

Investigating Omani College Teachers' Perspective on Critical Media Literacy

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Abstract

Despite the numerous benefits presented within Critical Media Literacy (CML) in understanding societies, cultures, and even our values globally, the lack of teacher preparation, including English language teachers, in teaching (CML) skills remains noteworthy. Such education could arm teachers with sufficient media literacy competence to pass on to students' capabilities in democratic self-expression and social progress. The research gap that exists, therefore, leads to this qualitative research study where the aim is to explore how a group of five College EFL teachers in a Middle Eastern institution in Oman relate to critical media awareness. This is by deconstructing a US film entitled 'Freedom Writers' (2007) to discuss issues related to social injustice, prejudice, and violence in society. The method used to collect data was semi-structured interviews. The interview questions, guided by a semiotic Inquiry Graphics (IG) approach, aimed to capture those EFL teachers' interpretations, values, and beliefs relevant to CML and their subsequent intentions to teach CML in their future English classrooms. The findings suggest that although the teachers demonstrated positive attitudes and increased awareness of CML, they lacked confidence in applying it and needed to expand their perceptions of CML further. Generally, they viewed CML as being helpful for students in its ability to develop their criticality and citizenship. However, the teachers stressed the harsh realities of a packed curriculum and restrictive program requirements that may obstruct any comprehensive implementation of CML education at a university level, an issue that merits further consideration.

Keywords: Critical media literacy (CML), EFL teachers, social justice, semiotics, inquiry graphics (IG) approach

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Introduction

Critical awareness of a range of media formats (Bergstrom, Flynn & Craig, 2018) is crucial to promote education, democratic self-expression, and social progress (Dominguez, 2019). The media is often a vehicle for the promotion of problematic 'ideologies' that may perpetuate social injustice, prejudice, and violence often portrayed via racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism (Marlatt, 2020; Kellner & Share, 2005). The goal of critical media literacy is to build awareness of the suggestive character often imbued in such media by analysing how such messages are constructed, delivered, interpreted, and reinforced, leading to an understanding of their impact on society (Jiang & Vetter, 2020; Hobbs, 2011). Educators, including English teachers, can play an essential role in preparing English Foreign Language (EFL) learners to critically navigate media landscapes while developing their language proficiency.

However, the challenges of nurturing critical media awareness through instruction exist since the process of empowering young people to be meaningful and critical participation (Jenkins, 2006) can be a daunting task. In other words, to understand media critically, the pedagogue needs to ensure the appropriate lens is deployed. It can focus on the essential crux of political, social, economic, and environmental tethering of the issues encountered (Marlatt, 2020; Moore, 2013). Another serious challenge exists, that of instructors themselves being mostly unfamiliar with CML and the reasoning as to why their students may benefit from it. Inan and Temur (2012) report that formal teacher training in CML lacks in many parts of the world, including, in the author's experience, the Middle East region. Schmidt (2015) declares that teachers who lack academic training in the field will feel unprepared to introduce it, let alone critique it. Furthermore, Fuxa (2012) describes teachers who do not understand the complexity of the multimedia landscape and careful consideration of media forms, those who lack a working knowledge of the idiosyncrasies of how widespread the media is, at socio-political/economic disadvantage (Azevedo, 2019). Thus, inevitably, a deficit exists amid the pedagogical framework of teaching techniques based on inquiry approaches to infuse critical media thinking (Rogow, 2011).

Rationale and significance of the study

Initiatives to incorporate critical media analysis into the core curriculum is still in its infancy globally (Jiang & Vetter, 2020, Bordac, 2014), and especially so in the Middle East. This creates a gap in the literature and a significant need to investigate how teachers consider CML education approaches, and, in particular, whether it takes place in a selected HEI in one of the Middle East countries, Oman. It is noteworthy to say that the rationale behind the qualitative study is to explore CML implications in teaching practice, especially in language classrooms. The following related research questions are addressed in the study:

1. What are EFL teachers' opinions of the critical US film *Freedom Writers* (2007) in terms of i) its meanings and potential pedagogical application in the classroom and ii) it's link to (CML)?
2. What CML practices have teachers enacted in an EFL classroom if any?
3. How do teachers relate to and evaluate the (IG) approach of media to support CML in an EFL classroom?

