

Implications of Critical Literacy for Language Classroom

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Abstract

The present study is aimed at examining how critical literacy helps the students in using language efficiently and exploring new ways of reading any text. The study focuses on gauging the place of critical literacy at graduate level and also checks the awareness of students and teachers to this productive way of using language. This study also tries to find out about the gap that exists between the objectives of critical literacy in Pakistan and our present curriculum. For this purpose both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis were used. Finally it brings the results that in Pakistan curriculum dominantly focuses the structural level of language and does not give students sociopolitical insight. The learning of students is more bookish and does not enable the learners to employ their language skill in understanding the ways of the world.

Keywords: Critical Literacy, Critical thinking, Curriculum, Civic education, Teaching methodology

1. Introduction

Education aids evolution and curriculum which is a roadmap to achieve desired goals should comprehensively pacify the changing needs. We cannot confine education simply knowing something from a panorama storehouse of knowledge. Knowledge flourishes from education and language is a vehicle for it. English being world language possesses an important place in our curriculum. From grade one to graduation it is taught as a compulsory subject, but what it lacks is the depth in realizing the changing needs of the learners. English syllabus and its objectives of teaching are confined merely to memorize rules of grammar, vocabulary and syntax structure. English language is not only a source of communication but it has become a life skill, a way of establishing and manipulating facts. It needs to bring and generate a critical approach and an analytical outlook in learners towards various socio-political issues. We should not lead our students towards blind acceptance to what certain textbooks and their criticism tell the learners. But we should inculcate a questioning attitude to challenge status quo and bring alternative perspectives.

We live in a country where we breathe in the air of religious and political views. We are the part of a value and norms injected nation. So variety and diversity is inevitable among people holding different religious and political ideologies. In such a diverse atmosphere we need to be tolerant and patient. Currently there is severe shortage of it among people belonging to all sections of society. Especially intolerance in academic institution is at a high rate as an author. The role of our institutions is not just imparting knowledge but also to give awareness to the need of tolerance. A democratic attitude regarding each and every aspect of life is the need of the present Pakistan.

Before going ahead in this discussion we need to look at the shared objectives of English language teaching at various levels. The most common objective in Pakistani institutions is to encourage the learners to enjoy the wide range of reading and to orientate the learners to the tradition of writings in English and to enable them to display substantial proficiency in oral and written English. This will also enable them to demonstrate the knowledge of core linguistic and literary concepts and their various applications. It will ultimately enhance for them the employability in various fields as media, communication, teaching, competitive exams and other relevant fields.

All of the above objectives are no doubt fair to be achieved but what we need is the modern approach that can be molded to meet the needs of a society where students are expected to participate in socio-political happenings and if we do not achieve this purpose it will fail in delivering the solutions to our problems. So this brings the need of a curriculum that may give insight to the learners

to political and social issues and also enables them to identify the roots of those problems to find out its solution. For getting the sense of all these our learners need to be mature in their thoughts which can be done through critical literacy pedagogical approach.

Academic institutions are the product making factories from which a country draws its required material. Schools can be the nurseries where we plant what we need in future. A teacher is the onlooker of all this process. So what is second most important here is the teachers and their teaching methodology. Keeping in view all the above discussion we seriously come to the conclusion that the teaching methodology of the teachers also needs to be redesigned. A teacher should not confine himself to merely delivering lectures in the class and making students knowing about concepts of any text but he should impart a quest of knowledge. He should behave like a conductor of a democratic classroom where debatable socio-political issues can be discussed. He should encourage the students to relate literature with present society and organize dialogues and group discussions. This can help in the upbringing of analytical approach in the students.

2. Theoretical Background

Education is a multilayered concept that involves all the activities determined to bring well being of the individuals. It brings literacy which is the power to discriminate things ranging from decoding symbols of a language to the sociopolitical matters of a country. Therefore if we confine literacy to the level of gaining meaning from written symbols it will become a skill that can be acquired after by the end of third grade (Stevens & Thomas, 2007). Instead the concept of literacy is much complex which can best be defined under the term critical literacy. Critical literacy is the ability of knowing a language in order to better understand power, inequality and injustice in human relationships. It is a concept with variety of interpretations which Lewison, Flint & Sluys (2002) synthesize as disrupting common place, interrogating multiple view points, focusing on sociopolitical issues and taking actions and promoting social justice (p.1-3).

