

## **Beyond language barriers: One educator's tale of nurturing critical literacy for academic success in refugee-background adult learners**

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*Young people from refugee backgrounds in Australia face numerous barriers to successful tertiary education. One key challenge is developing critical literacy skills beyond basic language proficiency. Critical literacy empowers students to understand power relations, critique underlying assumptions and explore issues of belonging – factors crucial for personal and academic thriving. This practice story outlines one teacher's attempt to empower her students with critical literacy while teaching English as an additional language in an academic English program. Students in this program are in a challenging position. They have passed through the free service to help eligible migrants and humanitarian entrants improve their English language skills and settle into Australia (Australian Migrant English Program [AMEP]). However, their English language skills are still below the level of English required in most workplaces and tertiary courses. In this story, students are engaged in the Preparation for Social Action [PSA] program which is supplementary to their*

*core English language curriculum. PSA aligns with a Freirean education model and aims to empower students to contribute to social transformation (Freire, 2000). Through the experiences of teacher, Grace, and her students, it becomes clear that the current Australian system of supports for English language is failing these students of refugee background - literally and figuratively. The current system of supports is not equipped to bridge the gaps these students have in their education journey. The story of their experiences suggests that the pressure of family and community expectations for high achievement can undermine engagement in exercises in critical thinking and create a resistance to less familiar, less teacher- centred learning. The students give priority to academic outcomes in graded assessments over opportunities for practicing fluency and the pressures of “passing” supersede the imperatives of learning. At the end of the program, many of the students do not reach the requirements to pass the subject. Through the following story, insights into challenges and successes give examples of the promises this program fails to deliver. In discussion, we highlight the need for educational policymakers and institutions to ensure that literacy goes beyond basic reading and writing skills to achieve aspirations for education, as well as active social and political lives as informed, active citizens. We suggest that offering critical literacy, particularly for students with gaps in their education, promotes students’ critical engagement with their socio-cultural environment and empowers them to contribute to individual and collective transformation.*

**Keywords:** *refugee-background learners, critical literacy*

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## **Introduction**

In Australia, young people from refugee backgrounds face a multitude of barriers on their educational journeys, particularly when aspiring to enter tertiary or post-compulsory education. One of the most significant barriers is English literacy (Correa-Velez et al., 2010). Basic proficiency in reading and writing in English is often inadequate for academic success at the tertiary level. Language proficiency in a host country's language is crucial for enabling individuals with refugee experiences to

effectively navigate public institutions, actively participate in democratic processes, and engage in civic activities, thereby facilitating their comprehensive integration into the host country's social and political communities (Damen et al., 2021). Fluency in the local language significantly enhances the ability of learners from refugee backgrounds to access vital information and services, boosting their capacity for self-advocacy and active engagement in community dialogues (Asfar, 2023). Language competencies are associated with increased confidence in interacting with local governments and community organisations, which contributes to a heightened sense of belonging and agency within the host society (Kosyakova & Laible, 2022). Critical literacy is an important skill to achieve the kinds of linguistic and cultural knowledge required to achieve success in education, work, and citizenship; it allows learners not only to decode text but also to understand power dynamics, critique prevailing assumptions, and explore themes of belonging and inclusion—factors crucial for their well-being and success (Mann & Turner, 2023; Olifant & Boakye, 2022).

This practice story outlines one teacher's attempt to empower her students with critical literacy while teaching English as an additional language in an academic English program. Students in this program are in a challenging position. They have passed through the free service to help eligible migrants and humanitarian entrants improve their English language skills and settle into Australia (Australian Migrant English Program [AMEP]). However, their English language skills are still below the level of English required in most workplaces and tertiary courses. The story uses pseudonyms throughout to keep all identities confidential. Alongside her regular coursework, Grace introduces her students to the Preparation for Social Action (PSA) program, a program aligned with Paulo Freire's (2000) educational philosophy. This program is designed to not only improve language skills but also encourage learners to think critically and engage in social transformation. In this story, students engage in the Preparation for Social Action [PSA] program supplementary to their core English language curriculum. Through the experiences of teacher, Grace, and her students, it becomes clear that the current Australian system of supports for learning English is failing these students of refugee background - literally and figuratively.

## **Implementing PSA as an opportunity for critical thinking and critical literacy**

When Grace embarked on her teaching journey, having migrated from China to Australia, she was armed with multilingual capabilities and a rich background in ESL education. Her teaching philosophy, influenced by her own experiences as an English language learner, gave her unique insights into the challenges of learning English. This, combined with her focus on equipping learners for their future beyond mere curriculum completion, made her a favoured teacher among her students, who often found her methods more relatable than those of native English speakers. This respect and admiration led to her being chosen to teach the new English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course at Technical and Further Education (commonly known as TAFE). Administrators had decided to run EAP to fill the gap for learners who had finished available courses and yet still had insufficient English to pursue further studies.

