A Taxi Ride to Critical Literacy: High School Students as Co-Researchers and Text Analysts

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Abstract

This article describes a critical literacy research project undertaken with English Additional Language students at a South African township school. Students were invited to take on the position of researchers in gathering and analysing bumper stickers found in commuter minibuses known as *itekisi* (taxi). These everyday texts in English and African languages are salient for the students' discourse communities. Bringing them into English lessons validates the use of languages and discourses that multilingual students inhabit and draws on their ability to move fluidly between languages. Framed by critical discourse analysis theory, this project aimed to facilitate students' abilities to develop and use critical literacy knowledge and skills in analysing taxi bumper stickers. The findings indicate that the students were able to demonstrate some criticality as they investigated multiple interpretations of the texts by community members and themselves. Inviting students to investigate texts drawn from their own communities was envisaged as enabling their development as critical readers with a social justice orientation to texts. However, their relentless negativity towards taxi drivers made it difficult for them to keep their focus on the texts, suggesting that teachers' selection of salient texts for lessons with a focus on critical literacy may not always achieve the intended outcomes.

Keywords: bumper stickers; critical literacy awareness; critical discourse analysis; social justice; taxi drivers; students as researchers

Introduction

In South Africa, teaching critical literacy in classrooms in which English is studied as an additional language (AL) is under-researched although critical literacy is an important component of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) (Department of Education [DoE] 2003). At the end of the Further Education and Training (FET) band (Grade 10–12), students are expected to have become critical readers who can take an assertive stance in response to the dominant assumptions in texts. The final Grade 12 English language examination requires students to respond critically to a variety of texts in a range of genres. According to Millin (2015), unless students are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills, they are likely to merely perform critical reading mechanically and fail to achieve the critical literacy objectives set out by the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS).

To foster criticality, teachers are advised to create critically literate "niches" or spaces in their classrooms (Leland, Harste, and Huber 2005; O'Brien 1994; Souto-Manning 2009). Paulo Freire (1978), often recognised as the initiator of critical literacy, conceived of teachers as cultural workers. The emphasis placed on code-breaking and comprehension-type literacy practices (Leland, Harste, and Huber 2005) has meant that critical literacy has remained on the margins in many classrooms and curricula and, where included, is often reserved for the older or most able learners (Comber 2001b). As Luke, O'Brien and Comber (2001) and Vasquez (2003) demonstrate, critical literacy can be taught even at lower grades using all manner of texts, particularly those located in readers' everyday contexts. Some studies have shown how "illiterate" adults engage in literate activities using everyday texts that are not commonly recognised in school-like settings and academic contexts (Lankshear and Knobel 2003). These everyday texts may include occupation-related literacies such as those practised by South African taxi drivers (Breier, Taetsane, and Sait 1996) or farmhands (Gibson 1996).

Research has shown that it is possible to use any text for teaching critical literacy (Vasquez, Janks, and Comber 2019). This means the world, as text, can be read from a critical literacy perspective, given that what constitutes text continues to change (Vasquez, Janks, and Comber 2019). As Vasquez (2014) points out, students can use texts to build a curriculum that has significance for their lives. As everyday texts, the taxi bumper stickers used in this study are salient for students' discourse communities. They reflect issues and topics that may capture students' interests and enable them to "exert their voices on issues of public concern" (Cohen et al. 2012, vi).

Bumper stickers can be a resource for teachers who aim to use a culturally relevant pedagogy that, as conceived by Ladson-Billings (1995), can validate students' cultural knowledge and experience and assist them to recognise and analyse unequal relations of power. Such unequal power relations are an integral part of many children's everyday lives with the majority coming to school with complex and sophisticated understandings of "what's fair and what isn't" (Comber 2001a, 170). More recent iterations of culturally relevant pedagogy emphasise cultural pluralism and the centrality of community and

youth culture (Paris and Alim 2014). When applied to literacy education, teachers should recognise that varieties of English have been appropriated by a wide range of discourse communities. In post-colonial countries such as South Africa, English can no longer be equated with whiteness, monolingualism, or dominant ways of speaking and writing (Gee 2007). Culturally relevant pedagogies aim to be inclusive of students' linguistic repertoires and to resist the ideological construction of languages as separate, bounded entities (McKinney 2007). For students to be socioculturally conscious, they need to resist normative constructions of subjectivity, recognising difference as necessary for making sense of the word and the world (Freire and Macedo 1987). Thus, engaging students in critical literacy practices can lead to a "transformative social action that contributes to the achievement of a more equitable social order" (Vasquez, Janks, and Comber 2019, 302).