The objective of the current study, therefore, is to examine a group of EFL college teachers relationally to a critical awareness of media through analysing the US film titled '*Freedom Writers*' using an Inquiry Graphic (IG) approach.

Literature Review

The notion and importance of critical media literacy

According to Freire (1974), who first introduced critical awareness in language education, being critically aware of media involves an in-depth engagement and analysis of 'problematized' media texts where participants can actively reflect on social, political, and economic contexts in the media they

encounter (Share & Mamikonyan, 2020). Furthermore, it involves the process of non-neutrality analysis of media texts by critically examining the purpose, audience, and representations of people/communities they portray. Kellner and Share (2005) also provided a comprehensive definition of CML adopted here, which is: "it involves cultivating skills in analysing media codes and conventions, abilities to criticise stereotypes, dominant values, and ideologies, and competencies to interpret the multiple meanings and messages generated by media texts" (p.372).

Thus, acquiring the skills above helps learners to use media intelligently by discriminating and evaluating media content, and critically dissecting media forms in the investigation of media effects and uses (Mouza, 2020). Media messages can be found in the forms of photographs, videos, advertisements, news, and films that are mainly social constructions that can reproduce messages related to specific history, culture, and ideology (Kellner & Share, 2007). Luke (2012) further described media as a portrayal of particular versions of human identity, human action, races, and social class. Similarly, Kellner and Share (2007) portrayed media as "ideological notions of white supremacy, capitalist patriarchy, classism, and other oppressive myths" (p. 62).

CML can contribute to the development of greater awareness of and sensitivity to the social and political injustices perpetrated by media texts based on gender, race, and other sociodemographic factors (Mouza, 2020; Torres & Mercado, 2006). Furthermore, this could shape the literates' values, beliefs, identities, and behavior (Bergstrom et al., 2018) and strengthen their cognitive capabilities for high-order thinking skills and critical engagement in today's heavily mediated society. Ferire (1974) also stressed the importance of actively assisting students in discovering/exploring a level of consciousness about themselves and the world while not pontificating their worldview. This would contribute to pupils' cognitive development with personal insight towards understanding diversity, culture, ethical issues, and community needs (Marlatt, 2020; Gehlert, 2018). Finally, CML can also promote multicultural literacy conceived as understanding and engaging the heterogeneity of cultures that constitute an increasingly global and multi-cultural world (Weil, 1998).

Practices and challenges of critical media literacy in higher education

A small amount of literature exists on CML in Higher Education, as its incorporation and assessment in college classrooms have received limited scholarly attention (Bergstrom et al., 2018). It is therefore understandable that there is a paucity of research documenting how teachers view or teach CML outside media and communication programs, especially in language classrooms (Deal, Flores & Sears, 2010). Studies linked to EFL teachers and CML in HE are relatively rare.

However, such research as there is on the effects of CML initiatives reveals that college students improve their overall media competencies, concepts, and can demonstrate an increased knowledge of CML across HEI curricula (Share & Mamikonyam, 2020; Schmidt, 2015). To add on to the corpus of CML, and when it comes to engagement with film, a study conducted by Azevedo (2019) found that CML engagement attained watching movies and documentaries can support students' multicultural understanding and emotions. College students developed empathy towards issues they have not experienced before but seen in movies, such as the lack of fundamental human rights, hunger, and poverty. They became more critical in the media environment heightening their critical awareness of media structure, content, and impact.

Another research study on teacher training bases, Dominguez (2019), investigated how pre-service EFL teachers developed CML as they critically analysed advertisements in public spaces and engaged in the active reflection within a particular English classroom setting. Teachers gained critical awareness of hidden messages and developed a deeper understanding of the non-neutral nature of media.