Grace's students, primarily from refugee backgrounds in a regional New South Wales town, came from war-torn countries and diverse educational backgrounds. Many had missed years of schooling, making it difficult for them to align with the academic expectations of the Australian education system. Grace identified distinct differences between students who spent some time in high school on arrival and those who attended the government's Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP): the former struggled with insufficient support to address educational gaps, while the latter were often pigeonholed into low-wage jobs, despite their aspirations.

The educational challenges were compounded by traditional cultural pressures and expectations from their home country. In Grace's classroom, the spirit of competition and high achievement often undermined collaborative learning and critical thinking. Grace shared instances where the atmosphere would shift dramatically during assessments, revealing tensions and rivalries among students. The dynamics were further strained by late joiners to the courses, which disrupted the sense of fairness and continuity in the classroom.

In response to these challenges, Grace and a teaching assistant, Nura, decided to implement the PSA program. The program aimed to enhance the learners' critical thinking skills and their ability to form opinions and engage meaningfully with their community. However, implementing

this program was not straightforward. The PSA program was designed to be learner-centred, using texts as a springboard for discussion about learners' own realities, similar to Freire's problem-solving approach to teaching. This approach was unfamiliar to many students who initially hesitated to engage in collaborative learning. It took time for them to overcome their initial reluctance and recognise the value of sharing knowledge and perspectives with their peers.

In one of the initial sessions, for example, each pair was asked to consider a set of questions and discuss the answers together as it applied to their own lives and communities. When Nura approached one pair of students in the classroom, they were each doing the task independently, not wanting to discuss or share their answers with each other. It took some time for them to engage together, and even longer for them to realise it was not just one person meant to lead the discussion. Many of them, though, meaningfully engaged with the discussions. Some came to new realisations about their reality, and the deficits and strengths that faced their communities. For example, one student shared that they were disappointed that young people in their communities were not learning about their religion and culture, as there were no learned people to teach them. Some aspects under discussion needed greater consideration, while others they could figure out and agree upon quickly. One activity was a prioritising task; some groups found it difficult to agree and, for some, this meant merely accepting the answer of other group members. Interestingly, when this happened, even the non-agreeing group member was still able to contribute to the justification for the decision. Despite these challenges, many instances showed students engaging meaningfully.

One of the lessons, about learning from community members through conversation, brought up concepts of humility, reflection, selflessness, and wisdom. Some students reflected on the importance of humility, despite the possibility that, in doing so, those with whom they were talking may feel a heightened sense of self. Others reflected on the importance of not dismissing the opinions of those younger than themselves, since age does not always equate to wisdom. Others still reflected on the importance of considering others' feelings before expressing their own, despite this being difficult. Humility, selflessness, and many other virtues were highlighted as qualities that would require lifelong dedication, not merely something that would be learned once.

This meaningful engagement seemed particularly evident in the changed dynamics during group discussions, where previously hesitant students like Darah started to participate more openly and confidently. Darah was a particularly shy participant. At first, she reluctantly read aloud when it was her turn to do so, and barely spoke while doing group work. The first few lessons, she was in a group with much more confident students, and her contributions were minimal. A few weeks into the program, Nura put the students in pairs, and paired Darah with a similarly shy student. While the pair needed a little support to fully understand the task, they did not seem to struggle more than any of the other groups and offered meaningful contributions to the whole group discussion. In the following week, Nura also observed interactions between some of the more confident students, such as Hala, with some of the more shy students, such as Darah. In this lesson, Hala and others were visibly encouraging others, including Darah, to share their thoughts and insights. Subsequently, Darah actively volunteered to read aloud to the group, putting her hand up confidently when it was time to read. Her confidence levels in the whole group setting had noticeably improved.

The program began to show promise as students engaged more actively in discussions and shared insights. They examined community issues critically and learned to value diverse viewpoints. However, not all was smooth. The cultural and educational differences posed significant barriers in creating a safe and supportive learning environment. Despite Grace's efforts, the shaming and competitive behaviours persisted, occasionally disrupting the learning atmosphere. For instance, if a student misunderstood, misinterpreted, or admitted to not knowing something, they would be ridiculed by others, resulting in many students, and not only those ridiculed, being unwilling to fully participate.

