

The Conceptualization of Critical Literacy and its Historical Development

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Abstract: This paper reviews and examines critical literacy, its conceptualization, and historical development by delineating the concept of critical literacy, definitions of its core principles, and how it has developed over the years. In addition, the historical development of critical literacy is examined with a framework by Yoon and Sharif, using four broad themes (Language, Power, Identity, Multimodality). "Education" was introduced as an additional theme because it is the means through which critical literacy is passed. Additionally, the issue of racism in the educational system is analyzed and discussed in liberation literacy, which was grouped as a subset under the "Identity" theme.

Keywords: Critical literacy, language, power, identity, multimodality

Introduction

Critical literacy, otherwise known as “the power relations of language” (Yoon & Sharif, 2015, p. 9) has gained huge popularity among educators and researchers in recent times because of its central focus on the lives of learners. In particular, the shift from a teacher-centered and subject-centered form of education has given rise to preparing students based on their experiences and identity. This reality makes the argument for critical literacy, which attempts to help students understand the social nature of language and how texts position them (Bacalja, 2018). Critical literacy as a broad approach to teaching has contributed greatly to the teaching and learning process, both for teachers and students. Based on the context and subjects, researchers have used critical literacy to suit the specific needs of learners. Hence, various strategies have been developed to fit critical literacy perfectly into the classroom setting, and for various learners. Cleovoulou and Beach (2019) proclaim that questioning, dialogues, reading a variety of texts, and examining diverse views are just a few of the learning practices used in critical literacy. Therefore, it is pertinent to conceptualize critical literacy and explore its origins and development over time.

Definitions of Critical Literacy

Critical literacy has been identified as one approach which can support students to understand their cultural world. It represents the ideal pedagogical approach to support students to engage and understand various texts in new ways (Bacalja, 2018). Critical literacy could be effectively used to build new understandings of everyday text types which include books, videos, and images. According to Luke (2018), “what counts as the critical in recent years has focused on how people use texts and discourses to construct and negotiate identity, power and capital” (p. 216). Currently, what is seen as critical, particularly where there were previously no such markers, depends on how the state, media, school, church, and other institutional spheres of authority enable or prevent what is said and done about texts and discourses, but equally important is what can be said and done about identities, histories, and about oneself as institutions (Luke, 2018). Furthermore, Stevens and Bean (2007) argue that critical literacy is “different from reading between the lines, reading inferentially, or the higher-order thinking skills, as it demands reading texts and sieving them for dispositions/standpoints, agendas, and motives” (p. 17).

Furthermore, some researchers see critical literacy as a theory, framework, or model that guides teachers on the appropriate ways to engage their students to perceive the world critically; while others feel it is a way of life that needs to be imbibed for the larger population to be aware of their environment and surroundings. As a theoretical stance, critical literacy works toward designing a more critically informed and just world by understanding the relationship between texts, meaning-making, and power to carry out transformative social action that contributes to the achievement of a more equitable social order (Wargo, 2019). The word “critical” here means moving beyond the literal or ordinary interpretation of texts and giving appropriate judgement and analysis of the information presented. As an approach, it supports students in understanding their cultural world by focusing on their lives (Bacalja, 2018).

Additionally, it is important to state that the foundation of critical literacy is built on exploring personal, sociopolitical, economic, and intellectual border identities by using texts and print skills in ways that enable

students to examine the politics of daily life within contemporary society, to understand what it means to locate and actively seek out contradictions within modes of life, theories, and substantive intellectual positions (Bishop, 2014). Hence, the essence of critical literacy is in the naming of and willingness to reflect upon the role that language and texts play in the construction of the self and the society (Bacalja, 2018), and to empower students to re-create a more equal version of reality (Poulus & Exley, 2018). Janks (2018) posited that critical literacy positions students in learning to read against texts, to challenge the notion that a text's position must be right. More specifically, Lewison et al. (2002) identified four dimensions of critical literacy as the following: "(1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice" (p. 382). In this light, Demoni and Ferraras-Stone (2018) outlined the basic questioning framework for analyzing various texts through a critical literacy lens as: "Whose viewpoint is expressed? What does the author want us to think? Whose voices are missing, silenced, or discounted? How might alternative perspectives be represented? How would that contribute to your understanding of the text from a critical stance? What action might you take on the basis of what you have learned?" (p. 66).

