

Critical Pedagogy and Critical Literacy in the Bilingual and ESL Classroom

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to examine critical pedagogy and critical literacy as it relates to bilingual and ESL education. First, we focus on Freire's (2018) ideas in the classroom and the extent to which they can effect change in the educational system. In brief, critical pedagogy in the classroom is a method of addressing social issues in which students evaluate their perspectives on injustice and authority. Next, we focus on critical literacy, which is based on Freire and Macedo's (1987) theoretical concepts and language and uses written texts to critique the social creation of knowledge. Finally, we give classroom activities for English Language Learners to develop critical pedagogy and critical literacy, which teachers can use to apply critical pedagogy to the classroom for the development of critical consciousness.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, critical literacy, teacher education, bilingual education, ESL education, critical consciousness

Introduction

Many educational stakeholders question whether or not education includes critical thinking (Schmaltz et al., 2017; Wright 2002). Those stakeholders—such as educators, government officials, and the public—have shaped the school system. Even though these stakeholders shaped the educational system, many minoritized voices are excluded. Current legislation such as Texas House Bill 3979 limits teachers' ability to teach students how to critically engage with politics through the explicit banning of political activism in the classroom. Because of the limitation on teachers' ability to teach and the exclusion of many minoritized voices, education can limit and oppress children's choices and voices. This paper discusses

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the connections between critical pedagogy and critical literacy by exploring its history, its correlation to English Language Learners (ELLs), and implications in the classroom.

Critical Literacy

While many educational stakeholders believe that critical thinking has all but disappeared (Schmatlz et al., 2017; Wright, 2002), critical literacy offers a way for students to critically analyze not only the words they read but also the world around them. Freire and Macedo (1987) called for critical literacy not only in regard to the word but also to the world. They problematized issues surrounding minoritized people, especially indigenous people from the global south. From here, they worked with those individuals to not only critique the ways in which words were used to perpetuate oppressive systems but also to notice what oppressive practices existed in their worlds. Critical literacy should be broader than just a critical understanding of text. It should also include critical practice to develop critical praxis. Critical praxis is reflexive action informed by theory and practice (Freire, 2018). Understanding oppressive systems within education is one thing, but taking action to change those systems is essential to understanding critical literacy. One of the ways that teachers of ELLs can be aware of these oppressive practices is to see how language practices can lead to the racialization of a person without any evidence of a linguistic or intellectual deficiency. Flores and Rosa (2015) understood this as a raciolinguistic ideology. Raciolinguistic ideologies are any set of beliefs that conflate language use and race. For example, some people may have an encounter with an individual who speaks broken English and—without even taking the time to hear their message—quickly make a judgment based on their language use and race. With many teachers being white and the traditionally minoritized student population increasing (Dozier et al., 2006), teachers should reject these ideologies and instead adopt heteroglossic ideologies to foster equitable language environments for their ELL students (Stewart et al., 2021).

While critically minded educators can help foster students to make the world a better place, some may view critical literacy as a detriment to society because it creates opportunities for erasing history. Freire and Macedo (1987) noted the differences in Nicaraguan and British schools in that the former taught that the way people view history has changed while the latter taught politics. Critical thinking is good until, for non-critically minded individuals, students question the official knowledge being taught instead of valorizing particular forms of knowledge.

For example, in the United States, many school districts are renaming their schools from confederate generals to more localized leaders that supported inclusive education (WFAA, 2017). Even though some school districts are taking the move to valorize more deserving individuals through school names, other school districts are backing down on those efforts due to some conservatives who call it cancel culture (Romo, 2021). Yet, even though many students want the schools renamed, regardless of how they prioritize this issue over others, school boards often will listen to adult constituents over students within school systems (Learning Network, 2021).

To engage students with critical literacy in the classroom, teachers must understand their students. Teachers are predominantly white, juxtaposed against the growing population of

minorities. This creates difficulties for both teachers and students. Students feel as if their teachers are either avoiding important topics and teachers feel as if they are not knowledgeable enough in the subject. When trying to implement critical literacy in the classroom, teachers should go beyond traditional texts and engage with their students' lived experiences. Culturally responsive teaching provides a foundation for teachers to not only engage with classroom materials in a critical way but also with their students' lived experiences (Gay, 2018).

While culturally responsive classrooms purposefully engage with students' lives, some teachers intentionally avoid communication with the parents (Dozier et al., 2006). To counter this, teachers can use surveys, which provide a way for teachers to create culturally responsive classrooms focused on critical literacy. While online surveys are easy to administer, many families continue to have difficulty accessing the internet or email (Vogels et al., 2020). Online surveys can include questions about their cultural background, traditions, interests, dislikes, and communication methods. Other ways to adopt a culturally responsive classroom embedded with critical literacy is to advocate for informal meetings with parents such as Donuts with Dads, Muffins with Moms, or the more inclusive, Pastries with Parents. These events invite families to come to the school and enjoy breakfast with their children while the children show their work. This is a shortened version of the more common Open House. Through surveys and family engagement events, teachers can enact a culturally responsive pedagogy to incorporate students' cultures and lived experiences into class topics and discussions.