Critical literacy gained grounds in the twentieth century by the innovative work of Freire (1970, 1987). He carried out a successful literacy campaign in which he aimed to make education for political and social ends and he challenged the curriculum being a tool of establishing power hegemony of those who aimed to dominate the society. In maintaining the hegemony of dominant social groups' language plays important role. Therefore Freire took language as a subject of prior interest as he believes that there are always hidden meanings beside the surface layer and this can be explored through negotiation and challenging the structure and lexical choice in the language. He vehemently favors a literacy program which introduces a democratization of culture and which makes "human beings its subject rather a patient recipients" (Freire, 1970 p.43) and enable them to take creative actions.

Morgan (2002) admires Freire (1970) and is of the view that he revolutionized the world with his innovative ideas. He condemns banking model of education in which common man lives in oppression without knowing about the power that is controlling their faith. He says in the society of oppression common people are given education but that education does not liberate them neither it brings awareness nor make them conscious about their place and rights in a society. Instead he advocated a collectivist, student-centered method in which learning emerges out of joint negotiation of needs and interests, and blooms in a critical consciousness. This pedagogy has two aspects: first, students learn to perceive social, economic, and political contradictions in what they know and what they are told; second, they learn to take action against the oppressive and dominant elements within those contradictory situations (Morgan, 2002).

Stevens and Thomas (2007) identified four essential features of critical literacy: first is stance in which every text is taken as representational for certain issues; second is context or classroom that provides a democratic platform in which students are treated as members of a society, having their individual world view and opinions; third is tools in which language is perceived as having independent identity and is studied with a lens to see beyond words; forth is process which is a cycle of deconstructing text and reconstructing a new meanings out of words on the page. Morgan (2002) brings another view that everything that is present in the social environment can be read as text. He brings four principles as touchstone in this regard:

- Any text is made in a particular society at a particular time. This influences the form it takes and ideas it presents.

- Any text gives a particular version (or part of) a story. It emphasizes certain things; and it has gaps and is silent about certain things.
- Texts do not contain one fixed, definite meaning put there by the author. Different kinds of readers in different societies and times can produce different meanings for the same text because of what they bring to it.
- Any text offers a way of seeing and valuing things and invites to accept its versions as the truth, the ways things are meant to be. What comes to be accepted as the truth, as knowledge, comes to serve someone's interests.(p.39,42)

McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) put forward another view that four principles establish a relationship between reader and the writer. The first principle deals with the issue of power. In it, they believe that reader must acknowledge the power of the writer in any text. The second relation is that of problem and complexity. This makes the learners to put themselves under certain problem and hoping them to react what they think is appropriate in reaction. This can be possible by identifying themselves with the situation and making students to assume the role of the characters of the text and react accordingly. The third relation is that of dynamic and adoptable. As critical literacy does not believe in fixed methodology, therefore, it is up to the teacher to make learners to react upon text by applying its situation to the real context of their society. The fourth relationship is that of having multiple perspectives and point of views. This mainly deals with the approach that learners should expand their learning by thinking and adopting multiple meanings, beliefs, views, positions and roles. For this a classroom needs to be like a public forum where everyone comes with his own observations and conclusions and has power to discriminate right from wrong and dominating from suppressed.

Morgan (2002) views that curriculum in a critical literacy classroom may range from the microscopic (social practices including literacies themselves) to the macroscopic (particular texts within sociocultural context). He offered two approaches in this regard. First approach mainly deals with education for adults. Here teacher and students deal with current social practices. It is a student-centered approach in which learners have the responsibility to identify a social problem which then becomes curriculum to be investigated by teacher and students together. This approach goes beyond simply asking what problems are but defining a chain of cause and effect between various connected issues. It begins to discover the questions in the everyday lives of the students that need concentration and bring political possibilities of such questions. In a second kind of curriculum, the focus may be on the verbal-visual texts and their effectiveness for learners and other members of community. Critical inspection is aimed at knowing that how knowledge is shaped and presented as text, how it is spread and how it attains power that matters to others and how this often have solid consequences.

