

Critical Literacy for Monolinguals and Bilinguals-in-the-Making

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Abstract

This article discusses: (1) The reasons why all learners, and in particular those in the process of acquiring a second language, benefit from critical literacy approaches and, (2) Offers suggestions for instruction that will help learners and their teachers collaboratively question text and the world.

Este artículo presentará: (1) Las razones por las cuales todos los estudiantes, in particular aquellos que se encuentran en el proceso de adquirir un segundo idioma, beneficiarán de la metodología de la lecto-escritura crítica y, (2) Ofrece sugerencias para la instrucción que ayudarán tanto a los estudiantes que a sus docentes a colaborativamente cuestionar textos y el mundo que les rodea.

Key Words: Critical Literacy, English Language Learners (ELLs)

La Lecto-Escritura Crítica, Estudiantes de Inglés como Segundo Idioma

Introduction

Teachers' knowledge base and cultural stances affect classroom practice and the school climate. In respect to immigrant populations, teachers' perceptions delimit what students come to believe they can accomplish. Teachers who espouse the goals of cultural pluralism validate the backgrounds of learners as well as legitimize bilingual bicultural identities (Igoa, 1995; Pang, 2005). This article will address the reasons it is important that teachers examine their pedagogy and identify ways to implement critical pedagogy with monolingual and bilingual learners. For English language learners (ELLs) in the United States (U.S.) as well as for other immigrant populations or speakers of a language that is not the dominant language of the country where they reside, critical literacy is a path to becoming citizens who know it is safe to have a voice within the political and educational system of their country. Critical pedagogy provides a path to understanding and gaining access to the norms and beliefs of those who speak a language other than one's own. Because literacy approaches may either empower or disempower learners, teachers' greatest challenge is acquiring the preparation they need to understand and address the cultural heterogeneity of their students (Taylor & Sobel, 2001). Knowing and implementing the ideologies of critical literacy meets this mandate.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is an evolving set of beliefs about a different way to approach reading instruction which contributes to biculturalism. For years teachers have encouraged students to construct the meaning of a text through a transaction between their personal knowledge and what they learn from it. Critical literacy goes further than this in what it asks learners to do and in the collaborative meaning-making relationship it promotes between teachers and students. This pedagogy is part of a growing interest in thinking about texts more deeply through examining a text's social implications from the lens of critical literacy theory. Cadiero-Kaplan (2002) describes critical literacy as the following: "Students involved in a critical literacy curriculum read the world and the word, by using dialogue to engage texts and discourses inside and outside the classroom" (p. 377). Critical literacy, then, can be defined as a set of literacy practices that encourage readers to develop a critical awareness of the ways power is used in texts to privilege individuals or groups (Luke & Freebody, 1997).

Teachers have typically required monolingual students to read text "in such a way as to question assumptions, explore perspectives, and critique underlying social and political values or stances" (International

Reading Association & National Council of Teachers of English, 1996, p. 71). However, teachers of students learning a second language have often focused literacy instruction on helping learners comprehend the meaning of the words in texts and not necessarily question the ideas or the motives of the author. Theories of second language acquisition suggest that with appropriate multimodal instruction (Author, 2002) learners can engage in critical examination of text in a second language before total acquisition of the language. When students enter into a critical literacy dialogue, they become aware of the social framework of a text and they grasp cultural messages that help them understand and adapt to new environments (Author, 2007). Textual messages are sometimes explicit but are more often implicit. The critical literacy perspective is that texts are not only products of words, but are the result of an author's worldview. The reading of texts, then, is a combination of interpreting the overt words and also understanding the cultural implications, or as Johnson and Freedman state, "by scaffolding student learning toward becoming critically literate, teachers can engage students in questioning texts, resisting the dominant reading, and becoming aware of how texts 'work' on them" (Johnson & Freedman, 2005, p. 17).