From the definitions of critical literacy above, it is evident that critical literacy's practices are underpinned by theories of social justice. This underpinning has led to Comber's conception of critical literacy to involve: "repositioning students as researchers of language; respecting students' resistance and exploring minority culture constructions of literacy; and problematizing classroom and public texts" (Comber, 2015, p. 363). By repositioning students as researchers of language, teachers are meant to guide and facilitate their students to know more about the use of language because language is the medium by which thoughts and ideas are shared. Hence, knowing the different ways language can be used to pass meaning is important in critical literacy. In using the critical literacy approach in the classroom, teachers should respect students' views and not force them to accept their own perspectives. Likewise, all cultures must be respected and explored in the classroom. A classroom may have pupils from different backgrounds, and when one culture is seen as superior, it may affect the students of other cultures and make them feel inferior. For instance, White culture should not be viewed above Black culture. Also, teachers should problematize their classrooms and public texts, and students should not be seen as containers in which knowledge would be deposited. It is necessary to question their education and the texts they use in the classroom.

In line with the foregoing, Bishop (2014) identified the core principles/transformational elements of critical literacy pedagogy as: "a) mobilizing learners as social actors with knowledge and skills to disrupt the commonplace; (b) conducting research, analysis, and interrogation of multiple viewpoints on an issue; (c) identifying issues focused on sociopolitical realities in the context of the lives of the learners; (d) designing and undertaking actions focused on social justice outside of the classroom; and (e) reflecting upon actions taken and creating a vision(s) for a future project(s)" (p. 55).

Historical Development of Critical Literacy

The development of critical literacy is seen as fundamental to twenty-first-century literacy pedagogies in contemporary international educational policy and research (Humphrey, 2018). While most text testifies that the roots of critical literacy are associated with Paulo Freire (Bishop, 2014; Luke, 2012; Vasquez, 2017) after his publication of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Yoon and Sharif (2015) are of the opinion that the history dates to the fifth century, during the time of Socrates and Plato. They posited that the critical practice of literacy was demonstrated through dialogue or exchange of words between these Greek academics, and the structure of power is obvious in their exchanges. Therefore, they divided the history of critical literacy into four different themes which are based on the perspectives of power, language, identity, and multimodality. This paper adopts these perspectives in shedding some light on the history of critical literacy and includes "education" as another perspective, which draws on most of the ideas from the other perspectives. Although these perspectives are different, they are very much related. These interrelationships will be explored in the explanations of these perspectives below.

The Power Perspective

Several significant theoretical frameworks have represented the discourse of power throughout history, “from the time of the Greek philosophers, the beginning of the Renaissance in Europe, the rise of Karl Marx’s philosophy during the Enlightenment, and Paulo Freire’s empowerment of peasants in Brazil during the 1960s” (Yoon and Sharif, 2015, p. 10). A balance of power through language is shown by Greek philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle who attempted to assert their power by sharing their positions and not leaving major societal decisions in the hands of the upper class. For instance, Plato utilized the practice of critical literacy by directly questioning and challenging Homer and the traditional Greek rulers. Yoon and Sharif (2015) assert that Plato sought to secure political power to maintain critical literacy practice through dialogues between people. Many of the twentieth century’s philosophers, sociologists, educators, and activists contributed to critical literacy by opening the way to more nuanced understandings of immanent criticism, dialectical reasoning, human history, power connections, edge building, and activist citizenry (Blixen & Pannell, 2020). During the Renaissance period in Europe, there were challengers of the Catholic Church, who interrogated and opposed the power that the Church had over the creation and dissemination of religious knowledge. Further into the 19th century, Karl Marx was extremely interested in how power was maintained by the bourgeois class over the proletariat majority. He raised awareness of power through critical literacy by “encouraging the working classes to question and challenge the dominant classes’ power over them” (Yoon & Sharif, 2015, p. 11).

Pescatore (2015) explains that critical literacy evolved from several twentieth-century philosophies, all of which aimed for social change. The Frankfurt School of Social Critical Theory was founded by intellectuals who wanted to explore Marxist theories within the academy, rather than within political organizations. The school was led by Max Horkheimer (1939-1975) and was one of the first to coin the term “Critical Theory” to describe the school’s principles. Vasquez (2017) also contends that the ideals associated with the Frankfurt School of the 1920s and their focus on Critical Theory are frequently brought up in discussions regarding the origins of critical literacy. They highlighted the relevance of class conflict in society while focusing on political and economic theory. Inequalities in society, according to this school of thought, are the result of economic inequality. They looked at how dominant economic groups suppressed marginalized communities. Furthermore, they studied society through a critical lens, and their most important finding was that human activity must always be understood in the context of history and society.