According to Kretovics (1985, 51), critical literacy "points to providing students not merely with functional skills, but with the conceptual tools necessary to critique and engage society along with its inequalities and injustices". These tools should assist "students and others [to] develop a critical relationship to their own knowledge [and to] learn how to read the world and their lives critically" (Aronowitz and Giroux 1985, 132). In *Doing Critical Literacy*, Janks (2014a) proposes classroom strategies that show how words and images work to re/produce discourses and ideologies.

To achieve social justice, critical literacy should enable students to question, resist, and reconstruct textual representations that do not correspond to their own identities (Gainer 2010). Writing together, Vasquez, Janks and Comber (2019) have conceptualised critical literacy as "a way of being and doing" that supports diverse learners, issues of social justice and equity. Janks (2017) has called for refocusing on the moral consequences of questions raised by critical literacy education, including what it means to be socially just.

In order to promote social justice in the English classroom, I draw on Comber's (1994) early conception of critical literacy involving the following pedagogical moves: (1) repositioning students as researchers of language, and (2) problematising classroom and public texts. Comber's approach is informed by Freire's (1978) and Connell's (1993, 43) identification of a key principle of social justice as working in the "interests of the least advantaged". In Connell's view, learning from ordinary people's viewpoints could lead to curricular justice by changing what counts as valued knowledge. From my perspective, the small research project described and discussed in this article is a first attempt at developing cultural sustaining pedagogy (Paris 2012) capable of connecting classroom instruction with literacies and knowledge that children bring from their own experiences (Delgado-Gaitan 1990; Ladson-Billings 1995).

In the interests of promoting critical literacy education, some valuable school-based research has been conducted in different parts of the world (Norton 2003; Norton and Kamal 2003; Norton and Vanderheyden 2004). In South Africa, to locate critical literacy

within the classroom, Boakye, Olifant, and Cekiso (2021) investigated teachers' perceptions of critical literacy in selected South African township classrooms. Their findings demonstrated teachers' limited understanding of critical literacy and limited use of a critical-reading approach in their classrooms. These findings are a cause for concern because classroom research in South Africa reflects that social relations occurring outside the classroom have a bearing on how teachers and students act in ways that perpetuate social inequality (Kapp 2004; Makoe 2007; McKinney 2007, 2011). Kapp (2004) has shown that dynamics and divisions within the social fabric of townships inform and construct the ways in which students in townships position themselves in the English classroom.

Theoretical Perspectives

Critical Discourse Analysis

This study is framed by Fairclough's (1989) critical discourse model, which was used to analyse the bumper stickers. The model employs three analytical foci for analysing any communicative event: the text itself, discourse practice and sociocultural practice. The text is the product of the discursive practice elements, which in turn vary with the conditions of particular social practices (Stables 1996). In this study, analysis of the bumper stickers is not separated from analysis of the discursive practice itself and analysis of the social context in which it happens (Fairclough 1989). The study draws on the works of Barbara Comber (2001a, 2001b) and Catherine Wallace (2003), which provide valuable insights into the teaching of critical reading in schools in Australia and the United Kingdom, respectively. Comber's (1994) early conception of critical literacy provides valuable pedagogical moves for critical reading of texts in classrooms, with her research located in schools in high poverty and working-class areas (Comber 2015).

Humour

The structure, form and purpose of most bumper stickers replicate jokes and they are meant to amuse readers. Jokes are a form of wordplay, inextricably linked to circumstances that belong to the world and exist beyond words (Freud [1905] 1960). Successful wordplay relies on shared knowledge between the sender and the recipient (Freud [1905] 1960). A comic situation that is too culture specific may not be so amusing outside its culture. Jokes are subjective (Freud [1905] 1960) and socially constructed (Chiaro 1992). The same content may not be amusing to everyone. The recipient of a joke should possess the particular knowledge needed to understand it. Another characteristic of jokes, which is also found on bumper stickers, is brevity, which is the body and soul of wit. It is "its self", says Jean Paul (1804). Being brief serves a purpose in sending the intended message instantaneously. Lipps (1898) says of brevity in jokes:

> A joke says what it has to say, not always in few words, but in too few words—that is, in words that are sufficient by strict logic or by common mode of thought and speech. It may even actually say what it has to say by not saying it. (1898, 90)

As in jokes, bumper stickers bring forward what is concealed or hidden. Jokes are identifiable by the frame within which they are constructed; the recipient is not expected to interact but simply to read and finally, it is hoped, to laugh (Chiaro 1992). Most messages on bumper stickers are short, almost spineless one-liners consisting of clichés (Sibanda 2009). In addition, bumper stickers may contain a pun. Most bumper stickers have a punch line or punch, which is the point at which the recipient notices something incongruous in relation to the linguistic or semiotic environment in which it occurs, but which at first sight was not apparent (Chiaro 1992).

