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Developing Critical Reading, Communication Competence, and Learner Confidence among Grade 6 Pupils: A Qualitative Exploration of English Language Teaching Practices in San Mateo East Central School, Isabela, Philippines

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Abstract

The development of critical reading, communication competence, and learner confidence remains a fundamental goal of English language education in elementary schools. In the Philippine educational context, English teachers continuously employ diverse pedagogical approaches to enhance learners' literacy skills while fostering meaningful communication and positive self-perceptions toward language learning. This qualitative study explored the English language teaching practices utilized by Grade 6 teachers in developing critical reading abilities, communication competence, and learner confidence among pupils at San Mateo East Central School, Isabela, Philippines. Using a phenomenological research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and reflective discussions involving ten Grade 6 English teachers. Thematic analysis revealed six major themes: (1) Interactive Reading as a Foundation for Critical Thinking; (2) Questioning Strategies Promote Higher-Order Thinking Skills; (3) Collaborative Communication Activities Enhance Language Use; (4) Supportive Classroom Environments Build Learner Confidence; (5) Contextualized and Authentic Learning Experiences Improve Engagement; and (6) Teacher Feedback and Encouragement Strengthen Language Development. Findings suggest that effective English language teaching extends beyond language instruction and serves as a mechanism for developing analytical thinking, communication skills, and self-confidence. The study highlights the importance of learner-centered pedagogies, authentic communication opportunities, and supportive teacher-learner relationships in fostering holistic language development. Recommendations are provided for curriculum enhancement, teacher professional development, and classroom instructional practices.

Keywords: critical reading, communication competence, learner confidence, English language teaching, qualitative research, elementary education, Philippines

Introduction

English language education plays a critical role in preparing learners for academic success, lifelong learning, and participation in an increasingly interconnected world. Beyond the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary, contemporary English language teaching seeks to develop learners' critical reading abilities, communication competence, and confidence in expressing ideas. These competencies are essential for enabling learners to analyze information critically, engage in meaningful discourse, and participate actively in educational and social contexts.

Critical reading has emerged as an important educational objective because it encourages learners to evaluate texts, identify underlying meanings, question assumptions, and construct informed interpretations. Teachers play a significant role in fostering positive reading dispositions and critical engagement with texts. Research emphasizes that effective critical reading instruction helps learners develop analytical and reflective thinking skills.

Similarly, communication competence remains a central goal of English language education. Communicative competence involves not only linguistic knowledge but also the ability to use language appropriately and effectively in different social situations. The concept extends beyond grammatical accuracy and includes discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competencies necessary for meaningful communication.

Learner confidence is another significant factor influencing language learning success. Confident learners are more willing to participate in discussions, engage in collaborative activities, and take risks in language use. Studies suggest that supportive teaching practices, engaging classroom experiences, and positive teacher feedback contribute significantly to learners' confidence in using English.

Despite the recognized importance of these competencies, limited qualitative studies have examined how English language teachers in Philippine elementary schools intentionally cultivate critical reading, communication competence, and learner confidence simultaneously. This study addresses this gap by exploring the experiences and practices of Grade 6 English teachers in San Mateo East Central School.

Review of Related Literature

Critical reading instruction encourages learners to become active constructors of meaning rather than passive recipients of information. Through questioning, interpretation, and reflection, learners develop deeper comprehension and analytical thinking abilities. Effective critical literacy instruction promotes learner engagement with texts and facilitates independent reasoning.

Communication competence has long been recognized as a fundamental objective of language education. According to communicative language teaching principles, language learning is most effective when learners engage in authentic communication and social interaction. Classroom participation, peer interaction, and meaningful language tasks contribute significantly to communicative competence development.

Literature-based instruction also supports language development by providing opportunities for interpretation, discussion, and critical engagement. Integrating literary texts into English language teaching enhances learners' critical thinking, communication abilities, and cultural understanding.

Moreover, learner confidence is influenced by classroom climate, instructional approaches, and teacher support. Positive learning environments encourage learners to participate actively and develop confidence in expressing their thoughts and ideas. Teacher encouragement and constructive feedback have been identified as significant factors influencing learner self-efficacy and language confidence.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of Grade 6 English teachers regarding instructional practices that develop critical reading, communication competence, and learner confidence. Phenomenology was selected because it enables researchers to understand participants' experiences and interpretations of educational phenomena.