Distinctively, Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* sought to empower peasants in Brazil in the 1960s. This empowerment majorly involved the concept of critical literacy and the theory of power. Thus, it can be said that “critical education received its most formal statement in Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*” (Luke 2018, p. 217). In addition, many educators and social theorists consider Freire to be the most influential theorist in critical literacy because of his ability to blend theory, ideological engagement, and political practice (Brady, 1994). He made a clear connection between critical literacy and the humanization of people as well. The ongoing social injustice in the world today has fueled renewed interest in critical practices characterized as redistributive social justice, which foreground the more equal distribution and achievement of literacy practices (Humphrey, 2018)

The Perspective of Language

Language is another major perspective used as a lens to understand critical literacy. Critical literacy is “practiced through the origin of Greek and Roman literary language” (Yoon & Sharif, 2015, p. 12). At this time, discourse analysis methods were used by scholars to challenge the concept of hegemony. Gee (2008) cited in Yoon and Sharif (2015) strongly mirrors that meaning is always culturally and socially established within contexts, which means that language is never neutral. Hence, most language and literacy educators view critical literacy as “higher-order reading comprehension and sophisticated personal response to literature” (Luke 2018, p. 217). Therefore, critical literacy consists of a variety of technical approaches that is dependent on certain political and institutional areas in relation to the teaching and learning of language.

Renowned linguists including Halliday and Hassan have contributed to the development of critical literacy in various ways. For instance, Schleppegrell and Moore (2018) explain that Halliday’s contributions

to literacy education have built on the notion that to be literate is not simply to have mastered the written registers, however, it is to be aware of their ideological force. Also, they posit that Hassan linked the idea of power with language by proposing that literacy should be perceived as having three levels of development that can be imbibed and implemented in schools: recognition literacy, action literacy, and reflection literacy. To Hassan, recognition literacy would give learners access to the code; action literacy would give learners access to disciplinary discourses; and lastly, reflection literacy would prepare learners to see themselves as capable of producing new knowledge and not just learning what others present for them to take up (as cited in Schleppegrell & Moore, 2018). To further the cause of language, Schleppegrell and Moore (2018) identified the concept of critical language awareness, which they define as the ability to identify that text is an object that can be evaluated, that authors make language choices, and that authors have points of view that can be considered, engaged with, and replied to.

The Perspective of Identity

Yoon and Sharif (2015) state that the subject of identity has traditionally been related to critical literacy. This link went as far as the time of the ancient Greek philosophers like Aristotle, whose view of the “self” was an assemblage of different features that not only differentiate humans from animals but also categorize one human from another. Janks (2018) further adds that “our identities are formed by the communities we inhabit and the discourses they use” (p. 97). In line with the aforementioned, Yoon and Sharif (2015) posit that identity is key to the practice of critical literacy as variations in identity are valued and upheld without one identity being prized higher than others. These philosophers’ awareness of injustice influences their identities, including physical, cognitive, and cultural differences, by making them more sensitive to discrimination and suffering that surrounds them. Hence, different terms have been coined, which include Critical Social Literacy (CSL) and Liberation Literacy. Humphrey (2018) defines CSL as consisting of various approaches that are primarily focused on how to assist culturally and linguistically marginalized students in gaining control of the genres required to properly participate in academic and civic life.

Liberation Literacy as a Form of Identity.

This paper classifies liberation literacy as a subset of critical literacy because of its link to the theme of identity. It is no news that researchers have changed the form of critical literacy in numerous ways to suit their situations, and although liberation literacy can be carried out in the classroom, it has a deeper connection with the identities of individuals and marginalized students. Lyiscott (2017) posits that racism in schools is pushing Black parents to homeschool their children, which is due to the “Eurocentric school curricula, marked by a general school-sanctioned ignorance about Africa, coupled with the attitudes and behaviors of white teachers, who make up 80 percent of public-school teachers” (p. 47). Despite decades of research demonstrating the benefits of exposing students of color to texts and literacies that reflect their racial identities, cultural practices, and social realities, Black textual expressions—the oral, written, visual, digital, virtual, and bodily expressions that pervade Black lives throughout the African Diaspora—remain largely absent from classrooms (Lyiscott, 2017). Hence, she further argues that the nonexistence of Black texts in the classroom is still evidence of the nonacceptance of Black identities within a white mainstreamed context.