Mass and digital media are interactive in nature and omnipresent, exhorting a persuasion power of ideological indoctrination, especially with the recent conceptualisation of media and social media as contributing to the new era of 'post-truth' (Lacković, 2020; Peters, 2018), stressing the need for teacher training in new literacy even more (Parker, 2010). However, teacher training in media instruction still lacks in many parts of the world: Tiede, Grafe, and Hobbs (2015) found that CML education was not consistently integrated into teacher preparation of education courses in many places worldwide. The lack of CML implementation globally can probably be linked to conservative governmental silencing of the political dimensions of education. In other words, CML is not a so-called 'traditional pedagogy' that has firmly established principles and teaching procedures (Mouza, 2020; Kellner & Share, 2007). Hence, the lack of critical media set pedagogy leaves teachers short of the competencies required for the holistic formation of any discipline. As this is related to media information provided to students, they are denied experiential proficiency in incorporating visual literacy, applying semiotics (how media make meaning), and multimedia production (Goodman, 2013).

Other challenges underscore integrating CML in higher education when many majors have packed curricula (Carnevale, Smith & Melton, 2011). This means that there can be added pressure to ensure that CML is connected with professional content outcomes of subjects that may not be overtly related to media and communication. As a result, university teachers report that university students who are spending more time with media lack most basic media literacy skills and analysis competencies beyond only access content (Ashley, Lyden & Fasbinder, 2012). This forms a significant gap, where a real need exists for CML pedagogical practices to help university students develop a broad range of understandings that support a lifetime of learning about mass media, popular culture, and digital technology (Jiang & Vetter, 2020; Schmidt, 2015). This also suggests a gap exists between the societal rationale for learners to become media literate and any sustainable preparation of teachers (Gretter & Yadav, 2018). Henceforth, it is vital for teachers to understand and develop their CML and reflect on its improvement before putting it into pedagogical practice. For this purpose, the current qualitative study will explore College teachers' critical examination of the US film *'Freedom Writers'* as a tool for teaching and learning language, critical analysis, and literacy skills (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009).

Semiotic analysis and Inquiry Graphics as a critical media literacy strategy

The study could adopt various approaches to examine media, for example, from media and cultural studies. However, this study adopts a semiotic perspective aligned with most recent practices in developing the semiotic theory of learning (Stables, Nöth, Olteanu, Pesce, & Pikkarainen, 2018) and a renewed interest in the material cultures, the so-called new materiality (Fox & Alldred, 2017). This is aligned with the pictorial turn and focuses on meaning-making and interpretation as staples of education (Lacković, 2020). Semiotics can be observed as an emerging theory of learning and knowledge that promotes a relational ontology in understanding human positionality in the world and cosmos as intrinsically related to other humans and the environment, and how meanings are constructed with all these different world entities interacting (Stables et al., 2018).

In relating this to the domain of educational research, this approach has been adopted as it is the closest to the field of Higher Education and EFL teacher training. Besides, semiotics, which has been mentioned as the study of signs and how meanings are socially constructed from the structural relations in sign systems, has significantly contributed to CML (Lacković, 2020; Kellner & Share, 2005). This study will apply an Inquiry-Graphic (IG) that builds on Peirce's semiotics; the semiotic approach regarded among most semioticians as the foundational approach for logic, learning, and knowledge development (Lacković, 2018). The IG analysis "provides interpretative guidelines to support researchers in multimodal, edusemiotic coding and analysis of video data" (Lacković, 2018, p.1). Building on the mentioned Peircean triadic semiotic coding, the IG approach of visual semiotics/multimodality constitutes three domains which

are an inference (Interpretant, here with two layers of denotation and connotation as inspired by Barthes' semiotics) about a sign's given form of (Representamen) referring to its (Object) (Peirce, 1991). This approach will be utilised to explore teachers' perspectives and interactions with the film from a novel perspective to provide a new conceptualisation of their understanding and method of transformative reflection to CML pedagogy.

