# Critical Literacy: A Definition and EFL Classroom Applications

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## Introduction

> Language…does things: it constructs social categories, it gives orders, it persuades us, it justifies, explains, gives reasons, excuses. It constructs reality. It moves people against other people (TRC, 1998: 7, 124, 294 as cited in Janks, 2010, p. 45).

This quote is meant to illustrate the inherent power in words and, by extension, how the use of words create the world. Critical literacy is a concept and practice that seeks to reveal this power to language users and have them become agents who can transform their social circumstances, enabling social justice (Janks, 2010, p. 42). Where the curriculum for the upper secondary school in Sweden calls for education to embody values, such as equality between sexes and solidarity with people of all cultures and circumstances (Skolverket, 2013, p. 4), critical literacy can be seen as a tool to make these values a part of language education. This is because critical literacy exists to reveal unequal power relationships in the world and help create positive change thanks to a literacy education (Lee, 2011, p. 96). The aim of this paper is therefore to provide educators with a working definition of critical literacy, as well as examples of ideas that may inspire educators to include critical literacy in their education, so that students can engage critically with the power they hold as language users.

## What Is, and Is Not, Critical Literacy?

Firstly, it should be noted that critical literacy is not restricted to reading of the printed word, and that students today consume information in a varied media landscape. This is why Tan and Guo call for "[a] new definition of literacy […] to encompass not just the traditional literacy, such as the ability to read and write, but also multiple literacies related to multimedia technology" (2009, p. 315). This broadening of critical literacy, which Tan and Guo dub critical *multimedia* literacy, is deemed necessary as a response to the growing influence of the Internet and other information technologies prevalent in today's society (2009, p. 315). This notion, to expand what media critical literacy is applied to, is echoed by Masuda, when he paraphrases Anstey and Bull (2006) and Healy and Honan (2004): "Furthermore, critical literacy discourses expand the notion of texts as more than print-based; texts can be electronic or [non-electronic]" (2012, p. 223). In addition to the above expansion of what media critical literacy is applied to, Lee (2011) argues that when one engages in critical literacy one should strive to be literate in many forms of cultural expressions, both verbal and non-verbal, including art, dance, speeches and marches, among many other things (p. 100). Therefore, going forward in this paper, critical literacy is constructed as including a literacy of different forms of media and cultural expressions, and not just the reading of printed text.

### The literature in review

In a review of 30 years of literature, Lewison, Flint and Van Sluys (2002) have distilled different definitions of critical literacy into four interconnected dimensions that encompass what critical literacy is in theory, as well as in practice. These dimensions will first be listed

and then connected to viewpoints from other researchers, which will clarify the concept of critical literacy. The four dimensions are: 1) *disrupting the commonplace*, 2) *interrogating multiple viewpoints*, 3) *focusing on sociopolitical issues*, and 4) *taking action and promoting social justice* (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 382).

## Disrupting the commonplace

"In this dimension, critical literacy is conceptualized as seeing the 'everyday' through new lenses." (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 382-383). This acquisition of new lenses is intrinsically connected to an awareness of how language and words hold power over our shared reality, since it is through language that we simultaneously discover and create the world, which is a point echoed by Janks when she describes how we irrevocably choose words to position ourselves and others in the world. Awareness of these choices is part and parcel of critical literacy education (Janks, 2010, p. 44-45). This dimension of disrupting the commonplace is made practical by studying language, interrogating texts, problematizing all subjects, and including popular culture in the school curriculum (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 283). To an effect, this means that:

> […] taking a critical literacy approach to reading, we read underneath, behind, and beyond texts; we do not consider texts to be unbiased; we explore alternative readings; we focus on the beliefs and values of the authors; and we work for social justice and change. (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, paraphrased in Ko & Wang, 2009, p. 177)

In short, by acknowledging that words are chosen (consciously or subconsciously) and that these choices impact how we position ourselves and others in the world, critical literacy disrupts the power words and images have over us and instead puts the power in our hands by asking us to be critical in our readings and recognize that simply because something is being positioned in one way does not mean it is the only way to position this something.