The Context of the Study

Rationale and Aim

This study about teaching critical literacy extends the ideas included in a research project for a Master of Arts degree. It was initiated by a provocative remark made by a student, in an unrelated study conducted at the same school: "Children in this school don't read Afrikaans. How can you expect them to read English?" (Sibanda 2004). Using the remark as a catalyst for teaching that aimed to assist students not only to read but to read critically, I decided on a reading intervention using bumper stickers. Its main aim was to introduce students to critical reading, guided by the main research question: "How do students in a typical township school read bumper stickers critically?" Additional research questions were as follows:

1. Can students identify sociocultural factors that influence and underpin the messages on the bumper stickers?
2. What, if any, linguistic or additional textual reading knowledge and skills have students acquired from their participation in the project?

Research Site

This study was conducted at Pickett Secondary,[1] a township school west of Johannesburg, South Africa. Historically, the school served the Afrikaans-speaking "coloured" community of Pickett Township. At the time the study was undertaken, Pickett Secondary was classified as a poorly performing school by the Department of Education because of its consistently poor National Senior Certificate[2] results. Very few students from the school attained the minimum university admission pass. Consequently, students who were involved in this project had been labelled as academically "poor", a deficit label I aimed to refute while exploring various ways in which they could read and interpret texts.

The minibus "taxi" or *itekisi*, as it is known in South Africa, is a mode of transport that falls between private and conventional bus transport. Registered taxis often have unfixed time schedules, but the law requires them to have fixed routes. Though they

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[1]   A pseudonym used to protect the identity of the school and the participants.
[2]   South Africa's school leaving certificate.

have fixed routes, taxis have the convenience of stopping anywhere to pick up or drop off passengers. Violation of these routes and stiff competition often result in feuds or gun battles between rival taxi associations (Fobosi 2019). According to Kim Thomas (2018), 43% of assassinations that occurred in South Africa between 2000 and 2017 were related to taxi industry feuds. Taxi operators are also infamous for mistreating passengers, particularly women. While many drivers do have the negative qualities attributed to them by the students in this study and literature, it is common knowledge that they are often exploited by the owners of the taxis. Many taxi operators do not register as taxpayers and do not register their employees or adhere to any minimum standards of employment (Barrett 2003). Most taxis are not owner-driven because the owners own more than one taxi (Barrett 2003). The taxi industry often creates numerous traffic problems because many taxi drivers are reckless and their vehicles are unroadworthy, as a report in the newspaper, *The Star* (8 February 2007), attests: "The speedometer isn't working, tyres are bald, seats are torn, brakes, lights and steering wheel are defective … [It is] a piece of rubbish". Although the industry presents numerous problems, taxis often attract commuters with comparatively lower fares and the ability to reach more remote destinations than buses and trains, which is a convenience for residents of the urban areas' outlying townships.

Bumper Stickers

Many bumper stickers are pasted on the inside of taxis and are easily accessible to township residents who use taxis as their major mode of transport. The stickers are decided on by the taxi employee-drivers or owner-drivers. Their messages are generic in nature but localised in content that adapts to contexts familiar to commuters. As a pervasive aspect of township discourse, bumper stickers are worthy of study. Because they are in languages that commuters are likely to understand, they facilitate dynamic social interactions, intended to entertain passengers in the taxi. They are examples of a communicative genre embedded in several discourses such as feminism, gender disparities and violence (Sibanda 2009). Messages on bumper stickers are short and pithy statements or phrases of a witty, humorous or satirical nature, reflecting particular social, philosophical, or political positions (Sibanda 2009). The messages reflect how taxi drivers and taxi owners perceive the world and subsequently position themselves and others. In this study bumper stickers are positioned as a significant communicative mode that surfaces the text makers' and the text users' ideologies and how commuters are implicated in these texts to act and believe in particular ways (Albers, Vasquez, and Harste 2011; Albers et al. 2019; Harste 2003; Janks 2014a, 2014b; Vasquez 2004; Vasquez, Albers, and Harste 2017). As texts, bumper stickers are not autonomous self-contained products but are located within sociocultural contexts (Street 1984). They are a unique genre embedded in the social literacy practices (Street 1984) of taxi drivers, whom Breier, Taetsane, and Sait (1996) construed as "illiterate" or "semi-literate". These stickers offer opportunities for important learning as students undertake the processes of collection, description and analysis central to the research project. Throughout this article, the words "bumper stickers" and "stickers" are used interchangeably.

Methodology

Participants

The following groupings participated in the study: 20 Grade 12 English Additional Language students (six of whom formed the focus group), four taxi drivers (who were interviewed by the researcher), three bumper sticker printers and 40 taxi commuters (interviewed by the students). The students, whose ages ranged from 17 to 19 years, were selected using purposive sampling (Creswell and Creswell 2018). All the students had access to bumper stickers because they used taxis regularly.