The study was conducted at San Mateo East Central School, San Mateo, Isabela, Philippines. Ten Grade 6 English teachers participated through purposive sampling. Selection criteria included active teaching responsibilities in English and at least three years of teaching experience.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and field notes. Interviews focused on instructional strategies, learner responses, challenges encountered, and perceived outcomes of English language teaching practices.

Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework was utilized to analyze the data. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, triangulation, and audit trails. Ethical standards involving informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and anonymity were strictly observed.

Findings and Discussion

Theme 1: Interactive Reading as a Foundation for Critical Thinking

One of the most prominent themes that emerged from the interviews was the role of interactive reading activities in developing learners' critical reading abilities. Participants consistently emphasized that reading instruction should move beyond simple word recognition and literal comprehension toward deeper analysis and interpretation of texts. Teachers described interactive reading as an instructional process that encourages learners to question, analyze, infer, and evaluate information while actively engaging with reading materials.

One teacher explained:

"Hindi sapat na basta makabasa ang mga bata. Kailangan nilang maintindihan kung bakit nangyari ang mga pangyayari sa binabasa nila at makapagbigay ng sariling opinyon."

Another participant stated:

"Kapag nagtatanong kami habang nagbabasa sila, natututo silang mag-isip nang mas malalim kaysa sa simpleng pagsagot lamang."

A third teacher shared:

"Kapag nagpapahinto ako sa pagbabasa at pinapahula ko sa kanila kung ano ang susunod na mangyayari, natututo silang magsuri at gumamit ng ebidensya mula sa teksto."

Classroom observations revealed that teachers frequently utilized guided reading sessions, think-aloud strategies, prediction activities, story mapping, character analysis, and reflective discussions. During these activities, learners were encouraged to identify themes, evaluate character motivations, compare situations, and connect textual content with personal experiences. Teachers reported that such approaches helped pupils develop independent thinking and improved their ability to justify their interpretations using textual evidence.

The findings suggest that interactive reading serves as a critical pedagogical tool for fostering higher-order thinking skills. Rather than positioning learners as passive recipients of information, interactive reading transforms them into active meaning-makers who engage critically with texts. Through structured discussions and reflective questioning, learners develop the ability to evaluate information, identify underlying messages, and formulate reasoned opinions.

These findings support the principles of critical literacy, which emphasize reading as a process of questioning, interpretation, and social meaning construction. Freire and Macedo (1987) argued that literacy education should empower learners to read not only words but also the world around them. Similarly, Luke (2018) emphasized that critical reading promotes analytical thinking and enables learners to challenge assumptions embedded within texts. Research by Olifant and Machet (2020) further demonstrated that interactive reading practices enhance learners' critical engagement and comprehension by encouraging reflection and interpretation. The present findings affirm that English language teachers play a vital role in facilitating critical literacy development through purposeful and interactive reading instruction.

Theme 2: Questioning Strategies Promote Higher-Order Thinking Skills

Another significant theme that emerged was the strategic use of questioning techniques to develop learners' analytical and evaluative thinking abilities. Participants consistently described questioning as an essential

instructional tool for extending learners' understanding beyond factual recall.

One teacher remarked:

“Hindi lang ‘what’ questions ang ginagamit namin. Mas madalas naming itanong ang ‘why’ at ‘how’ para mapaisip sila.”

Another shared:

“Kapag may iba't ibang sagot ang mga bata, natututo silang pakinggan at suriin ang pananaw ng iba.”

A participant further explained:

“Kapag nagtatanong ako ng ‘Ano kaya ang mangyayari kung iba ang naging desisyon ng tauhan?’ mas nagiging malikhain at mapanuri ang kanilang pag-iisip.”

Classroom observations revealed frequent use of open-ended questions, analytical prompts, reflective discussions, and problem-solving activities. Teachers intentionally designed questions that required learners to infer meanings, justify answers, evaluate situations, and examine multiple perspectives. Such questioning strategies encouraged learners to articulate their reasoning processes and engage actively in classroom discourse.

Participants observed that learners gradually became more confident in expressing opinions and defending their ideas as they became accustomed to higher-level questioning. Teachers noted that learners who were initially hesitant to participate eventually became more willing to share insights and engage in discussions.