## Interrogating multiple viewpoints

This dimension seeks to have the reader illuminate both the present and missing voices in texts by asking who is talking and who in turn is not talking. A reader must try to understand a text from their own viewpoints, as well as others (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 383). This is done in order to recognize that "[…] texts are constructed in ways that serve particular interests" (Ko, 2013, p. 97) and that these interests can concurrently benefit and/or disenfranchise individuals and groups of people. Education in critical literacy seeks to bring these multiple viewpoints to light and make them explicit.

## Focusing on sociopolitical issues

In this dimension, critical literacy sees language, sociopolitics, and power relationships, as inseparably intertwined and that education therefore should have students reveal how their daily lives are affected by the above mentioned power structures. The challenge seems to lie in helping the students move outside their own personal experiences with texts into a sociopolitical sphere (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 383). However, Pessoa and Frietas (2012) argue that, despite this challenge, language teachers are in an opportune position to have students recognize the power in words, because they can give students an education that informs them of the power they are able to express by consciously, or unconsciously, communicating their personal needs to their surrounding environment (p. 754).

*Taking action and promoting social justice*

Of course, after students have been introduced to critical literacy, they should be allowed and encouraged to use their literacy in action by working for social justice. Social justice, a concept that sees the empowerment of the marginalized and those without voice in society as crucial in communication, works in tandem with critical literacy by always having students and readers question the current status quo, as Lee explains when describing the recent history of critical literacy (2011, p. 95). Crucial to the enactment of critical literacy that strives for social change is recognizing, as mentioned in the previous dimensions, that language is constantly used to maintain power in the current status quo. Students are in turn encouraged to question this power balance and then cross cultural boarders, creating new multicultural spaces based on mutual understanding in their wake (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 284).

*Not to be confused with…*

After having read all of the above, one might think that critical literacy is similar to critical thinking. However, the two are not exact equivalents, as Lee notes that: "[…] critical literacy practices differ from critical thinking skills in that the former are set in a sociopolitical context oriented toward identifying unequal power relationships and serving social justice." (2011, p. 97). In effect, critical literacy places texts in relation to the world around it and lets students question those texts motives and reasoning, where critical thinking does not necessarily go as far, according to Lee (2011, p. 97).

## Classroom Applications of Critical Literacy and Their Benefits

One possible area in the EFL classroom that critical literacy can be applied to is grammar, as described by Jordao and Fogaca: "Rather than aiming at adapting readers to texts, merely leading them to recognize text genres or fixed text formats, our perspective focuses on developing ownership of texts, which implies more than the possibility of 'understanding' texts." (2012, p. 78). The idea is to make students active participants in the meaning-making process of reading texts and not simply passive replicators of norms, both textual and societal. The benefit of critical literacy in this instance, as Jordao and Fogaca see it, then becomes a development in a student's ability to see themselves, as well as seeing others, in a given text and thus gaining a deeper, more critical understanding of the way the world works and how they can influence their position in the world. (2012, p. 78).

Janks (2010) provides another example of a grammar exercise where students can work with modals and understand that by choosing a certain modal they can express themselves imperatively or tentatively, and that this has consequences for their readers (p. 45). The benefit here is that students learn that how they choose to express themselves has an impact on the world and that they indeed have a choice when expressing themselves.

## Conclusion

To summarize: critical literacy is a concept and practice that seeks to reveal to language users unequal power relationships in the world and help marginalized people, those without voice and power, all in the name of social justice. Critical literacy does this by studying language and the power structures that come into play in daily communication. In a language classroom, an awareness of expressions of power could be created by educating students in how they can choose their words and, in turn, how these communicative choices create the world around them. The benefit with this kind of literacy education is that students develop an ownership of the texts they read as well as the words they use in everyday communication,

while also developing skills that help them recognize expressions of unequal power relationships so they can work towards social justice and indeed embody the values the Swedish upper secondary school is built on.

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