After a brief trial period, Grace decided to discontinue the PSA program. Some students felt the program diverted focus from their primary goal of learning English, while others, like Hala, were disappointed by the lack of collective decision-making in the discontinuation process. A few months later, the English for Academic Purposes course wrapped up. Of the 16 students who signed up, only five achieved a competent grade. Three students have since commenced university studies, while others were constrained by familial obligations or the harsh realities

of the educational system that labelled them as “Not Yet Competent” (TAFE NSW, 2019, p3). This label was a significant setback for many, preventing them from progressing further in their academic or vocational paths.

Grace's reflections on the program and her ongoing commitment to her students highlighted the complex interplay of educational challenges, cultural expectations, and institutional limitations. Despite the setbacks, Grace remained hopeful about her students' potential to overcome these barriers and engage fully in their new community, aspiring to create a learning environment that truly supports all students in realising their potential. While Grace recognised the value of the PSA program, insufficient student numbers for the English for Academic Purposes course meant that she is now teaching lower-level English classes again.

## **Discussion**

The story explores systemic barriers hindering Grace's students' academic and social integration, exacerbated by familial expectations of high achievement. We analyse critical literacy's role in enabling refugee-learners to become active citizens, empowering participation in political processes, civic rights access, effective community engagement, and navigation of Australia's complex landscapes (Olifant & Boakye, 2022; Saglam et al., 2017). Enhancing critical evaluation of information and services fosters agency, belonging (Chao & Kang, 2020), and integration through informed decision making and participation in Australia's democratic processes (Saglam et al., 2017). Additionally, we examine how the focus on passing grades overshadows learning and understanding, demoralising, and deterring further academic pursuit.

As practitioners working with those from refugee backgrounds, we want the best outcomes for our students. We want them to succeed not just in their English, not just at work or their studies, but in life. We want them to be the absolute best versions of themselves they can be; to fulfil their ideals, to build their capacity and contribute to society. To achieve this, we need to go beyond the functional literacy that only serves to produce low paid workers. We need to move the goal posts so that they themselves value more than a “competent” result on tests that are myopic.

## **What are the barriers for learners in learning critical literacy?**

Refugee-background learners face significant barriers in developing critical literacy skills. From the accounts of the students, education in the Middle East was frequently abusive and unsupportive. This description is supported by an overview of education conditions in some Middle East countries (Osler & Yahya, 2017). Learners quickly gained insight into the educational environment, realising that pleasing teachers and achieving high grades were crucial for avoiding physical punishment. Teachers' perceptions of students' attributes, such as engagement and academic competence, can significantly influence their expectations and treatment of students, impacting student learning outcomes (Timmermans et al., 2016). In such contexts, where teachers' expectations are influenced by factors beyond academic skills (Kamisli, 2023), students may face additional challenges in meeting these expectations and avoiding physical punishment (cf. Hughes et al., 2005). These pedagogical approaches encourage students to simply “learn the tricks” of a particular approach, such as memorising facts or saying what the teacher want to hear, to achieve success (Keddie, 2012). Critical literacy challenges students to critically examine their own understanding of themselves and the world - an often-uncomfortable task (Keddie, 2011; Kaukko & Wilkinson, 2020). For the refugee-background students in Grace's class, their existing strategies for demonstrating knowledge did not align with the expectations of the new Australian educational context.

Coming into Australia's education system has its own unique challenges, such as learning the language, navigating unfamiliar social situations, and a different approach to teaching (Matthews, 2008). Schools in the Middle East, while experienced as unsupportive and abusive by some students, had clear expectations and consequences (Mohammed-Marzouk, 2012). The Australian education system, in contrast, may seem to lack overt incentives and consequences, and create a challenge for some to find motivation to fully engage in the curriculum. While the traditional EAP courses without critical literacy components may align more closely with the educational systems refugee-background students are accustomed to with its clear expectations and outcomes, neither approach adequately prepares them for academic trajectories in the Australian context.



Additionally, the influence of Australian culture also implies that parental pressure to do homework and achieve high grades that refugee-background students may have experienced in their home country no longer has quite the same impact (Maringe et al., 2017). Both students and parents are unfamiliar with navigating the new and opaque educational imperatives in the Australian context (Karam et al., 2017), further compounding the challenges they face. Further, all the students in Grace's class had significant educational gaps. Specifically, as refugees fleeing persecution, they forwent up to three years (sometimes more) of schooling to ensure their physical safety (Anselme & Hands, 2010). Such gaps are overlooked by Australian schools, instead assuming they understand fundamental concepts to engage meaningfully in typical classroom settings (Kong et al., 2016).