The concept of critical literacy is closely connected with the concept of critical pedagogy. Shore (1992) defines critical pedagogy as a theorized practice of teaching that speaks against the prevailing ideologies, institutions and setting of the society which uphold socioeconomic disparity. In education this movement wants to enlarge the students' critical consciousness of about domineering forces through school structures and knowledge. So progressive learners will be empowered and will display their unrestraint power by participating in active citizenship activities that help to treat the ills of society. Thus, individuals as well as society at large will be altered through this language of critique and possibility and led them towards remedial social actions.

Most of us are confronted with the question that critical literacy is somewhat same to the idea of critical thinking, but Temple (2002), a proponent of critical thinking in curriculum, is of the view that critical thinking and critical literacy are not wholly the same approaches. He believes that critical thinking focuses on claims and their support; it interprets and sees how this interpretation of certain concepts can be applied in practical fields. Whereas critical thinking begins with the belief that we are often overpowered by our prejudices and language is a tool in it. But this very language can help us to find out ambiguities and make us free from it. He further opines that hearing needs reinterpretation and analysis so that we may draw out a series of meanings. Moreover, there is another view that belongs to the mental approach. According to it, critical thinking belongs to the mental process and working of mind on pre-established facts whereas critical literacy mainly concerns with the issues of power and

politics. Temple (2002) also favors this idea that critical literacy belongs to a belief that language is always used in some context of power relations “thus language is a form of politics” (p.3).

In critical literacy classroom the learners hold the central position. They occupy the place not only of students but also of social agents who come to schools to get training for the society. Learners are not just to memorize the ideas of text book instead they have the ability to challenge the pre-established facts. They are aware of their rights and duties and also the prevailing status quo which demand their attention. Gregory & Cahill (2009) views critical literacy as a necessary element in the classroom, applying Dewey’s (1916) view of democracy, social justice and emancipatory literacy in the classroom setup. They are of the view that living in ever changing world literacy needs to be a practiced for lifelong purposes. They further opinioned that whatever we write, speak, and read, construct our ‘identity kit’ which is shaped by different cultural and social sharing of knowledge.

3. Pakistani Scenario

Keeping in view all this discussion and applying it in Pakistani educational context, we come to certain problematic areas. In Pakistan education is confined to learning course material without bothering about its application in practical social fields. In this regard a research was carried out by a social educationist, Dean (2005) who brought out the results that in Pakistan “a critical aspect of education that is often overlooked or inadequately addressed is preparation of school students for citizenship” (p. 35). This research further revealed the fact about learning and teaching process in terms of classrooms. The teacher holds authority and learners have to follow the orders. Text book is central in learning and least interaction about textual issues and its purposes in syllabus is told to the learners this makes the learning process dull and mostly useless.

Teaching and learning process in Pakistani classrooms is formulaic and boring as teachers transmit textbook knowledge and ensure its rote memorization. Minimum teacher-student interaction occurs, and even less is permitted among students. No citizenship skills are developed. Values like knowledge are transmitted through lectures rather than encouraging students to choose and develop their own. Such classrooms are not conducive for citizenship education (Dean, 2005 p.47).

This research suggested some very important measures to be taken against all the existing problems. It suggested for implementing civic education program teachers must acquire knowledge and best pedagogical skills. It argued that beside teacher training programs a cult of responsibility should be raised in teacher. This cult will remind teacher that besides imparting knowledge, he must make learner good for society. This can be done through co-curricular activities such as celebration of local, national and international days, establishing student councils, student clubs, and community learning programs and their purpose and benefit in a democratic country. Teacher should be very clear in the purpose of these activities and he should facilitate students in organizing such activities and helping them to learn how to live and bring benefits to the society. Such events and the participation of learners in them is a source of training for them to take part in social life of the country besides making learners conversant with our own social and cultural values.

4. Present Research

The present paper aims to investigate the implications of critical literacy in English language classroom specifically at graduate level in Governmenr College University Faisalabad (GCUF), Pakistan. It studies the present objectives of curriculum and brings comparison with the objectives of critical literacy. It also focuses the curriculum at graduate level, the teaching methodology and the desired objectives of critical literacy in a language classroom. The key questions for this are as follows:

- What elements of language are focused in a language classroom?
- What is the teaching methodology of the teachers in teaching a text?
- Should objectives of critical literacy be introduced in the language classroom?