Therefore, liberation literacy is a pedagogical framework that caters to the needs of students “to better engage the intersections of race, text, and equity in the classroom” (Lyiscott, 2017, p. 48). Also, it is an approach through which students connect with current social issues in the classroom while reading multimodal texts, which is critical literacy’s focus. Lyiscott (2017) is interested in the intersection between language, race, and power, which is embedded in critical literacy pedagogy. To the author, a person’s linguistic identity should empower and make them feel valued irrespective of the spaces they find themselves in. Liberation literacy consists of some paradigm principles, which Lyiscott (2017) calls the five As, namely: awareness, agency/access, actualization, achievement, and alteration/action.

Awareness is a major principle of liberation literacy because it is important to be conscious of the self before this consciousness can be transferred to the world at large. Teachers and students need to be aware of themselves for social justice to occur as transformative action is required in critical literacy. For teachers, being aware would give room for creating spaces for students’ voices to be heard, and, for students, it means acknowledging their social identities and linguistic practice. The second principle of agency and access stems

from the first. Having acknowledged one's identity from within, it is important to explore this acknowledgment in society. The way a person is, or how they speak, should give them access and open different doors and opportunities for them. Thereby, there will not be scenarios in which an individual did not get a job because of a difference in the way they speak. Lyiscott (2017) argues that the mode of speech should not inform or determine a person's intellectual ability and capacity. The principle of actualization speaks to creating continuous opportunities to execute different ways of knowing and expressing one's thoughts. Achievement, the fourth principle, illustrates that there should be a standard for not just students, but for institutions that are meant to serve the students, to accommodate diversity and equity. It is not enough that students are taught to be inclusive when the institutions are not. Hence, institutions, spaces, and disciplines need to be assessed and transformed. Lastly, the principle of alteration and action explains that there is a need for an understanding of students' diversity and reimagining the institutional space, which would lead to constant construction and reconstruction of the curriculum to be inclusive and diverse. The reconstruction of the curriculum would affect the ways and approaches teachers employ in the teaching process.

The relationship between critical literacy and liberation literacy is a clear one, as the latter deals directly with the issue of identity, and how it can lead to social change. Although liberation literacy might be viewed as a subset of critical literacy, there is still a debatable difference in focus between the two. While critical literacy seeks to dissect the written words and prints as evident in the definitions above, liberation literacy focuses more on the spoken word and how much students are allowed to use their voices in the classroom. On the contrary, Luke (2012) explains that "critical literacy approaches view language, texts, and their discourse structures as principal means of representing and reshaping possible worlds" (p. 9). His explanation embodies the different forms of linguistic representation, including the spoken form. Consequently, it can be said that the principles of liberation literacy are majorly derived from the critical literacy approaches.

The Perspective of Multimodality

Multimodality relates to the different forms of representation that "are considered important meaning-making modes" (Yoon & Sharif, 2015). The multimodality technique applies to critical literacy because it seeks a range of meanings, instead of one constant perspective. Yoon and Sharif (2015) argue that the framework of media and technology has greatly affected the practice of critical literacy, which is evident in the 1990s, as researchers used popular culture in their practices in pursuit of diverse forms of representation. Also, Bacalja (2018) posits that in 1991, the assumptions of critical literacy were challenged, regarding schooling, and the different types of students these schools produce. Thus, researchers identified the aims of critical literacy to include stimulating critical understandings and the rewritings of texts, building critical readers and writers with the resources to control, resist, oppose and subvert genres across some fields, and clearing space so that the uniformity of academic practices and literacy might be challenged. These aims articulated a school-based critical literacy that was applied to a variety of text types for decades to come.

In recent times, the growth in technology has impacted the different pedagogical approaches that were employed. This shift in the textual medium gave rise to the continued effort to reconceptualize English and literacy curriculum for the twenty-first century. The implication of this shift is to imagine what it means to be literate in a digital and multimodal world and to explore divergent ways to connect pedagogy and curriculum more powerfully with students' rich experiences of the computer (Bacalja, 2018). Bacalja (2018) suggests that using technology in the classroom might address three recognized literacy challenges: moving away from language as the primary communicative mode, embracing an alternative perspective on the world of texts, and looking to technologies as signifying devices. A term that seeks to solve these challenges is known as critical media literacy, which combines critical literacy and different forms of media. Stevens and Bean (2007) defined critical media literacy as helping students learn "how the print and non-print texts that are part of everyday life help to construct their knowledge of the world and the various social, economic, and political positions they occupy within it (p. 50). Alvermann and Hagood (2000) argue that critical media literacy is not simply the ability to deconstruct different media forms, but also the ability to create or "produce one's own multimedia text" (p. 194).