The findings indicate that questioning strategies function as catalysts for cognitive engagement and intellectual growth. Through purposeful questioning, teachers scaffold learners' thinking processes and encourage deeper interaction with texts and classroom content. The use of higher-order questions promotes critical reflection, reasoning, and evidence-based argumentation.

These findings align with Bloom's Taxonomy, which identifies analysis, evaluation, and creation as higher-order cognitive processes essential for meaningful learning (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Research by Chin (2007) demonstrated that effective questioning stimulates inquiry and promotes deeper conceptual understanding. Furthermore, Mercer and Dawes (2014) emphasized that dialogic classroom interactions support learners' reasoning skills and critical thinking development. The present study reinforces the importance of questioning as a pedagogical strategy for cultivating reflective and intellectually engaged learners.

Theme 3: Collaborative Communication Activities Enhance Language Use

Participants identified collaborative communication activities as powerful mechanisms for developing learners' communication competence. Teachers consistently emphasized that language learning becomes more meaningful when learners actively use English in authentic social interactions.

One participant stated:

“Mas natututo silang magsalita kapag may partner work at group discussions.”

Another explained:

“Kapag may reporting at role playing, nagkakaroon sila ng pagkakataon na gamitin ang English sa totoong sitwasyon.”

A third teacher shared:

“Napapansin ko na kahit mahiyain ang bata, kapag nasa grupo siya ay mas nagiging komportable siyang magsalita.”

Observed classroom activities included debates, peer discussions, storytelling sessions, role-playing exercises, oral presentations, cooperative learning tasks, and group reporting. These activities provided learners with opportunities to negotiate meaning, exchange ideas, clarify misunderstandings, and practice oral communication

skills in supportive settings.

Teachers noted that collaborative activities reduced learners' fear of making mistakes and encouraged active participation. Through interaction with peers, learners developed vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and confidence in expressing themselves in English.

The findings suggest that communication competence develops most effectively when learners engage in meaningful language use within social contexts. Collaborative learning environments provide authentic opportunities for language practice and support the development of interpersonal communication skills.

These findings support Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in cognitive and language development. Similarly, Hymes (1972) argued that communicative competence extends beyond grammatical knowledge and includes the ability to use language appropriately in social situations. Research by Canale and Swain (1980) further highlighted the importance of authentic communication experiences in developing linguistic and sociolinguistic competence. The present findings demonstrate that collaborative communication activities serve as effective vehicles for language learning and communicative development.

Theme 4: Supportive Classroom Environments Build Learner Confidence

A recurring theme throughout the interviews was the importance of creating emotionally supportive classroom environments that foster learner confidence. Participants emphasized that confidence plays a critical role in language learning because learners are more willing to communicate when they feel safe and accepted.

One teacher explained:

“Kapag alam nilang hindi sila pagtatawanan kapag nagkamali, mas nagiging aktibo sila.”

Another participant shared:

“Pinapalakas namin ang loob nila para hindi sila matakot magsalita ng English.”

A third teacher added:

“Kapag nakikita nilang pinahahalagahan ang kanilang mga sagot, nagkakaroon sila ng kumpiyansa na sumubok muli.”

Teachers described intentionally fostering positive classroom cultures characterized by respect, encouragement, empathy, and acceptance of mistakes as natural components of learning. They frequently used affirmations, praise, and supportive feedback to motivate learners and reduce language anxiety.

Participants observed that learners who initially displayed fear, hesitation, or reluctance gradually became more engaged and communicative when exposed to supportive learning environments. Teachers noted significant improvements in classroom participation, oral communication, and self-confidence among learners who received consistent encouragement.

The findings indicate that emotional safety and positive teacher-learner relationships significantly influence learners' willingness to communicate. Confidence emerges when learners perceive classrooms as spaces where mistakes are viewed as opportunities for growth rather than sources of embarrassment.

These findings support Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, which emphasizes the importance of positive experiences and social encouragement in developing confidence and motivation. Dörnyei (2005) similarly argued that supportive learning environments enhance learners' willingness to communicate and persistence in language learning tasks. Research has consistently demonstrated that positive classroom climates contribute to improved language achievement and learner engagement.

Theme 5: Contextualized and Authentic Learning Experiences Improve Engagement

Participants emphasized the importance of making English lessons relevant to learners' lives and experiences. Teachers believed that contextualized instruction increases learner interest, motivation, and comprehension.