Beyond the inclusion of students' cultures and lived experiences, teachers should also understand that they must care for their students. Noddings (2013) understood how education should practice an ethic of care in which teachers care for their students deeply so that the students will be ready to learn. Bartolomé (2008) extended Noddings (2013) work through the inclusion of a culturally responsive form of an ethic of care in *cariño*. *Cariño* moves beyond merely caring for a student and loving them but also noticing and working to dismantle the systemic inequities that students experience. Teachers with *cariño* must understand that their care for students should be expressed as an "armed love" (Freire, 1998), which focuses on giving students a liberatory education with high expectations.

This culturally responsive care goes beyond a Spanish-speaking population. Kim and Cho (2017) noticed how Korean children hardly question what is taught to them. The teachers in the study understood these cultural values and implemented read-alouds, which created a safe and comfortable atmosphere for students to share their viewpoints. Through this, students were able to explore multiple interpretations and develop critical perspectives. Creating a safe and comfortable environment for ELL students allows them to open up and become more comfortable while speaking.

Beyond speaking, critical literacy affords students the opportunity to engage their writing to enact social change (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999; Luke & Freebody, 1997). Abednia (2015) suggests following a sequence for ELL students so that they can experience critical literacy regardless of their linguistic repertoires. Step one is to familiarize learners with critical literacy; step two is to negotiate the readings; step three is to ask critical questions; step four is to discuss questions collaboratively; and step 5 is writing reflective journals.

Throughout this process critical consciousness must be embedded. Critical consciousness is the process in which an individual sees the systemic issues in their world and works to change them for the good of people (Freire, 2018). Palmer and colleagues (2019) advocate for adopting critical consciousness, especially in the context of bilingual education. Critical consciousness or conscientization is central to critical pedagogy.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is a philosophy of education that invokes educators to encourage students to critique the oppressive power structures within education (Freire, 2018). Critical pedagogy takes place in the classroom, where the teacher highlights the importance of students forming their own opinions and positions. When students are able to critically analyze their world, they practice critical consciousness. When they take the ideas from their observations and do something about it, they enact praxis, the unity of theory and action. Freire based his theory on his struggles growing up in a third-world country and experiencing poverty. Some may question why Freire is used as the theoretical foundation to understanding critical pedagogy rather than other scholars such as Peter McLaren or Michael Apple. We believe that, because Freire's experiences with poverty and his cultural identity as Latin American reflect a large portion of children, his theories are uniquely situated to teach children, especially bi/multilingual children, through critical pedagogy.

Teachers can model praxis through the dialogical method to engage students with out-of-book activities, and problem-solving strategies (Uddin, 2019). Freire (2018) explained how true reflection can lead to action, which leads to activism. In order for students' voices to be shared they must have someone who trusts in their beliefs for reflection and also must have effort to start. Without trust, there are no connections and, most poignantly, no dialogue. These dialogical conversations create interactions among teachers, students and peers. These conversations are created through strong relationships with students in a safe environment where students are more likely to open up and feel comfortable sharing their opinions. Critical pedagogy is effective not only for general education but also for bilingual education (Darder, 2016).

For ELL students, applying critical pedagogy in the classroom is paramount to their educational success, especially in regard to critical consciousness. One option that the literature suggests is to give students critical thinking opportunities through problem solving and orderly thinking (Uddin, 2019). Students develop solutions and then analyze which solutions best fit the problem at hand. While this strategy does have opportunities for applying critical pedagogy, it mainly connects with critical thinking because it does not explicitly address solving a problem that students observe in their worlds.

Samuels (2018) connects the idea of critical thinking to critical literacy through culturally responsive pedagogy. Teachers of ELL students should relate students' culture to the classroom; when students are able to see themselves in the classroom, both student engagement and participation increase. When students are engaged, they can critically analyze texts through their cultural lens and contribute to deeper conversations about texts. However, even though applying a culturally responsive pedagogy through critical literacy can increase student engagement, students do not problematize issues that they observed in their worlds, or begin to read both the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Students can begin to read their world through out-of-book-activities (Uddin, 2019), starting with texts such as films, books, or music. They can extend their understanding of those texts through discussions. Discussions that happen in safe spaces with strong student-teacher relationships allow for students to develop their critical consciousness. They develop this by juxtaposing the text against their lived experiences.