Bilingual Education in the United States

Delivery of bilingual education or English as a second language (ESL) has posed numerous challenges to educators in the U.S. Linguistic diversity is no longer limited to the large urban school districts geographically close to ports-of-entry. Although different educational models have addressed the ways curricular issues are impacted by linguistic heterogeneity, no one model has proven to meet all needs. The goals of some programs have been to mainstream the ELL as quickly as possible and as such have not followed the recommendations of the literature for educating bilinguals-in-the-making. Dual language programs offer an equitable education because they take learners to true biliteracy and biculturalism. Within these programs there is room for critical pedagogy. Both languages are used to help learners acquire a second language, learn content area material, and critically examine text. In a dual language program, instruction is divided into two languages in an incremental manner. First, students are instructed 90% of the time in one language and 10% in the other. Little by little the 10% is increased to reach the goal of an even split across the languages.

Democracy in the Classroom

Critical literacy promotes communication in the classroom that is based on the premise that human beings create meaning together

because all members of the democratic classroom society have a voice. We cannot question that students' ideas germinate and mature when they exchange ideas as they challenge the merit and veracity of what they read. Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT), although not a part of the literature on critical literacy, is an applied communications theory that this article proposes as an additional support for critical literacy approaches for ELLs. It is important to note that this theory, which is at its essence a way of examining how individuals think and co-create new meaning, can be used to strengthen critical pedagogy.

SCT has been utilized to examine how teachers create new meaning in conversation (Author, 2002). Its ontological assumption is that human beings are natural dramatizers/ fantasizers who have an intrinsic need to create symbolic reality/fantasy themes to justify their interpretation of the world. If one accepts this, then it is clear why learners need to be able to examine texts critically. A person's interpretation of the world evidences itself in the fantasy themes or rhetorical visions that are chained in communication. These themes are not imaginary events because they are what the person holds to be reality (Bormann, 1983). A rhetorical vision is the message that human beings share as they communicate; it is the intent behind the conversation (Author, 2002). When conversations in the classroom include all students' histories, and are part of an all-inclusive curriculum; they are transformative and empowering. They pave the way for learners to believe and collaboratively pursue advocacy and social justice. Such conversations lead students to chain interpretations that lead to discussion of stories at high levels of analysis and synthesis. People from many cultures like to tell stories, and many students enjoy sharing their stories in school. A student's funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005) shape his/her understanding of text. As individuals interpret and present their beliefs in conversation, they share stories or anecdotes that illustrate their position (Rarick et al, 1977). Students engaged in critical examination of text work within differentiated curricula to better understand their world.

Because fantasy themes give meaning to human action (Duffy, 1990) and either empower or disempower learners, it is important that teachers promote classroom conversations that result in a comfortable new adapted cultural identity for second language learners. As students negotiate a shared group consciousness they develop bicultural identities that are based on the premises that they espouse individually and co-create with others. This fantasy-chaining process realizes the promise of critical pedagogy.

Engaging ELLs in Critical Literacy Experiences

Teachers do not need to wait until students are fluent in English before asking them to think critically. Teachers can encourage ELLs to take new information, reflect upon it, interpret it, and become advocates for social justice even without a fluent knowledge of a second language through multi-modal instruction. For example, tasks that require low levels of language would require ELLs to do things such as identify an item, choose between two pictures, memorize a list of vocabulary, or follow commands. Although tasks of this type are recommended and necessary for students beginning the process of second language acquisition, these do not engage students in synthesis and analysis. Long before ELLs reach biliteracy, they are evaluating, judging, and making decisions about the events that are taking place in their world. Asking ELLs to compare and contrast, and to formulate answers to questions that ask “why,” is engaging them in active learning. Dual language programs facilitate such learning. In these classrooms, conversations are conducted in both languages and learners are able to participate in discussions in either one of the two languages they understand. This gives validity to all of the students’ languages and helps them to transfer their knowledge from one to the other.

Critical literacy experiences motivate students to investigate and experiment with the new language they are studying and to say what they think. In this process, students learn to advocate for themselves and for others. The process of real thinking is what motivates a student to understand and make efforts to communicate with classmates and teachers in spite of not having a fully developed lexicon. When students are taught through contexts that ask them to explore a new discourse, they grasp how words can empower or disempower. As second language learners explore the code of the dominant language they note that authors’ intentions are often covertly transmitted. In critical analysis of texts students do more than comprehend an author’s words. They go beyond surface meaning to notice what an author says and does not say in order to consider the underlying purpose of presenting information with certain words and not others. Students can identify that what a writer may assume is part of the reader’s past, may not be, and that this can affect what the student understands. Without the appropriate background knowledge and experiences, readers can find themselves locked out. Canagarajah affirms this when he states, “In specific social contexts, certain discourses are privileged. Continuing to use them uncritically only serves to uphold their power” (2005, p. 935).