5. Methodology

The main focus of our research is to find out the place of critical literacy in English language. The concept of critical literacy here means learning in socio-political context (Stevens & Thomas, 2007). We have used representative sampling paradigm to determine our population. The population we have selected is experimentally accessible as it comprises of all the teachers in Government College University Faisalabad (GCUF) at graduate level, govt college for boys samanabad faisalabad and govt college for women faisalabad who taught English language as a compulsory course at graduate level and have more than one year teaching experience.

In order to probe answers to our research questions, a questionnaire has been devised based on Cohen, Manion & Morrison's (2007) discussion on questionnaire design. The questionnaire is divided into three parts: Part one focuses on the main elements included in English curriculum; Part two is based on the methods of teaching employed at this graduate level; Part three focuses on the desired aspects of critical literacy about which we want to assess the response of the teachers. Gender, experience and education variables are used to study the response towards various questions which offered choice in terms of their preference. The participants are allowed to choose only one of these elements to mark their choice.

The pretesting of this questionnaire has been conducted in the last week of January 26/2011. The questionnaire has been modified and certain changes have been made on the basis of results produced by pretesting. The modified version has then been used to collect our data.

The results of the questionnaire have been analysed using SPSS 15.0 software. We have studied the teachers' response towards critical literacy and the present curriculum objectives beside their teaching methodology. In order to find out the place of critical literacy in English curriculum we present results in percentage to show the difference between opinions. Later on we use cross tabulation as a statistical tool of measuring correlation between sets of scores which also shows the strength of correlation between factors. These two statistical tools have enabled us to interpret our data quantitatively. They have also added to the validity of our research findings. In this study three factors i.e. English curriculum, teaching methodology and civic education have been studied keeping in view three variables: teaching experience; qualification; and gender. The findings of our research are presented in the following section.

6. Research Findings

6.1 English Curriculum

Majority of the respondents agree with the view that learning of English should give learner the knowledge about their real life problems (see figure 1 below). The learning of literature should not be of abstract kind but it should teach morals and values which learner may employ in solving their social problems. English is not only a source of communication around the world but it should be used as a vehicle for making learners aware about real life problems.

Most of the respondents are of the view that our teaching of English language should enable the learner to understand each and every underlined theme of any text. Text is a bearer of multiple meanings. Complex issues related to power, gender, and social norms are frequently hidden in the words. These issues can surface only when the learners are conversant with the issues of power and role of language in it. But most of the teachers are of the view that students rely upon whatever is being written in the key books available in the markets and do not focus on exploring new meanings. Most of the respondents strongly agree with the view that knowledge about political parties and other democratic issues should be included in the syllabus beside literary stories and tales as this will enhance the learner's political and social awareness. Literary stories, no doubt, pacify the artistic sense of the learners but this is a minor aim in terms of civic education. The knowledge about political parties and political issues will help the learners in developing a political sense and guides him in future actions.

Accuracy in grammar and syntax structure is also important at this level. But the teachers also agree to the view that learners are always in the search of those words that they feel are appropriate for conveying their intended meanings. Therefore, most of the time this discomforts the students as ideas developed in the first language Urdu could not find proper expression in second language i.e. English.

The results show that academic learning of English language should enable the learners to employ their ability of fifth language skill i.e. critical thinking. Language teaching without reflecting upon the inherent meanings of the words in any text is just like memorizing. Majority of the teachers agree with the view that curriculum of English should make the learners active respondents to certain critical issues discussed in the text. Any text or piece of writing is a source of multilayered meanings which reader should explore during his reading. Therefore learning of any text should enable students to critically evaluate what has been discussed in the text, what is the intention of the writer in saying certain things and what impression he wants to create in the mind of the reader through his text.

It is apparent from the above analysis of the figure 1 that the teaching of English language at B.A level focuses on the primary level of language e.i. the structural level. Most of the respondents agree with the idea that learning of grammatical rules, vocabulary and sentence structure occupy more space than communicative aspects. All teaching and learning process follows GTM (grammar translation method). The focus is only on two skills that is reading and writing while listening and speaking are ignored. It is interesting to note that even after 12 year learning of English language at this level the focus is on writing and reading skill and not on communicative aspects of English language.

6.2 Teaching Methodology

Teaching methodology is as important in a language classroom as curriculum. It is the stage where teachers employ a particular strategy to deliver their knowledge according to the objectives of their curriculum.