Data Collection

Relevant steps were taken to obtain permission to conduct the research project, including obtaining informed consent from participants. Ethics clearance was granted by the university in which the researcher was located. As this was a teaching project, the 20 students played an active role in it as "researchers" who collected messages on bumper stickers while they travelled in taxis. Other data collection techniques included interviews and focus group discussions.

Interviews

To be critically literate requires an understanding of the processes of production and reception of texts (Fairclough 1993). Thus, the focus group conducted interviews with printers of bumper stickers (producers) and taxi commuters (receivers). The whole class interviewed commuters residing in their township in order to establish attitudes towards bumper stickers. Each student interviewed two taxi commuters (one interview with each one). In addition, the focus group members interviewed three bumper sticker printers (once) on separate occasions, while I observed the process. Interviews with printers were intended to enrich students' knowledge of the processes of production. I interviewed four taxi drivers (one interview each) because they are often considered violent, and students should not be placed at risk. The purpose of the interviews with the taxi drivers was to investigate conditions of production and processes of reception of bumper stickers. It was not determined if interviewees were owner-drivers or employee-drivers. The findings from the interviews with the drivers were made available to the students because my role was to feed information into the research process.

Focus Group

For in-depth discussion, a focus group technique was used to engage a small number of students in a group discussion "focused around a particular topic or set of issues" (Wilkinson 2004, 177). Two focus group discussions focused on the conditions of production and reception of bumper stickers. In the first discussion, the group discussed information they had obtained from interviews with printers and the information from my interviews with taxi drivers. In the second interview, they discussed the perceptions of commuters towards bumper stickers. The information obtained from these

discussions was intended to enrich the interview data obtained from the printers and taxi drivers.

Data Analysis

According to Yin (2014), in a case study data analysis involves examining, categorising, tabulating and recombining data to address research questions. In this study, data were organised around the three dimensions defined by Fairclough (1993): social conditions, processes of production and reception and linguistic features of texts. For each of these dimensions, the researcher monitored the students and analysed the extent to which they were becoming critical. Positive features of these processes were that the students produced extraordinarily interesting examples and analyses of responses and interpretations of bumper stickers.

Processes of Production

In this study, the abbreviations PR and DR refer to bumper sticker printer and taxi driver, respectively. An understanding of the processes of production was derived from the perspectives of bumper sticker printers, taxi drivers and students by posing the question: "What factors influence your choices or designs of bumper stickers?" All the printers maintained that money was the major motivator for printing bumper stickers. PR2 described bumper stickers as township people's "voice" for commenting on social issues. For example, the students revealed that during the 2010 FIFA World Cup, the demand for "Proudly South African" stickers was high. Similarly, during the 2007 Zuma trial,[3] stickers associated with Jacob Zuma's trademark mantra "*Umshini Wami*"[4] (my machine gun) were "selling like hot cakes". Interesting views emerged from the printers' responses to the question: "Do you ever change an original concept if the idea is not yours?" According to PR1, they just print whatever customers want, which "can be a cultural identity or message towards women of loose morals". Importantly, taxi drivers revealed negative stereotyping of women throughout this study. Additionally, PR1 expressed a lack of concern about "those who are offended by what the stickers say because they wouldn't buy our products anyway". By contrast, PR2 asserted that they do not just print stickers with potential to create racial or sexist tensions such as "One Boer One bullet" or "All women are bitches". Surprisingly, PR2 revealed that they often get requests to print images of nude women or women's genitalia, about which he expressed disgust with "how sick our society is [and] obsessed with pornography and obscenity". However, PR3 admitted that although they take precautions not to print offensive material, they may unknowingly print obscene material that is in township lingua they do not understand. This comment indicates that bumper sticker discourse is a social practice mostly understood in particular sociocultural contexts.

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[3]   The Deputy President of South Africa at the time was on trial for allegedly raping a 31-year-old family friend.

[4]   Words of Mr Zuma's trademark song.

To further uncover the production process, the following question was posed to taxi drivers: "How do you choose particular stickers?" DR1 openly admitted that he chose sexist stickers because he believes that what they insinuate about women is true. For example, when commenting on the sticker "If you hate peace get married", he unequivocally declared, "These creatures [women] talk too much". In response, the students were critical of stereotyping women as inherently evil, with one girl even questioning the representation of women in religious texts: "Even in the Bible women are treated as evil like Eve and Delilah", a view shared by one boy: "Women are constructed as evil and cursed even in the Bible". The interpretation of the position of women in biblical "allegorical terms" (Cole 2014, 18) is fascinating. As Cole (2014) reminds us, recasting the position of women using religious allegory as a discursive practice of interpretation provides a context for rethinking the values of one's faith, which in my view could raise questions about interpretation and misinterpretation of gendered positions.