The previous examples of applying critical thinking, critical literacy, and critical pedagogy to the ELL classroom come from the literature; however, there may still be a need for more specific activities for many teachers. The following section details some activities for a variety of grade levels from which teachers and students can apply a critical pedagogy.

Classroom Activities for ELLs to Develop Critical Pedagogy and Critical Literacy

Teachers serve as role models for students by providing scaffolding in the classroom. Teachers should maintain an open environment when dealing with selected critical readings and encourage students to discuss their opinions as they think critically. However, students, especially ELLs or bi/multilingual students, are frequently disrupted by a wave of nervousness or a sensation of loss inside the classroom (Cadiz-Gabejan, 2021). Teachers can help students in situations like this by presenting question strategies to use during selected readings and activities. These activities are meant to be suggestions for teachers who are in various stages of applying critical pedagogy in their classroom. Critical thinking, critical literacy, and critical pedagogy are modeled. We highly recommend that teachers look at who their students are and apply these strategies in a culturally responsive way that fits the needs of their students.

Critical Thinking: Asking Critical Questions with Math

To begin, many teachers hear the word ‘critical’ and immediately think about critical thinking. While the following section does not explicitly connect to critical literacy or critical pedagogy, we believe that it is a great segue into these challenging subjects. This should be the first step toward having students critically question their world and the word.

One way to apply critical thinking is to allow students to make better financial choices and be responsible through money. Sheila Bair's (2017) *Rock, Brock, and the Savings Shock* serves as a starting place where students can ask critical questions to determine comprehension. Each student can then create a storyboard along with a budget plan. During the interactive read-aloud, the teacher asks questions directly during the lesson to captivate students into thinking about the story such as “How did Brock feel when he got more money than Rock?” or “What did Brock do to help his brother in the end?” Additional potential guides for students to ask critical questions during or after the story are listed below (See Figure 1). This questioning strategy is important for bi/multilingual students because it serves as a scaffold for their comprehension of the story.

Because the story is about two twins, Rock and Brock, children can distinguish between the spender and the saver in the story. This gives students the opportunity to empathize with one of the characters. Students can demonstrate critical thinking through the creation of a budget plan. This allows them to see that, with limited resources, choices have to be made. Another application of critical thinking which could begin to foster dialogue in the class is a

group project, which asks students to decide what they would need to spend and save for a particular list of items (e.g. a robot, a car, a new game, food, or clothes) with a given amount of money. As a culminating activity, each group can give a short presentation to the entire class. Allowing children to critically think about limited resources is a beginning step for them to understand how these limited resources can be used for beneficial and detrimental reasons, especially for bi/multilingual students who are disproportionately from lower income families. This serves as a stepping stone to critical literacy.

Figure 1 *Critical Questions Menu*

<u>Bloom's Taxonomy</u>	<u>Top 6 Critical Questions</u>	<u>5 W's</u>
Creating <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would happen if..? Evaluating <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think it's a good idea or bad..? Analyzing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you distinguish between..? Applying <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What can you change about the character? Understanding <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you write in your own words..? Remembering <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What happened after..? 	What's happening? Why is it important? What don't I see? How do I know? Who is saying it? What if?	Who What When Where Why

Critical Literacy: Embracing Diversity and Social Justice in the Classroom

Students gain foundational knowledge in the elementary classroom. One piece of foundational knowledge that is necessary yet often excluded from curricula is social justice, which can be difficult to grasp. Students should engage with texts that help them understand the importance of fairness and justice in society. Critical literacy calls for this to be done through texts, and most importantly, through books.

Hood's (2016) *Ada's Violin: The Story of the Recycled Orchestra of Paraguay* (available in Spanish and English) gives great opportunities for students to critically reflect on the message of the book. In the book, a young girl named Ada lives in a dirty city called Cateura, Paraguay, where trash is being dumped near her home. Eventually, her passion for music unleashes her creativity, and she begins making instruments from trash. The book's theme is designed to help students understand the importance of having big ambitions in life, and it also defies stereotypes in vulnerable communities. Many bi/multilingual students come from Latin America and will empathize with Ada's experiences. These students need stories that serve as mirrors to their world while other students need these stories to serve as windows into new experiences.

Students can participate in critical discussions about the book guided by questions such as “Turn to your partner and ask what their favorite part of the story was. What is it about that section that appeals to them?” or “Think about Ada’s neighborhood. What were some of the issues that the children had to deal with?” Small group questioning is good for language development for bi/multilingual students because it gives them a safe place to practice their language skills. Additionally, if two bi/multilingual students are paired, they can practice translanguaging where they fluidly use their full linguistic repertoire (García et al., 2017). As a culminating activity, students can develop a multimodal presentation combining printed photos, biography, and Paraguayan culture to more deeply understand Ada’s world and her problems. Asking students to view Ada’s plight from a critical stance serves as a model of critical consciousness, which can then be applied to the students’ worlds, thereby moving students from a critical viewpoint to social justice through environmentalism.