Methods

The exploratory study adopts a social constructivist paradigm of research since it is grounded by the assumption that human beings do not find knowledge but rather construct it (Schwandt, 1994). It further develops a natural qualitative approach since the study seeks to explore, understand, and create meaning from the perspective of participants involved in a natural setting (Yilmaz, 2013). In specific terms, the researcher sought to analyse how a small group of EFL college lecturers relate to the film as they critically engaged in exploring it, understanding if there are any implications in their teaching practice for CML. The method applied was an interview with teachers mediated by a teacher-chosen scene of the mentioned film, which the researcher analysed in a descriptive theme analysis aligned to the research questions.

The Setting, procedure, and participants

The study was conducted in one of the HEIs in Oman, specifically the Center for Foundation Studies. The researcher interviewed five college teachers who are studying their Master's Degree in TESOL, aged from 27-35, and are teaching college students at the foundation level. Three were females, and two were males, with most of them having teaching experience of not less than four years. The five faculty members mostly teach the English language with the four fundamental skills, which are Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking. The teachers were first asked to watch the film to raise awareness of the controversial issues covered, such as race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, mirroring a diverse set of social relations (Marlatt, 2020). After that, the interview sessions were conducted individually in English and lasted for 40-50 minutes maximum in the dedicated participants' offices. The semi-structured interview consisted of two parts, first to capture teachers' perspectives on the film relating to CML, and second to apply IG analysis following the Peircean semiotic and interpretation model on the lecturer-chosen scene to illuminate their semiotic diagrammatic understanding.

The semi-structured interview reports were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The interview protocol was used to provide detailed examples (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) to portray how the participants viewed the socio-cultural issues of the movie through CML associated with its potential application in their EFL classrooms. Findings were ordered to facilitate the discovery of themes and patterns, as well as subtle messages the lecturers attributed to CML.

The film Freedom Writers (2007) as a critical media literacy tool

The reason why the film *Freedom Writers* (2007) was chosen is first that its topic is closely linked to EFL teaching, and EFL teachers are the participants. Second, it is based on a true story, although the very notion of 'truth' needs to be considered critically revolving around themes of teaching and learning that are affected by social, political, economic, and historical factors, hence presenting an overt case for CML exploration. Third, it is set in a racially charged atmosphere where a group of mixed-race students who are at risk of being expelled are assembled in a class and deemed incapable of learning. The film is abundant with scenes where the teacher (with a different background to students) has to teach an English class and overcome their racial stereotypes, school-promoted power relations, poor discipline, socioeconomic issues, and other socio-cultural restraints, prejudice, and myopic bureaucratic policy that have resulted in the students behaving negatively towards their teacher, school, educational system and in their life in general. Therefore, the film is profoundly rich in its coverage of racial and social injustice, equity, ethnocentrism,

and diverse cultural issues. These can (and do) act as an informative tool for introducing CML to EFL teachers.

Ethical considerations

The qualitative study adheres to the university's ethical procedures by the HEIs Ethics Committee. Consent forms were distributed to participants debriefing them about the nature of the study and assuring their anonymity and confidentiality. They were made aware of their right to withdraw at any point during the study, where the researcher was not in any position of power towards them.

Analytical approaches

The inductive data analysis applied in this study yielded relevant patterns, topics, and later codes and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Upon transcription and coding of the reflection reports and interview data, the initial analysis revealed general patterns, with subsequent analysis yielding more specific topics (Tesch's, 1990). These generated thematic similarities that were classified according to the research questions as follows:

1. EFL teachers' opinions of the critical film *Freedom Writers* (2007).
2. College Teachers CML practices in EFL classrooms.
3. A critical evaluation and IG analysis of the scene most chosen.