During class and focus group discussions, the students interrogated the processes of sticker production. One focus group interview began with the question, "What do you think of people who make bumper stickers?" For the entire interview, the students said nothing positive about the production of stickers as they discussed information obtained from interviews with commuters. They constructed taxi drivers as misogynists who "hate women full time", as depicted in their choice of stickers. They had found numerous stickers portraying women as "gold diggers", such as: "The only time women listen is when money speaks", "99% of women are after money", and "A beautiful woman is a multiplication of problems and a subtraction of money". The class described the sticker "If women were good, God would have married" as blasphemous and disrespectful. Surprisingly, Tom[5] supported the bigoted views: "Many girls are after money. They leave school and fall pregnant so that they can get maintenance and grant."[6] The social grant is a subject for debate on various South African platforms, where views expressed include allegations of misuse by recipients, promotion of promiscuity and encouragement of underage and unprotected sex leading to the spread of HIV/AIDS. South Africa is reported as having one of the highest HIV infection rates in the world, with 20% of the world's population living with HIV, and 20% of new HIV infections in the world occurring here (Allinder and Fleischman 2019). Because of their stereotyped views of women, the taxi drivers held beliefs that women are responsible for spreading HIV/AIDS. By contrast, Thembi found it absurd for taxi drivers to suggest that women are responsible for spreading HIV/AIDS. She succinctly pointed out that taxi drivers are the ones spreading HIV instead, because they do not believe in condomising (using condoms), an attitude asserted in the sticker, "I love flesh on flesh", which contrasts with stickers with stark warnings and advice such as "Fools love flesh on flesh", "Wise people condomise" and "Safe sex saves life". In addition, the students

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[5]   Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of the participants.
[6]   A government social grant meant for children whose parents are poor or earn below a stipulated minimum wage.

described stickers such as "Sex instructor, first lesson free", "Sex with a taxi driver is a blessing" and "Sex saves lives" as evidence of the taxi drivers' obsession with sex.

In order to interrogate students' perceptions of producers of bumper stickers, I posed the question: "What interests and values do you think the composers of bumper stickers have?" The students described bumper sticker producers as sexist men who believe that women depend on men for their livelihood, a notion the students dispelled. They expressed disgust at the use of gender as a construct to perpetuate discrimination against women. The students believed taxi drivers were fixated on the past and conformed to archaic beliefs (Ogoti 2019).

To uncover more thoughts about the construction of bumper stickers, I posed the question, "What do you think the stickers tell you about the drivers or printers?" Themba described taxi drivers as "old fashioned and barbaric". In support of this description, Thelma suggested that the implied support of gender-based violence expressed on bumper stickers was a result of taxi drivers' "botched" upbringing: "what they were taught when growing up that women must be beaten always". She made a shocking observation: "Even in our township, we see men beat their wives and boys rape girls. It's common and like normal." This observation is indicative of the hideous reality of students' experiences of gender-based violence. It illustrates that violence against women is a phenomenon not only deeply ingrained in the attitudes of some taxi drivers but present in the broader township context. The students suggested that violent words on stickers extended to action. For example, taxi drivers were seen as living up to statements such as "*Yimina ngedwa enginelungelo lokushela lapha etekisini*" (I am the only one who has a right to propose love to women in this taxi). They revealed that some taxi drivers insist that women or girls should sit in the front seat, so that they can propose love to them while caressing their thighs and fondling their breasts for the entire journey. They warned that turning down such unwanted behaviour may attract insults and death threats from irate taxi drivers. According to the students, this "rough" behaviour is typical of taxi drivers and is depicted in stickers such as "When I am rough, I am real rough".

Discussion

The students identified strong cultural influences in the construction of bumper stickers. As urban youths, they believe that bumper stickers are based on traditional African beliefs contradictory to progressive contemporary views on matters such as gender equality. Cultural controversies emerging in this study are not uncommon in communities where myths surrounding cultural perceptions about gender relations are magnified by behaviour linked to culture (Cole 2014). As the students reassessed prevailing narratives about gender and gender relations, they challenged the construction of women in these narratives. For example, Thembi contended: "There are women out there that work hard to make a change [and] do not rely on men's money". In the students' view, some drivers may be using stickers to affirm their cultural identity and inherent beliefs. As the study demonstrates, it is difficult for people in general and

taxi drivers in particular to move away from their own deeply held beliefs. The bigoted views on bumper stickers may not necessarily reflect the position of printers, but they do appear to reflect individual taxi drivers' and taxi owners' perceptions and choices.

Processes of Reception

Critical reading by the students started with the categorisation of bumper stickers. In their analysis of the stickers students reflected their lived experiences. Janks (1991) argues that critical literacy texts chosen for classroom activities should have relevance to students' social and political life to enable them to work within their "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky 1978) as they begin to develop knowledge of how meaning is conveyed in texts.