A fine illustration of critical media literacy where the students created their form of multimedia was a study carried out by Sanders-Bustle and Lalik (2017). They combined classroom and outside-the-school

practices to make sense of the world. Through their research, they have suggested that students need to mingle with real people to understand the injustices they are faced with and to understand those people's perspectives. The reason is that it is possible that some students only hear of social ills but may not be able to wrap their heads around them. Seeing and working with people who have gone through injustices firsthand would open the minds of the students to see how the world truly works. As a form of action, they chose the theme of "homelessness" and motivated their students to design a 14-foot by 75-foot mosaic with those battling that problem in the community. This study highlights the transforming potential of instructional practices that span a variety of social situations, provide accessible and varied processes, and produce a public representation that can be shared and appreciated by the greater community. This form of practice can inspire educators to develop and improve the combination of artistic and literacy activities in schools and communities. Also, for students to construct art for social justice can be considered a better form of taking action and making change, which may not be achieved by merely identifying social ills without making any transformative change.

Education as an Overall Stance

All the perspectives as discussed above draw on varying themes, but critical literacy is an approach that stands with education. To be literate is not an act that can easily be achieved outside the confines of the classroom. Hence, education takes the stances of power, language, identity, and multimodality, which is based on the teacher's strategies to approach a subject matter. In this light, Bishop (2014) argues that it was not until 1993 that "Lankshear and McLaren issued what was to become the seminal text devoted to the topic" of critical literacy (p. 53). Accordingly, in their text, they contended that critically reflective teaching and research agendas should focus on both the forms that literate skills take as social practices and the uses to which those skills are employed (Bishop, 2014). The term "social practices" as used here combines the four perspectives earlier discussed. It is not news that the way language is used is based on the custom of society: the division of people into groups, based on their socio-economic status, is a social practice; the different identities people assume cannot be devoid of the practices of the community they find themselves; lastly, different forms/techniques of making meaning is greatly linked to the social norm.

Lankshear and McLaren, as cited in Bishop (2014) identified three dispositions of "educational practice that critical literacy can take on, varying by their commitment to inquiry and action: liberal education, pluralism, and transformative praxis" (p. 53). Liberal education refers to a method of approaching disciplinary knowledge that allows for intellectual flexibility and consideration of differing interpretations but avoids contradiction and favors reasoned debate. Talking about pluralism, the authors posited that reading is emphasized to assess principles that support a lax definition of tolerance and diversity. Lastly, they defined transformative praxis as the application of critical literacy's radical potential to guide emancipatory action in the world (Bishop, 2014). Furthermore, Bishop (2014) explains, drawing on Lankshear and McLaren, that one of the guiding principles of transformational critical literacy praxis is to analyze how actors operating within established power structures participate in the social creation of literacies, revealing its political consequences. This framing specifically draws on the theme of power, which made Lankshear and McLaren referring to critical literacy as political and social literacy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, to trace the origin of critical literacy is to trace the history of humans. This is because there has always been a dichotomy between people, socio-economically, physically, racially, religiously, culturally, and educationally. Hence, scholars have always sought to look for the earliest time critical literacy was practiced, based on historical documentation. As a result, different authors might have divergent views regarding the origin of critical literacy. Some authors have linked the origin, tracing the idea behind critical literacy and what it seeks to accomplish. Others might attest that the history can be mapped, based on when the term 'critical pedagogy' was first used. Either this or that, this paper has employed Yoon and Sharif's (2015) frame to discuss the history of critical literacy, which is based on the general issues that are linked with critical literacy (power, language, identity, and multimodality). Also, since these four themes are closely related, 'education' was discussed as an overall stance subsuming the other themes.

These four themes highlighted gave rise to the various terms that are used in recent times to denote how critical literacy has metamorphosized to suit the purpose for which it is used. Such terms include recognition literacy, critical media literacy, critical internet literacy, and liberation literacy. In this paper, more specifically, the relationship between critical literacy and liberation literacy was examined and reviewed. Although liberation literacy has been classified under the perspective of identity in this work, it has a close connection to language and power. The term 'liberation' can be said to mean freedom of the oppressed from the oppressor, and language is the major tool that is used for liberation to take place. As mentioned, language is a tool for liberation, education is the means/carrier by which this tool and other tools can be used. Therefore, these tools are the various approaches that can be used to implement critical literacy in the classroom.

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