Inquiry graphics analysis

As mentioned earlier, the participants were asked to choose their best scene to critically analyse via Inquiry Graphics (IG) approach. This is where critical evaluation took place to pinpoint key concepts, understand emotional engagement, identify visual cues, determine speaker's stance and expressions representing epistemic and deontic modes through analysis of "gesturing, gaze, body posture, and proximity, the sound of voice, and movements" (Lacković, 2018, p. 22). The five participants chose similar scenes to analyse. The most repetitive was the 'courtroom scene'; hence this scene has particular salience and is demonstrated here as an analytical example conducted. When teachers made their interpretations, the researcher supported them by explaining some aspects below, pointing at some elements they did not consider.

The scene most chosen by the participants



Figure 1. Courtroom scene Paco did it

For the semi-structured interview, the participants were asked to reflect on the meanings of the film, apply the IG approach to their chosen scene, define CML, recall memories of the CML

application in the classroom, discuss their attempts, challenges, and implications at integrating it into their future curriculum.

Table 1. *Inquiry graphics approach analysis*

<p>Representamen Led (Representational Focus): List of Elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Chairs - Tables - Row - Wooden panels - Wooden walls - Woman (face, upper body, eyes, eyebrows, mouth, hair, necklace, cross pendant, cardigan) - Man X (face, upper body, eyes, eyebrows, mouth, jacket, shirt, tie) - Man Y (face, upper body, eyes, eyebrows, mouth, white t-shirt, orange overalls) - People (about 9) 	<p>Interpretant (Interpretation Focus):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The woman is sitting on a chair, gazing towards the viewer. Her gaze is fixed in a manner to show a particular emotion. The woman wears informal clothes (black colour) and a necklace and cross pendant. Her hair is black with slight curling, neatly put in a ponytail. - The microphone is in front of the woman, and Man X. Man X is wearing a tie, white shirt, and a jacket. His hair looks neatly combed. He is gazing at his hand and the paper in front of him. He is writing something down on the form. - The man is sitting on a chair. He looks young, he is wearing orange overalls, his gaze is very focused, lips tight. - The people are sitting behind the two men in three rows, separated by a wooden panel. They seem to be looking at the two men.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Microphone (2) - Dial Telephone - Notebook - Pen-Paper files 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The dial telephone, papers, and notebooks are on the table
<p>Descriptive Connotation: The court witness, a young woman named Eva, is sitting in the testimony chair at a trial of an African American youth who is the suspect for murder and trailed at court in front of a jury. She is hesitant to falsely testify against the suspect who is racially identified (African American) in a murder case. She is of Hispanic origin, and the wearing of the cross suggests Catholic religious' affiliation, commonly associated with Latino communities in the US. She looks worried. In this scene, she has to decide to choose between the real murderer, one of her gang members (Paco), and the African American boy. From the film context, we know that she was raised to protect her ethnic group no matter what. In this scene, and after learning about meaningful values from Ms. Gruwell's (teacher) class, she finally decides to do the right thing and testifies against one of her tribes, even if this was against her traditions and ethnic rules. This scene is crucial for showing the transformation of Eva informed by her school experience, which affected her inner belief/morals as a person for a good cause.</p>	

Results and analysis

EFL teachers' opinions of the film Freedom Writers (2007)

Most of the college teachers found the film interesting, particularly in how it mediated messages ubiquitously representing the world and to attract attention to; purpose, authorship, bias, values, lifestyles,

points of view, omissions, and power. The EFL teachers successfully decoded the symbolic signs of the media culture, which advances sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, problematic ideologies, and questionable values, promoting a dialectical approach to the media. Moreover, the participants found the interview session provided ample opportunities for a greater understanding and rich critical analysis. This was mainly depicted in the social and educational themes related to teaching and learning. The sub-themes emerging are discussed below:

Teacher's role in supporting students' citizenship development through effective T&L methods