In their analysis of the linguistic features of the stickers, the students identified the wordplay in the sticker "Say no to drugs; that will bring the price down" as related to the "law of drugs and demand" adapted from the law of supply and demand in economics. Another example of wordplay, "Is there life after death, mess with a taxi driver and find out", derives from the religious belief in life after death. The students revealed that the pun in "Don't talk to me, talk to my employer" is based on the slogan of a particular insurance company, "Don't talk to me, talk to my lawyer", which they viewed as the taxi driver's cunning way of trying to shift responsibility for bad behaviour to their employer (that is, the taxi owner). Importantly, when commenting on the sticker, "Black is beautiful but too black is a crime", Mumi showed awareness of xenophobia in South Africa (Hassim, Kupe, and Worby 2008; Landau 2012); as she noted: "There is discrimination against our black brothers. If you are too black, people in our township call you 'Shangaan'[7] or 'Kwerekwere'."[8]

In addition, the students identified ellipsis in most messages where pronouns are omitted. The omission of a pronoun or agent is deliberate in its ambiguity for it creates commands as taxi drivers attempt to impose certain ideological positions and to assert their position of power. Where a pronoun was used, one student observed: "The use of 'you' does not need someone to go to a prophet to tell that the finger is pointing at women. Where they use 'me' and 'I' they speak highly of themselves." The use of the pronoun, "you", is deliberate for it refers to the reader. From such usage emerges the victim and perpetrator discourse where women are the victims. Bumper sticker discourse is mostly in first person, which makes the composer more visible and the message timeless (Janks 1988), and depicts the taxi drivers' ongoing position and static beliefs. When commenting on stickers such as "*Kukhal'esami iscathulo*" (I call the shots / I am in charge) and "*Yimina indoda*" (I am *the* man), the students noted with disdain,

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[7] "Shangaan" or Tsonga speakers are found in the Limpopo Province of South Africa and parts of Mozambique. They are often discriminated against and targeted for their dark complexion whenever there is xenophobic unrest.

[8] "Kwerekwere" is a derogatory term referring to foreign African nationals.

"*Bayazitshela*" (They are full of themselves), which is a common South African way of referring to someone with a big ego.

In the second focus group interview, the following question was posed: "How do you and other commuters receive and respond to bumper stickers?" While reflecting on commuters' views, Thembi highlighted shared knowledge between producers and receivers: "Stickers reflect the lives of ordinary South Africans from townships." After analysing the commuters' responses, the following question was posed: "What do you think the taxi drivers think of the way commuters receive bumper stickers?" According to Thembi, bumper stickers contain dirty jokes with vulgar language, which another student, Thelma, found "not funny" because they are "not our culture" (outside her urban culture). The students' views demonstrate criticality in addressing the research question, "Can students identify sociocultural factors that influence and underpin the messages on the bumper stickers?" Thando thought that taxi drivers chose stickers that depict violence: "One even said that they use '*isagila*'[9] to solve their problems". According to Thembi, stickers create an impression that taxi drivers "are in control and people don't say anything because of fear [of them]".

In order to further tease out attitudes towards bumper stickers, the following questions were posed to taxi drivers: "Do your passengers ever comment on your stickers? What do they say?" Interestingly, DR1 proudly declared that passengers do not dare to comment on his stickers "because they know that any stupid comment *Ngingabaphihliza ngesagila* [I can smash them with a club]". Thembi affirmed the violent nature of some taxi drivers: "They can beat you up at the slightest provocation, like asking for your change or asking to be dropped-off." DR4 conceded that passengers may be afraid to comment because "many taxi drivers are violent and don't take nonsense". Importantly, DR2 made a fascinating suggestion as to why women, in particular, do not usually comment: "Maybe because our culture forbids them to comment on sexual matters in public." Regarding the discussion of sexual matters, DR3 interestingly noted, "In our African culture, sexual matters are never discussed in public. Elders discuss sexual matters in the privacy of their homes. *Injobo ayithungelwa ebandla* [private matters are never discussed in public]." The drivers' views are important in uncovering the meaning of passengers' silence. In this context, silence has different possible interpretations: cultural, emotional and interpretative. From a cultural perspective, it depicts the social positionality of women on what they can say, where and when to say it. As an expression of emotion, silence may mean defiance of sexist messages. From an interpretive perspective, silence could depict a state of fear of retribution from taxi drivers for challenging their position of power. Confronted with such bigoted perceptions, it is critical for teachers to consider how students can be assisted to respond to such views. They could begin by asking students what it means to be silenced in their cultures (Cole 2014).

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[9]   A fighting stick.