Most of the respondents prefer that teaching should be taken through group discussions, dialogues and sharing ideas besides merely delivering lectures in the class. This result highly supports the results of Freebody (2008), according to him teacher should not consider the learners 'empty head' and teaching a goal of filling those empty heads but teaching should be a two way process.

A democratic class room where each individual possess his own ideas and has the freedom to share it. According to Freebody (2008) learning in such environment will be ideal and bring long bearing results. But they also showed their negative response towards this desired method as they think that in Pakistan large classes are to be taught by a single teacher therefore it is not possible for a teacher to involve the whole class in the discussion in such classes lecture method is more advantageous. Apart from this, the teacher has to go through a vast syllabus therefore he/she cannot afford this method. Beside this the learners belong to Urdu and Punjabi community therefore they have to translate text in order to make them understand it. This ultimately make them to ignore speaking skill which needs to be improved through direct listening but it is not possible in second language learners' classrooms.

6.3 Civic Education

Critical literacy does not oppose curriculum which is predesigned based on literature but it is oppose to the approach through which it is dealt in the classrooms. It needs a methodology where teacher is not sole authority in the classroom but where teacher is just like learners sharing common goal i.e. knowing the society. Therefore it is against teacher centered approach. Most of the respondents agree with the view that in Pakistani classrooms teacher orders what should be done in the classroom. He is considered a promoter of values, discipline and efficiency among students and resultantly he demands obedience from students.

Most of the respondents were agree with the view that the English curriculum should enable learners in expressing their views about any issue existing in the society (figure 3). Social issues like poverty, unemployment, injustice, should be discussed in the classrooms. These problems are deep rooted in our society and needs to be seriously handled. The teachers are of the view that knowledge about social problems will help students to know about their society and encourage them to sort out these problems.

The analysis shows that most of the respondents disagree with the view that English curriculum give the learners the knowledge about their own culture. Most of the teachers were of the view that a major part of syllabus belongs to foreign authors which is not identical to our cultural values. This literature helps know about other cultures but we cannot make students learn about our own. Such wide difference and lack of identification also hinder students' ability to grasp key textual concepts.

The respondents agree with the idea that strong judicial system in any country is a sign of healthy and mature society. The knowledge about judicial issues and how law works in a society will provide learner not only awareness but also a sense of identification with a country where strong judicial system is working while under certain ideology. When students confront the idea that Islam is a fountain head from which we draw laws, it will not only provide an opportunity to learn about Islam but also help them to know the working of strong judicial system in an Islamic state. Apart from this, it will bring in learners a sense of duty that they should follow law not for their country but as their religious duty. Their judicial knowledge will also make them able to know about their rights and duties and this will ultimately help in getting long bearing results.

It is interesting to note that most of the population is of the view that English curriculum should enhance political awareness. The learners should know the political issues like material law, corruption, and political disharmony, how to vote etc. This can best be taught through classrooms. Teaching in political context, on one hand, will help in generating awareness among the students about politics and on the other, can be used as a tool to create political patience. Students can learn the value of patience and developing democratic view towards others. This awareness will bring long bearing results as this will help how to work for the well being of the country.

7. Conclusion

Critical literacy mainly aims to develop an analytical mindset which may help to generate a mature attitude for analyzing sociopolitical issues. It questions commonly held views, interrogates different point of views, focuses on current social issues and strives to take action against oppressions and to work for social justice. It is an approach to bring a democratic outcome in the attitudes of the learners. Democratic attitude is a way to create patience among learners and enables them to give space to others. In a classroom observing tenets of critical literacy there is an atmosphere where everyone is free to think, respond and discuss his views about even no go areas of politics and religion. In such classrooms everyone teaches and learns where teacher is a facilitator and organizer who holds discussions, dialogues and maintains balance among groups of opposite ideas. And learners are not passive receivers of knowledge but active members of the society. Those members are not blinded by the readymade views of the teachers and key books but they have insight to the core of the issues and have ability to discuss them.

By analyzing this contrast we feel that our curriculum neither relates to academic learning nor to the social fields. It seems an approach based on individual needs which are in sharp contrast to the wider needs of the society. Ability to communicate, comprehending and bringing positive attitude among learners are the objectives which belong more to learners not directly to society. Presently our society needs good learners who can act against oppressions and have strong identification of problems. Their knowledge should be based on skills which enable them to bring out ways to solve these problems.