One teacher noted:

"Mas interesado sila kapag ang mga paksa ay may kaugnayan sa kanilang buhay."

Another explained:

"Ginagamit namin ang mga lokal na kwento at karanasan para maging mas makahulugan ang pag-aaral."

A participant further stated:

"Kapag nakikita nilang konektado ang aralin sa kanilang komunidad, mas madali nilang naiintindihan ang konsepto."

Teachers reported incorporating local stories, community events, cultural experiences, and real-life situations into English lessons. Classroom observations revealed the use of authentic texts, situational dialogues, community-based examples, and learner-generated narratives.

Participants observed that contextualized instruction enhanced learners' engagement and facilitated deeper understanding of lesson content. Learners became more enthusiastic about participating in discussions because they could relate classroom topics to familiar experiences.

The findings suggest that authentic and contextualized learning experiences promote meaningful language learning by connecting academic content with learners' realities. Such connections enhance comprehension, motivation, and active participation.

These findings support constructivist learning theory, which posits that learners construct knowledge through connections between new information and prior experiences (Piaget, 1973). Research by Tomlinson (2017) likewise emphasized that contextualized instruction enhances relevance and learner engagement. The findings affirm that meaningful learning occurs when instructional content reflects learners' social and cultural contexts.

Theme 6: Teacher Feedback and Encouragement Strengthen Language Development

The final theme highlighted the significant role of teacher feedback and encouragement in supporting learners' language growth and self-confidence.

One participant shared:

"Mahalaga ang pagbibigay ng feedback para malaman nila kung paano pa sila mag-iimprove."

Another remarked:

"Kapag pinupuri namin ang kanilang pagsisikap, mas nagiging determinado silang matuto."

A third teacher explained:

"Hindi lang namin itinuturo kung ano ang mali. Ipinapakita rin namin kung paano nila mapapabuti ang kanilang sagot."

Teachers described providing feedback through verbal affirmations, written comments, one-on-one consultations, and reflective discussions. Feedback focused on learner progress, effort, strengths, and areas for improvement rather than solely identifying mistakes.

Participants observed that constructive feedback increased learners' motivation and willingness to participate. Learners became more receptive to correction because feedback was delivered in supportive and encouraging ways.

The findings indicate that effective feedback serves as both a cognitive and motivational tool. Constructive feedback guides learners toward improvement while simultaneously strengthening confidence and persistence.

These findings support Hattie and Timperley's (2007) assertion that feedback is among the most powerful influences on learning achievement. Similarly, Black and Wiliam (2009) emphasized that formative feedback promotes continuous learning and self-regulation. The present study demonstrates that teacher encouragement and constructive feedback are essential components of successful English language instruction and learner development.

Conclusion

The study revealed that Grade 6 English teachers at San Mateo East Central School employ diverse and learner-centered teaching practices to develop critical reading skills, communication competence, and learner confidence. Interactive reading activities, higher-order questioning techniques, collaborative communication tasks, supportive classroom environments, contextualized learning experiences, and constructive feedback emerged as the primary instructional approaches utilized by teachers.

The findings demonstrate that effective English language teaching extends beyond language acquisition and contributes significantly to learners' cognitive, communicative, and socio-emotional development. Teachers serve as facilitators of critical thinking, communication, and confidence-building, creating learning environments where pupils can engage meaningfully with texts and express themselves effectively.

Implications of the Study

The findings suggest that English language instruction should prioritize critical literacy and communicative competence alongside traditional language skills.

Schools should strengthen professional development programs focusing on critical reading instruction, questioning techniques, collaborative learning strategies, and confidence-building pedagogies.

Curriculum developers may integrate more authentic, contextualized, and discussion-based learning experiences that promote higher-order thinking and meaningful communication.

Educational leaders should encourage classroom cultures that value participation, inquiry, reflection, and positive learner engagement.

Recommendations

1. Enhance teacher training programs on critical literacy instruction and communicative language teaching.
2. Develop school-based reading and communication enrichment programs.
3. Increase opportunities for oral communication through debates, presentations, storytelling, and collaborative projects.
4. Integrate culturally responsive and contextualized learning materials into English instruction.
5. Promote formative assessment and constructive feedback practices that strengthen learner confidence.
6. Conduct further qualitative and mixed-methods studies involving learners, parents, and school administrators to gain a broader understanding of English language learning experiences.

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