Emerging Themes

Cultural Issues of Gender and Inequality

The students found gender-stereotyped messages to be positioning women as insignificant in a male-dominated world. As they analysed stickers from a feminist perspective, they were particularly critical of sexist and distorted cultural beliefs informing the construction of bumper stickers. The class characterised historically tribal and contemporary township culture as inherently violent and unresponsive to the needs of women, which in its chauvinism devalues the worth of women (Cole 2014).

One student, Mandy, was critical of the sticker "In the good old days, girls used to cook like their mothers. Now they drink like their fathers", because it stereotypes good women as child minders and caregivers. She noted, "Although I don't favour alcoholism in general, I am totally against the idea that men are permitted to drink but women are not. This sticker also shows that our culture expects us girls to do all the housework while men drink and laze around." Mandy's statement critiques the positioning of women as home minders as a gendered social practice entrenched in most South African communities. Drinking is associated with masculinity and women who drink are perceived as straying into exclusionary gendered space. Gender relations feature prominently in the students' analysis of stickers. As a social construct, gender defines one's personal identity, and is transmitted in daily interactions between men and women in families, communities and wider social arenas.

Perceptions on Power Relations and Identity

Critical discourse analysis focuses on the construction of meanings of social actions and practices through the lens of power relations (Agger 1991; Burr 1995; Hodges, Kuper, and Reeves 2008). According to the students, taxi drivers' choice of bumper stickers show that they consider women to be financially dependent, commonly known as PhDs (permanent home dependents) in the townships. Students thought that taxi drivers were using bumper stickers to exert their power over women, as one student, Nomsa, critically suggested: "Taxi drivers confuse taxis with their homes. They want to play father figure to every passenger, especially women. They ill-treat us like their wives at home." Importantly, violence against women is common in countries with pronounced gender hierarchies. According to McFadden (1999), a man with strong patriarchal views believes that he can say or do what he wants to any woman:

> [A]fter all he has a woman at home who kneels before him every night, calling him *baba* (father) and accepting his authority, almost without question; and taking whatever punishment he dishes out when he feels like reminding her of her place as a "woman" and "a wife". (1999, 26)

McFadden's view resonates with experiences of many women in patriarchal societies where women are conflicted between their "ways of being in the world" and the dominant discourse of male-based public institutions (Gee 2007). Notably, power

relations and dominance seem to be reasons for taxi drivers' arrogance, as DR2 stated: "Most passengers think that we are stupid because we are not educated. ... In order to earn respect one has to be arrogant, not to be too soft." In her 2014 address at the United Nations, actor Emma Watson succinctly described similar behaviour as exemplifying men being imprisoned by gender stereotypes in a society that expects men to be aggressive in order to be accepted (Pearson et al. 2017). Taxi drivers in this study admit to choosing messages that portray "toughness". As Janks (2010, 3) argues, "discourses we inhabit play a crucial role in constructing our multiple identities".

Bumper Stickers as a Reflection of Township Lifestyle

As a social practice, bumper stickers reflect how some township dwellers think and act. The students found bumper stickers to reflect the sexual and other forms of physical violence prevalent in townships. The thought-provoking views of the students demonstrate an attempt at developing some criticality, as they linked messages on bumper stickers to locations of production (townships). As one student attested, messages in bumper stickers "express township social problems that we in the townships face like AIDS and child abuse". Similarly, DR4 revealed that he chose "stickers that ordinary black people in townships will understand [not] 'white' black people who live in suburbs …. They don't share the same jokes with us from the townships." This view is indicative of class divisions because black people who reside in former white-only areas are positioned as an emerging middle class often perceived as detached from ordinary township life.

Linguistic Features of Bumper Stickers

Bumper stickers in this study were mostly written in simple English or IsiZulu, the major lingua franca in South Africa. While a few were in Setswana, others were in *Lok'shin* lingua[10] (Sibanda 2019) or *Tsotsi Taal*, which most township dwellers are likely to understand. According to Breier, Taetsane and Sait (1996), the use of simple English may be attributed to taxi drivers' lack of formal education, but has far-reaching impact on the target reader—the ordinary township dweller. Interestingly, the study found that as urban youths the students had limited understanding of the "deep", "pure" or so-called "standard" varieties of African languages that are mainly spoken in rural contexts (Matentjie 2010). This could be one reason why students overlooked positive messages in some of the stickers such as "*Induku ayiwakhi umuzi*" (Beating a wife does not build a home). In a society plagued with violence, understanding and responding positively to this Zulu proverb could be a powerful restraint on violence against women. As Janks (1991) reminds us, students who bring to class an understanding of social conditions that language reveals or hides are likely to be interested in understanding the linguistic encodings of these conditions and become empowered to respond to this discourse. Janks (2019) argues that teachers often think that critical literacy involves reading against a text, whereas readers who have neither engaged adequately with a text

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10   A term I coined to refer to indigenous language varieties used in townships.

nor understood it cannot be in a position to analyse it critically. As urban youths, my students were *too* critical of messages they construed as an extension of "rural" culture. Conversely, they displayed considerable awareness of "modern" debates on issues of women abuse and gender equality, which they believed taxi drivers disregarded in their choice of stickers. This suggests that students' and taxi drivers' beliefs draw on different discourses (Gee 2007).