Primarily, the film demonstrates multiple teaching and learning approaches/methods to be applied in the classroom in the diversity of students' ethnicities and backgrounds. Since media's sole purpose is usually to sell a product, influence an opinion, or provide information, *Freedom Writers* seems to be primarily produced to craft possible educational pedagogies representing CML as a form of inquiry. As such, the EFL teachers believed that the film is rich with diverse social learning theories and teaching methods that encompass the diversity of ethnic cultures and power relations of students to support their citizenship development, ethics, and compassion. For example, teachers' conceptualisation of the social cognitive theory used in the film raised their awareness that it could act as the mental process that encourages pupils to discover modified behavioural characteristics, beliefs, and ethics by observation and imitation in a relevant social context (Bandura, 1986). To contextualise, the participants' CML allowed them to envisage notions of theory-in-practice, where learning can take place via cognitive process to acquire new behaviour, and develop inner beliefs and character through observation and imitation of a model, within a context of social interactions and experiences. One of the respondents further explains:

“Students' violent behavior has come to an extreme change with the help of their inspiring teacher, applying social cognitive theory, as they have learnt to abandon their society's racial division and start thinking of their future studies and achievements.”

Another prominent learning approach observed could be classified in the constructivist paradigm and sub-classified as experiential learning, suggesting that humans construct knowledge and meaning from their own and others' experiences (Morrell, Dueñas, Garcia & Lopez, 2013). Thus, it could be recommended that learning is best attained through experience. The following quote offers further elucidation on the teacher's perspective regarding the approach:

“Ms. Gruwell uses experiential learning as a teaching strategy through making her students watch movies, understanding media and novels, go to field trips, and produce their diaries. Such a strategy can enormously enrich the learning process because it puts the learner at the center where he/she senses learning”.

Through the practice of CML, teachers conceptualised the approaches mentioned above to be effective in a multiracial classroom of diverse cultural and social backgrounds, which contributed to raising awareness in terms of adopting effective pedagogical mechanisms when facing similar circumstances. However, although the interviewed teachers managed to analyse the teaching and learning methodology in the film critically, they were challenged to understand the identity representations of race and ethnicity, including the otherness stereotypes portrayed in the film. They also failed to observe any critical theory relevance of the film, which might signal that they had not engaged with it, although critical theory is a vast field closely connected to CML.

College teachers' CML practices in EFL classrooms

None of the teachers knew CML by definition, though they were familiar with its general concept. They had never implemented it in the classroom, at least not as a part of a curriculum. Although the teachers

have an appropriate personal understanding of CML, they lack the pedagogical content knowledge to translate the material to their students effectively. As such, lack of teacher preparation not only robs students of the opportunity to understand the global village, but also contributes to a deficiency in comprehending and critiquing media. Teachers' responses on this matter are categorised into the sub-themes below.

Implementation of partial CML and semiotics in EFL classrooms

The findings confirm that the incorporating of multimodality, edusemiotics, and CML into educational technology mediation in classrooms is underrated. However, the EFL teachers did use movies/video clips to enhance the fundamental English skills of their EFL learners in all four primary English skill areas, yet not promoting CML. Since those teachers are not familiar with the practice of CML, they mainly reported using short videos or sections in films as a visual aid to activate students' schemata regarding specific themes in reading, writing, or also developing vocabulary and expressions. Others use films in classrooms as an authentic audiovisual program to represent English as a first language to enhance communication practices in classrooms. The fact that teachers or practitioners have incorporated audiovisual clips to invite authenticity in task, language, and situation through learners' interpretation, offers an opportunity to include CML in future English classrooms. This is depicted in one of the interviewee's response:

"I use movies and images, which I consider as crucial elements of teaching to bring life, engagement, and fun to the class. Through movies and images, a new topic or vocabulary can be introduced. Students can also reflect on an image or a video that will require them to discuss and speak."

Other teachers stepped further to show their students films to touch on social justice themes, yet not practice CML comprehensively. Their primary aim was to construct knowledge and experience of the world across different cultures for bi/multi-cultural adaptations. The teachers confirmed that the movies watched by their students raised their critical awareness of social justice issues, women's rights, racism, and power relations. This has been captured in the transcript of the interview:

"I practiced CML partially, I showed them a film called 'Akeelah and the Bee', there was a theme on social justice, and we touched on that. The other movie I showed them is called 'Breadwinner'; which portrays women's rights, and we touched on these issues. We did it informally just for a discussion, and each would express their own opinion and have the ability to reflect and criticise such topics."