The underdeveloped countries like Pakistan where there are frequent political coups, economic crises, social injustice, corruption, aid addiction, red tape involved in judicial process and influential bureaucracy are deep rooted in the society need to be reformed at emergency bases. In such arena of affairs academic institutions can play a vital role. They can give knowledge to learners about their society, its needs and its demands from its inhabitants. For achieving this goal curriculum needs to be built on tangible footings. The students are required to be prepared as mature citizens of the country and for this curriculum based on civic education principle will provide a guideline to the desired goals.

The results supports the idea that teachers are aware of the fact that English should be taught in such a way that can enable the learners to communicate their ideas effectively but astonishingly this evolved a different response from the desired one as teaching is confined to reading and writing skills. This negation of the basic aspect of language shows that we do not keep in view the need of the learners and the society. The language through which we cannot communicate is of no use.

It is also noted that text reading is confined to memorization of important questions. Students do not think it necessary to ponder upon the hidden issues in any text the main reason of this is perhaps our evaluation system. This memorization results in Laissez faire attitude and this hinders the critical thinking approach. They accept each and every criticism that is available in key books. This lack of

questioning attitude is the root cause from which certain other problems arise for example; this attitude does not develop fifth language skill that is critical thinking.

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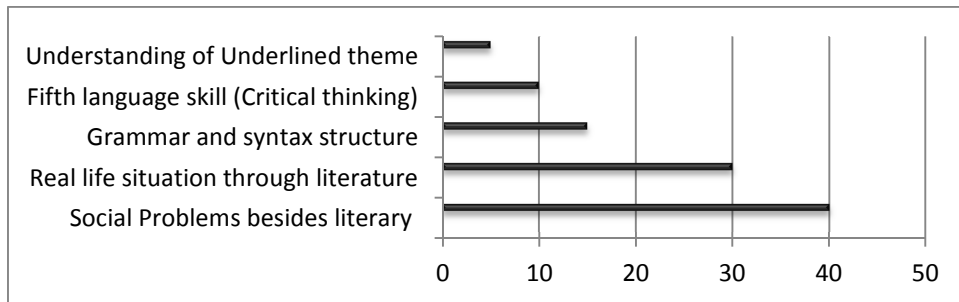


Figure 1. English curriculum

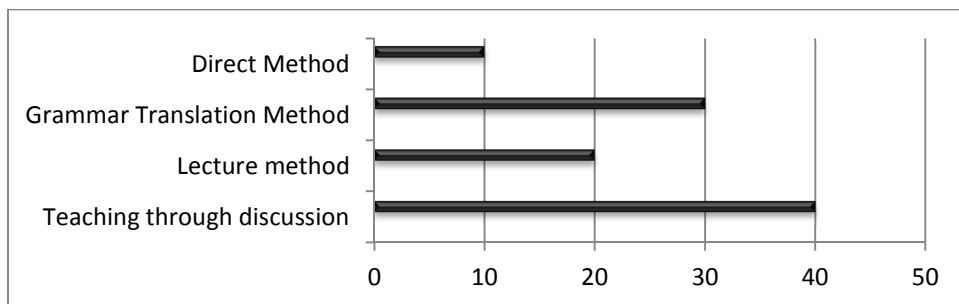


Figure. 2. Teaching Methodology

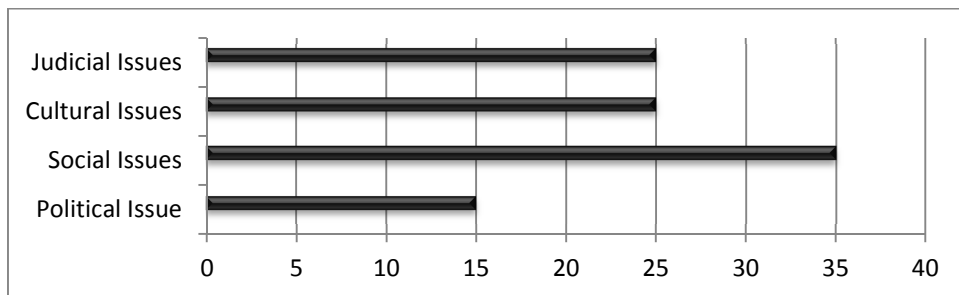


Figure. 3. Civic Education

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