioning during apartheid as non-critical consumers of text. Petersen (2014) has argued further that in-service teachers, too, need support to shift their practices towards a critical pedagogy. Thirdly, teacher training must address issues of the gendered positions of female teachers working in a society where women have equal rights legally but where patriarchal practices are normative.

A second focus requires a shift in the way in which learners are constructed, about the subject positions they are able to take up, or desire to take up, and about the resources those positions afford them, so that much more can be made of those resources in the classroom. Alternative models of teaching and learning, in which learners' knowledge, history and experience of the world are centrally placed in their engagement with texts, must be developed.

In this case study, learners displayed a strong investment in their future, drawn from their desire for an improvement in their personal and social circumstances. What they and all

learners need are opportunities for engaging with texts that position them as critical thinkers who can understand and challenge the way texts work to reproduce or undo relations of domination, and in doing so can acquire the resources they need for academic success.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that she has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced her in writing this article.

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