Discussion

Teachers' application of multimodality and iconic texts in the classroom depicted in the results section can be regarded as the multiplicitous view of literacy (Mouza, 2020; Azevedo, 2019) and a gateway to critical media analysis to develop students' in-depth content knowledge. This also represents teachers' positive attitude to enhance their learners' CML. Yet, these process skills are scarce, given the lack of CML training for teachers, whose pupils assert that this will endanger the media literacy fundamentals as students learn it without the encouragement of critical analysis (Jolls & Wilson, 2014). This is discussed further in the next section.

Challenges for CML Practice in EFL Curricula

The participants' agreement on using the film as a useful tool to practice CML reflects how they value and appreciate CML. They recognise its potential benefits and liabilities and have the interest and willingness to incorporate CML into their future professional practice, however resistant to apply or embed it into the curriculum (Share & Mamikonyan, 2020). This is because there are several challenges that hinder the implementation of CML in classrooms, such as the difficulty of adding anything more to the prescribed

curriculum, let alone teachers' lack of training to teach such pedagogy. As a result, teachers' opinions lie at the level of understanding CML as a skill to be practiced detaching the holistic meaning of it that involves integrating CML as a mode of thinking and living in all aspects of life. Other reasons for CML hindrance application in the classroom is aligned with Marsh's (2005) study, that reflects contextual obstacles such as time constraints, prescribed curricula, institutional policies, low proficiency of English Language, and a lack of resources that can best convey the theoretical foundation to develop pedagogical content towards an understanding of CML. However, Deal et al., (2010) suggest that regardless of pedagogical constraints, CML content knowledge can be peripherally integrated into the curriculum. Media instruction might involve concentrating on only a particular dimension of CML as a practical and effective alternative English class might address CML while analysing themes in a film. Henceforth, it is clear that it could be possible for educators in middle eastern HEI contexts to address specific dimensions of CML to encourage developing a range of foundational CML competencies and a broader understanding of the modern media-saturated world (Marlatt, 2020).

A Critical evaluation on IG analysis of the scene most chosen by the teachers

IG Analysis of the prominent scene chosen "The court scene": Inquiry/reflection object

Going back to the court scene, the film heavily relates to Critical Race Theory (CRT), where the categorisation of race, law, and power is portrayed in that particular scene. The emergence of CRT marks an essential point in the history of racial politics in the US (Taylor, 2009). It has proven to become an essential analytical tool in the field of CML education especially, offering critical perspectives on race, racism, inequity, and the dynamics of power and privilege in society. The Latinos and African Americans depicted in the scene reveal how people of colour are constrained and disadvantaged from their rights in society (Semetsky, 2007). On a larger scale, the scene advocates for social justice for people who live in marginalised communities and tries to illuminate any discrimination towards the minority groups giving voice to those victimised. Moreover, the societal power relations' revealed in the scene show that one group can impose power over the powerless (oppress the oppressed) (Foucault, 1980), in this case, the African American (defendant). The scene also draws on issues related to culture and power interwoven to demonstrate how a dominant culture can impose superiority over an inferior one.

Evaluation of IG in relation to CML

In the study of semiotics and IG approach, the college teachers analysed the film through the existence of dual meanings of signs: denotation as the more literal reference to content and connotation as the more associative; subjective significations of a message based on ideological and cultural codes (Marlatt, 2020). The college EFL teachers found applying the IG approach to scenes of the film to have allowed them to engage in an in-depth analysis and critical reflection of concepts related to socio-political and multiracial conflicts. Their positive attitude about applying the IG approach to interpret their chosen scene was developed during the interaction to construct social meanings. Furthermore, they evaluated IG as an analytical framework that allowed them to reflect on the semiotic power of media, demonstrating their social interpretations based on their experiences and via their lenses (Jiang & Vetter, 2020). In other words, IG analysis mediated their interaction with CML to reflect on cultural artifacts making sense of a world that is profoundly and socially constructed (Mouza, 2020; Morrell et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, since those teachers were not familiar with the approach and did not practice it, many of them struggled to reflect on the connotative meaning of the chosen scene, failing to link it to the socio-cultural aspect of the provided context. They also struggled to identify denotation. Their lack of ability to associate meaning from Representamen and Interpretant, and not being able to link them to CML reveals the fact that they could be helped further to practice the approach in critiquing media. However, the findings still show that those college teachers have demonstrated enhanced critical thinking as they showed an increased understanding of CML using the film as the tool to portray topics of gendered and racial media