Using Hood’s (2016) book can be a way to address diversity and social justice in the classroom; however, it is important that the stories we read with children serve as mirrors, windows, and sliding doors into their worlds (Bishop, 1990). These experiences are especially valuable for bi/multilingual children who are mainly Latinx (Braden & Rodriguez, 2016) and immigrants (Sotirovska & Kelley, 2020). Finding classroom materials that are both culturally responsive and embrace critical literacy can be difficult. The Anti-Defamation League (2021) provides many resources on a variety of reading levels and topics. Whether it’s about an immigrant girl achieving her American Dream, a Jewish family running away from the enemy, honoring friendships, or the meaning of respect inside a mosque, teachers should identify topics that engage students and their cultures. The previous examples are ways in which students can engage with texts; however, in order to truly practice a critical pedagogy, students must engage with both the word and their world.

Critical Pedagogy: Moving Beyond Classroom Walls

The previous examples were models of students applying critical skills in the classroom, yet they lacked the needed skill of asking students to think critically about their lived experiences and practice critical consciousness. Like Ada’s experiences in the previous story, many students see plastic pollution as an issue that affects the environment, and ocean wildlife. Seeing these issues not only as they affect wildlife but also the lives of individuals as seen in Ada’s *Violin: The Story of the Recycled Orchestra of Paraguay* can move students from merely being critical about a situation to enacting social justice. Students that understand the issue of plastic pollution can help other students develop background knowledge about plastics, its properties, and where it is recycled in the world. Students can more deeply interact with the student-created text through the use of virtual reality (VR) with Google Arts and Culture (GAC). The GAC app is designed for use in a highly interactive teaching and learning environment. The app only requires an electronic device and a Google Cardboard viewer. Then, with GAC’s exploration feature, students can use Ocean VR tours to provide context for learning and see the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. This type of activity is beneficial for the bi/multilingual student because it gives them a nonlinguistic scaffold to the learning, which can then be used to build their linguistic repertoire.

Students then can apply critical consciousness to the environmental problem through artistic citizenship, the creation of art for the good of others (Lozada, 2020). To do this, students will design an art activism sculpture out of plastics that showcases what they learned about plastic pollution in the ocean. These can include a lava lamp made of plastic water bottles, a jellyfish in a plastic bottle, or a plastic fish. Students can then produce an art show around Earth Day to bring their message to the community. These artistic expressions of the issue of plastic pollution allow students to artistically express the problem, like the Recycled Orchestra from Paraguay, and not only use their art for critiquing society but also to move from environmentalism to environmental justice as social justice. Lastly, students can write a personal reflection about how their art made a change for the better.

Extensions for Older Students: Environmental Awareness

Many of the preceding activities are geared toward elementary-aged students; however, critical pedagogy can be a powerful educational tool for older students as well. Continuing with the idea about the importance of environmental protection and the fragility of our ecosystem, the following activity provides a way for students to engage with critical pedagogy through environmental awareness.

This project allows students to examine the harmful environmental impact of everyday products. Students can investigate and collaborate with a partner to seek safer alternatives to certain products. Some examples of these products are disposable batteries, styrofoam, plastic water bottles, plastic bags, petroleum jelly, and re-refined motor oil. Students can investigate a product by focusing on either of the following questions: Is the product harmful? Can you list the product's ingredients? Once students understand the possible detrimental effects of the products, they can create a multimodal presentation that seeks alternative products, their benefits, and how to advocate to make policy change (See Figure 2). For bi/multilingual students, using multimodal presentations is a way for them to express their full linguistic repertoire because they might use images with multilingual content, create multilingual text, or even present in a multilingual fashion. These skills not only serve the bi/multilingual students but also create opportunities for all students to understand their worlds and create words to enact critical consciousness in regard to the topic at hand and the ways in which we use language.

Figure 2 *Multimodal Student Presentation*

Conclusion

Critical thinking leads to an understanding of critical literacy and then finally critical pedagogy. The purpose of applying these ideas to education is to create independent thinkers. Independent thinkers allow for more ideas, leading to change, praxis, and activism. For the teachers to implement these strategies, they must focus on the students, lead the discussions, bring in topics about culture, and create a safe environment for them to feel comfortable. This is especially important for bi/multilingual students because the expressive possibilities of enacting a critical pedagogy allows them to not only develop content knowledge but also expand their linguistic repertoire. Making an effort to be culturally responsive, especially in a nation where the population of minorities is increasing, is vital for teachers. Having teachers be culturally responsive and implementing critical pedagogy in the classroom can result in more independent individuals just as Freire would have wanted.

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