Transacting Meaning with ELLs

Culturally-responsive teaching addresses the *politics of literacy* and the reasons societies teach select learners differently from others. It asks students to look beyond the obvious, to question and challenge what they read, and to form their own interpretations. A transactional model of reading begins with culturally appropriate literature and is based on theories of empowerment (Edelsky, 1996; 1999; Freire, 1985; Greene, 1996; Gee, 1996). Students' stances develop from their reflections and discussions. When teachers help ELLs acquire an understanding of the intricacies and struggles within the world that surrounds them, they give these students more than survival skills; they give them skills for overcoming.

Although ELLs may read for both efferent and aesthetic purposes, for pleasure or to complete required assignments, reading for ELLs is a vehicle to gaining an understanding of a new culture. When ELLs read a text that is written by speakers of English, they engage in a process of reading the new world that they inhabit. Indeed, "The environment is a social construct. It does not consist of things, or even of processes and relations; it does consist of human interactions, from which things derive their meaning" (Halliday, 1975, p. 141). Exploration of issues that may not be universal across societies can empower ELLs to see that they can influence their world. When instruction is based on critical literacy approaches, students come to understand that the roots of discrimination are subtle and not overtly voiced.

One way for ELLs to think about the cultural implications of the text they are reading is through questioning texts, or recognizing that texts are not neutral and that they can perpetuate, prevent, or challenge cultural relationships (Luke, O'Brien, & Comber, 2001). Author (2004) suggests that problematizing texts is important for students who are learning English. ELLs read through a critical literacy lens when they ask questions such as:

- ✦ What is my reaction to the way the people in this book appear, the ways they live and dress and talk to each other?
- ✦ What other ways are there of thinking about this topic?
- ✦ How do I think about this topic?
- ✦ Who wrote this text and how do I understand the author's background as expressed in his/her own words?
- ✦ Do I sense why the author wrote this?
- ✦ What are the authors' qualifications?
- ✦ Do we know of any author biases?

- ✦ What groups are being privileged and which groups are silenced?
- ✦ How does this text align with other things I've read about the topic?

Encouraging Social Action

The primary aim of critical literacy is to promote social justice and transform lives through student engagement. Culturally responsive pedagogy promotes an active participation in conversations that leads students to understand that they and no one else directs the course of their lives. Critical pedagogy results in action when students question and react to the world around them by promoting social justice. An example of taking social action is when students in Chicago, IL used reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills to write to a major airline about their inefficiency after hearing of one student's struggles getting from Chicago to Mexico City (A. Díaz, personal communication, 2008).

Looking for ways to promote social action is the most effective type of strategy that teachers and students can use to promote critical literacy. Basically, "teaching for social justice involves knowing the factors of oppression and finding ways to disrupt them" (Johnson & Freedman, 2005, p. 14). ELLs in a sixth-grade Spanish-English classroom took action when a student from Oaxaca, Mexico joined their class. The students noticed that Spanish was not their new classmate's first language. They understood their new friend was being asked to learn two languages in the Spanish-English bilingual classroom and they asked who would translate his indigenous dialect for him. The students did not know the Supreme Court's ruling on the *Lau v. Nichols* decision (1974) that mandated that Chinese students in San Francisco receive instruction in a language they could understand, but they felt safe to ask questions.

Quality education encourages students to become aware of, if not actively work against, social injustice (Leonardo, 2004, p. 13).

Limitations of Critical Literacy

The teacher's views delimit the power and range of critical literacy approaches. Leonardo (2004) writes that "critical literacy pulls teachers forward as well as students" (p. 12). Teachers need a personal understanding and engagement in critical literacy before they begin using it in practice. A teacher's first step is to examine his or her own background and the background of their students. Personal histories are part of classroom conversations as much as information in text.