representations (Share & Mamikonyan, 2020; Bergstrom et al., 2018). Yet, not adopting CML holistically as a way of living and engaging with the world to understand, process, and critique any media information. Their thinking is limited to scale down CML as a separate set of analytical skills to be instilled in their students.

Thus, empowering students through critical thinking inquiry is essential for them to challenge the power of media, especially in recognising that specific texts can have multiple meanings depending on the interdiscursivity of context from which viewers interpret it (Fairclough, 1992). This enhances the process of negotiating to mean and can contribute significantly to potential CML. Moreover, Kellner and Share (2005) describe the moment of reception of media “as a contested terrain of cultural struggle where critical thinking skills offer the potential for the audience to negotiate different readings” (p. 375), essential in today’s multi-cultural and troubled societies.

However, since CML is not explicitly practiced in Omani HEIs classrooms, the findings call attention to the need for expansion of CML interventions in classrooms to understand more fully the complexities of media portrayals and to promote understanding of multiform socio-cultural issues in all contexts, including local ones (Jiang & Vetter, 2020; Hobbs, 2015). Yet, the question of what type of readings, discussions, and assignments best convey a theoretical foundation to build a thorough understanding of CML should be considered. To this end, promoting critical autonomy yet solidarity (Ferguson, 2001), which acknowledges the social dimensions of personal thinking and analysis, will support the individual’s capability to interpret information and communication within humanistic, socio-political, historical, and economic contexts. This will enable them to create their meaning in interrelationships and identities, to become independent critical thinkers in shaping and transforming the social conditions of their cultural society.

Limitations

The qualitative study has its limitations, despite the insights it has sought to provide an in-depth understanding of participants’ perspectives on CML and IG approach. It falls short with the qualitative data, which sampled a minimal number of participants conducted in a single HEI. Furthermore, the findings are more descriptive than in-depth and themed, as this is the first step in understanding teachers’ opinions and experiences. Other approaches could also be considered and combined with the one adopted, as any lenses chosen are limited. Future studies could adopt a particular view, such as building on a specific critical theory (e.g. the Frankfurt School or post-colonial and colonial perspectives), which has not been done here.

Conclusion and recommendation

The current exploratory study sought to explore college EFL teachers’ opinions of CML and its potential application in English classrooms. From the findings, it is apparent that they expressed positive attitudes towards CML and demonstrated increased critical media awareness while applying the IG analysis to the film *Freedom Writers*, which ably acted as a powerful tool to address issues of social injustice and inequality. Via the IG approach, the teachers succeeded in engaging in in-depth reflections about various socio-cultural concepts to negotiate different meaning representations and experiences that enhanced their critical multimodal and visual literacy at the skills level.

However, the participants believed that being media literate is insufficient to provide effective critical media education since they need to have the required pedagogical-didactic competencies and appropriate professional development to promote CML among learners. Although all the EFL teachers valued CML skills as a set of thinking skills to be taught for students’ career and life readiness, they expressed their lack of preparation to transfer or embed their knowledge of CML to effective pedagogy in future classrooms. Therefore, EFL teacher education programs should promote incorporating critical media

approaches to language education in the curriculum to facilitate continuous professional development, practice, and critical reflection, to nurture a critical awareness of media in their instruction for their future classrooms. This can deepen students' reflexivity, critical thinking, and communication competency, which can be considered to be centrally essential skills for life.

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