Hala spoke about the pressure on her due to her family's expectation that she would go to university and the disappointment that her attempts over the past 30 months had been unsuccessful. Hala felt she was given mixed messages about the requirements for university entrance through conversations with teachers, support staff, TAFE, and university representatives, leading to constantly changing approaches and increased disappointment. Additionally, the pressure Hala feels from her parents and community to serve as an interpreter and provide financially for her family has further impacted her mental health - a widespread issue for many refugee-background young people (Johansen & Varvin, 2019). The interaction of pre- and post-migration difficulties can adversely impact mental health and overall wellbeing (Correa-Velez et al., 2010).

Grace also believed that complex trauma from pre- and post-migration contributed to the program ceasing. During the discussions around community, students' culture and history was discussed. While there was no direct conversation around specific traumatic events, some students expressed an aversion to discussing their lives in their home country. Grace believed that this was because of trauma. Reflecting on one's own experience, as critical literacy demands, can have emotional implications (Keddie, 2012). Ensuring that teaching practices minimise stressors in the learning environment is not always straight forward in these circumstances, and creating a balance between critical literacy and the emotional needs of students is paramount (Kaukko & Wilkinson, 2020). Following Freire, critical literacy is a key element

for empowering refugee-background learners to overcome oppression (Huh et al., 2021), but effective implementation requires careful consideration. While therapeutically there is support for people of refugee backgrounds to talk about their refugee experience (Rivera et al., 2016), there is limited research to support this approach in classroom practices (cf. Riggs et al., 2012).

### **What are the barriers for teachers in implementing critical literacy?**

Grace's story is an example of push-back teachers often get from students when asked to go beyond the minimum requirements to be certified 'competent.' This suggests that the purpose of education for students is merely in obtaining the certificate itself, irrespective of the educational value. In this course, English for Academic Purposes, a 'competent' outcome implies that students have enough English to function effectively in a university setting. Students like Hala, who achieved a 'competent' grade, often were still unable to gain entry to university, let alone respond to the demands of English in a university setting. In comparison, students like Darah were not able to satisfactorily complete the course, questioning the efficacy of the curriculum and teaching methods. While the EAP course was offered to bridge the students' learning and enable university entry, this experience raises questions about whether the curriculum and teaching methods effectively accommodated the diverse linguistic abilities and academic goals of the enrolled student cohort, despite being intended to prepare them for the English language demands of university.

The experience also leads to questions about building skills for active social and political lives while balancing numerous imperatives: completing required materials, ensuring student understanding, and responding to student requests. When some students approached Grace to express discontent with the PSA program, she responded by stopping it. However, this decision inadvertently overlooked the perspectives of other students, like Hala, who were enjoying and meaningfully engaged in the program (Naidoo, 2015). While including student voice in decision-making is important, it is crucial to consider how this voice is engaged, ensuring that all students, particularly marginalised and unconfident ones, contribute to the discourse.

Facilitating the needs of students can enhance the learning experience

but ceasing the critical literacy elements may have underdeveloped the skills students needed for nuanced debate and finding democratic consensual solutions (following Saglam et al., 2017; Olifant & Boakye, 2022). Listening to students' concerns does not necessarily mean directly fulfilling specific requests; rather, it provides an opportunity for educators to develop intercultural understanding by considering students' distinctive cultural backgrounds (Naidoo, 2015). Adapting educational programs in response to student voice, instead of ceasing them altogether, may better serve learners' needs and foster the development of critical thinking and democratic participation skills.

### **Moving forward**

While Grace recognises significant value in critical literacy for these students, her key takeaways offer practical insight to moving forward. Grace emphasises the importance of developing critical thinking skills and creating a safe space for students to engage in discussions and express their ideas. To enhance accessibility and engagement, Grace proposes several strategies to create a more inclusive and effective learning environment to support critical literacy skills:

1. Engaging in culturally relevant activities relevant to their communities, such as designing multilingual community-oriented posters based on topics of study
2. Reducing the complexity of language used to make content more accessible to students
3. Extending the program duration to better consolidate basic knowledge and skills
4. Incorporating diverse activities, such as watching YouTube videos, inviting guest speakers, and undertaking community service projects.

While practical, the narrative also raises deeper questions about the philosophical underpinnings of critical literacy: would reducing the complexity of language adequately prepare students for future studies? Could incorporating critical thinking into the learning objectives allow students to take ownership of the program? Does classroom and curriculum design need to be interrogated to de-emphasise traditional student teacher dynamics more effectively? Complexities such as

trauma, stressors, parental influence, and culture are all unique aspects of the human experience that should be carefully considered when assessing the effectiveness of any educational intervention. **By adopting a holistic approach to evaluating critical literacy programs, educators can ensure that these factors are understood and addressed, ultimately leading to more effective and inclusive educational experiences for refugee-background students.**

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