Teachers must strive to eliminate the status quo that presents only mainstream culture as the norm.

Critical analysis of text does not always result in an immediate change in perspective. For example, it may take quite some time for ELLs who have lived under censorship in their countries to accept that there is greater freedom of thought and expression in the U.S. In some countries censorship involves the media, textbooks, television, radio, and even what a person is overheard saying on the street. Students from these backgrounds may have already begun the process of questioning text yet still find that they cannot feel secure sharing their thoughts. Teachers have to accept that the ability to question and voice objections takes time to develop. This is why evaluation and questioning should be an integral part of all instruction beginning in kindergarten.

Critical Literacy in Practice

When planning lessons from a critical literacy stance, teachers can use many of the same materials available in traditionally run classrooms. What they do differently is that they make sure to give a voice to students' experiences. They remove the stigma from sharing what took place in unfortunate times. They blur the boundaries of who can say what. Because the teacher's intent is to stop oppression and/or students' feelings from being permanently marked by oppressive situations, the teacher provides a setting where students gain an understanding of the ways oppressive social systems work (Shor, 1996; Shor, 1999). Depending on the needs of their students, teachers choose books and topics that highlight oppressive forces in society and thus liberate their students.

For younger learners, teachers can challenge stereotypical views of male and female roles in the ever-present "Cinderella" books. There are hidden messages in such books that make little girls think they must look like a princess and behave a certain way. In real life many girls do not have perfect hair but wear jeans and caps that cover their hair. Little girls come in all sizes and colors and many prefer to play with non-girly toys. Many little boys are not brave and stoic while many girls are. When teachers ask the right questions they sometimes find that there are role models within their students' lives that can help them dispel myths and establish links between home and school.

In the U.S., non-traditional same sex families are living more open lives than before. The topic of whether same sex marriage should be legalized is hotly contested. In the midst of this debate, there are children who may be afraid of having their friends know they have two moms

or two dads. A teacher who holds a critical literacy stance addresses this not for the purpose of judging or preaching, but to make sure all of her students' lives are validated. There are books about non-traditional partners that can be used to open the conversation and promote tolerance. One such book *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson & Parnell, 1963), presents the true story of two male penguins from Central Park Zoo in New York City who lived as a couple and raised a third penguin's egg as their own within the zoo's penguin community.

Definitely, critical pedagogy opens the classroom to the world. After the 911 attack on the Twin Towers in New York City, there was much feeling of nationalism that bordered on isolationist sentiment in the U.S. At the time many teachers were afraid to broach the subject of an attack against American society, yet it undoubtedly needed to be touched upon in the classroom. There were no books printed that could be used to negotiate a conversation but there were many newspaper and magazine articles. A good way of expanding the curriculum for older learners and keep it up-to-date is to look at political cartoons and headlines in newspapers. These provide fodder to discuss current cultural and political issues such as the events of 911.

A recent headline in the front page of my local newspaper referring to the anticipated democratic and republican nominees for president of the U.S. caught my attention. In large letters it read, AGE OR CHANGE? Without even reading the article, the headline leads one to believe that the writer will discuss Senator McCain's age as a negative, and Senator Obama's youth as holding the promise of a brighter future for the U.S. The headline alone provides material for a discussion of what one believes is possible to do at a young or at an older age. In U.S. society there is lots of age-discrimination, so this headline serves to open a needed conversation and raise awareness of the rights or lack of rights held by the elderly. It was also of interest that once I began to read the article I saw the prejudices presumably in the headline were not even encountered in the substance of the article.

Indeed, educators have a responsibility that is a delightful and fulfilling challenge to meet. Who can question whether critical pedagogy is a needed component of instruction in a global society or whether it is an exciting way to teach? Learners of all ages deserve to be asked their opinion and not to be expected to accept what educators or the media present to be the truth. Through critical analysis students and their teachers can engage in dialogical searches that empower and lead to responsible multicultural multilingual citizenry. This is what schooling

should deliver; opportunities to reflect and come to decisions, and the freedom to think outside boxes that only make sense to some.

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