Shared Meaning of Bumper Stickers

Shared meaning is important, particularly in regard to jokes, because many jokes are culturally specific (Freud 1905 [1960]). Where producers and readers possess different value systems, the latter may not find a joke that is "too culture sensitive" (Chiaro 1992, 6) amusing. According to commuters, derogatory jokes directed at women displayed male chauvinism and anxiety over the independence espoused by women. For students, such jokes were meant to make the victims of the jokes (usually women) feel inferior. They quoted one commuter who noted that "some jokes are meant to hurt other people's feelings". As cultural outsiders in the taxi drivers' world, the students resisted the sexually explicit jokes, construing them as crossing acceptable moral positions and containing humour of extreme bigotry (Billig 2002).

Resistant Reading

The students' responses demonstrated total rejection of the "mirrored image" or "positioning" (Misson 1994) evident in many of the bumper stickers. They resisted being "shaped" or "constructed" by bumper stickers as particular sorts of social subjects (Talbot 1992). As critical readers, the students "resisted the power of the print" (Janks 1993, iii) and refused to believe everything on bumper stickers, particularly the negative positioning of women. They started their reading from a position of strategic doubt and weighed texts against their own ideas and values as well as those of others (Janks 1993). As Vasquez et al. (2019, 307) importantly point out, "if you agree with a text, it is easy to read it sympathetically and hard to read it critically". It is very difficult to engage with a text that offends us, whereas it is easy to read with a text that supports our view of the world (Janks 2019). Equally, it is hard to undertake critical reading of texts that confirm our views and easy to be critical when we read texts that we disagree with (Janks 2019). To achieve criticality, we have to do both: "[W]e have to engage with texts on their own terms—both to learn from them and to critique them and we have to recognize that our identities shape how we consume and produce texts" (Vasquez, Janks, and Comber 2019, 307). In deconstructing the meanings of texts students can become active readers and participants in conversations and produce knowledge on their own (Cole 2014, 27). The militant attitude of the students suggests that they were "reading against" the texts chosen by taxi drivers whom they detest and fear. The students resist derogatory and insulting humour. For example, when commenting on the sticker "Save water, bath with your neighbour's daughter", one student observed with disdain, "One does not need to go to a *sangoma* [traditional healer] to tell that this was written by a sick man. We all know what he wants to do with the neighbour's daughter."

Conclusion

The overall aim of the project was to develop critical reading among my students, particularly their ability to interrogate texts. As "researchers", the students were presented with an opportunity to interrogate texts accessible to them. By tapping on students' "funds of knowledge" (Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg 1992; Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2005), this project potentially contributed to decolonising the English classroom. It created a pedagogical space that invited students to take part in the production of knowledge as well as to critically interrogate some of the knowledge systems they confront in their lives.

Although the students could interrogate processes of production, they were less able to analyse processes of reception. As township youth, they read bumper stickers from their own experiences as urban youth, which they associate with modernity and they stuck to this perspective. Apparently, they could not shift from their own points of view and deeply held beliefs. As a result, they failed to read bumper stickers from other positions such as those of taxi drivers whom they perceived as "uncivilised". They were unable to "see" the taxi drivers' positions because they read bumper stickers from an "estranged" position. Being able to see other positions is an important feature of being critically literate, according to critical language awareness theory (Fairclough 1995). As Scholes (1985) points out, a reader who projects his or her own mode of thought onto the text can fail to acknowledge the writer's position.

When undertaking this project, I had a strong conviction that, as "familiar" texts, bumper stickers would successfully elicit critical reactions from my students. I did not anticipate that they would interpret them almost entirely from an estranged position and in a resistant manner. Arguably, the students' readings frequently did not specifically refer to the texts themselves but were vehement responses to taxi drivers as targets of their dislike, fear and resentment, which is an interesting insight in itself. Their interpretations were largely subjective because of their prejudice against taxi drivers. It is apparent that some of the problems with the students' responses were related to their familiarity with and existing attitudes to taxi drivers. A critical question to ask is how students would have perceived the taxi drivers if they had interviewed them themselves. In conclusion, it is evident that the students gained limited critical literacy awareness because their discussions focused more on the taxi drivers themselves than on the bumper stickers. However, the discussions emanating from the students' encounters with taxi drivers can be productive in uncovering discourses that inform the construction of bumper stickers.

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