

TEACHING CRITICAL LITERACY AND FOUNDATIONAL LITERACY SKILLS TO EMERGENT LITERACY LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Critical literacy is usually considered higher-order thinking or critical thinking while emergent literacy learners are in the early stage of learning to read and write and held accountable by most mandates to learn foundational literacy skills such as the alphabetic principle and phonemic awareness. The question is: “Are emergent literacy learners capable of learning critical literacy and foundational literacy skills simultaneously?” This paper explores the question by first reviewing and discussing the terms “critical literacy” and “emergent literacy learners.” Then an example is provided to show that critical literacy can be taught to emergent literacy learners. This is followed by a demonstration of how to incorporate the instruction of foundational literacy skills into the critical literacy lesson given previously. This paper argues that emergent literacy learners can learn both critical literacy and foundational literacy skills at the same time if proper scaffolding is provided.

INTRODUCTION

Critical literacy is a field in literacy education that is traceable genealogically to the work of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian literacy educator and activist. Freire along with his colleague Macedo (1987) argued that educators should teach literacy learners to read the word and the world critically. Literacy training should not only focus on the learning of literacy skills, but also be considered “a set of practices that functions to either empower or disempower people” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 187). In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1984) proposed that literacy education embodied in reflection and action is meant to empower the oppressed through a dialogical process. Freire’s critical approach to literacy education and his collaboration with Donald Macedo and Ira Shor “mark a watershed in the development of critical literacy as a distinct theoretical and pedagogical field” (Stevens & Bean, 2007, p. vii).

Building on Freire’s work, Anderson and Irvine (1993) define critical literacy as “learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one’s experience as historically constructed within specific power relations” (p. 82). The goal of critical literacy “is to challenge these unequal power relations” (Anderson & Irvine, 1993, p. 82). In parallel, Lankshear and McLaren (1993) believe that critical literacy makes possible, among other things, “a more adequate and accurate ‘reading’ of the world, [so that] people can enter into ‘rewriting’ the world into a formation in which their interests, identities, and legitimate aspirations are more fully present and are present more equally” (p. xviii). Janks (2014) emphasizes that “critical literacy should not be seen as transient, like fads and fashions that come and go, but as essential to the ongoing project of education across the curriculum” (p. 349). Vasquez (2001a, 2010, 2014, 2015) even elevates the discussion of critical literacy to the ontological level and describes critical literacy as a way of being that should cut across the entire curriculum. Literacy education perceived from this critical slant is no longer merely the instruction of literacy skills. It is broadened to include the fostering of the ability to problematize and redefine ideologies depicted in the texts and power relations experienced in our daily lives.

Originally, critical literacy was intended to empower the marginalized through literacy education. Freire (1984) spent time with working-class peasants, learning the words that were meaningful to them, words that evoked responses in them. These he called “generative words” (Freire, 1984, p. 101). He wanted the peasants to feel that they could exercise power over their words. Critical literacy researchers and practitioners have expanded on Freire’s work and developed theoretical frameworks and teaching practices that are applicable to learners of diverse ages and backgrounds. There have been critical literacy inquiries targeting elementary and middle school students (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2015), college students (Morrell, 2003), pre-service teachers (Lam, 2022), and in-service teachers (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Vasquez, Tate, & Harste, 2013).

The applicability of critical literacy to beginning literacy learners, however, has raised concern especially among the proponents of developmental theory with its assumptions of the naturally developing child and emergent literacy (Comber & Reid, 2007; Dyson & Genishi, 2009). The developmental discourse is central to the notion of “readiness,” a key word in early schooling and literacy, a yardstick by which some children are judged whether they are ready to come to school and/or ready for reading (Comber, 1999). Therefore, the proponents of developmental theory argue that critical literacy, with its focus on power and language, is more appropriate for older or more advanced students, but too difficult for beginning literacy learners. Yet research (e.g., Dyson, 1989, 1993, 1997; Kuby, 2013; Vasquez, 2014) has provided evidence that young children are capable of addressing questions about power, language, and representation with proper guidance and scaffolding. For example, according to Law (2020), the use of picture books, along with questioning, supports the development of young children’s critical literacy. Specifically, picture books make great teaching tools as they bring in fresh perspectives on social issues, prompting children to explore concepts and consider how this might influence their actions (Robertson, 2018). Therefore, even young children are able to understand and practice critical literacy. In fact, teachers should encourage children to be open to different perspectives and explore challenging concepts presented in texts, such as diversity,

bullying, disability, and poverty, as these are issues relevant to people of all ages, including children in the early years (Law, 2020).

While there is little doubt about young children's ability to implement critical literacy, it is important to note that some emergent literacy learners, especially those who are still learning such foundational skills as phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, phonics, and spelling, may not be able to do critical literacy through traditional reading and writing. For such students, picture books are usually used for them to "read." These students are also allowed to use alternative forms of literacy (e.g., drawing and dramatization) to express their understanding. Yet this does not change the fact that teachers have to teach emergent literacy learners foundational literacy skills mandated, for example, by the Common Core State Standards (2010). These foundational literacy skills are also emphasized in the science of reading (SoR), "a phrase representing the accumulated knowledge about reading, reading development, and best practices for reading instruction obtained by the use of the scientific method" (Petscher, Cabell, Catts, Compton, Foorman, Hart, Lonigan, Phillips, Schatschneider, Steacy, Terry, & Wagner, 2020, S268). In fact, SoR is not simply a phrase, but it has been brought to national attention by the media, such as *The New York Times* (Goldstein, 2020) and *The Washington Post* (Mathews, 2020), and has become an academic mandate in many states in the United States. Therefore, this paper attempts to fill the gap in the critical literacy literature and address this issue by arguing that both critical literacy and foundational literacy skills should and can be taught to emergent literacy learners. In what follows, emergent literacy learners will be defined first. In other words, who are emergent literacy learners? What challenges do they usually face in learning to read and write? Next, an example will be provided to show that critical literacy can be taught to emergent literacy learners. This is followed by a demonstration of how to incorporate the instruction of foundational literacy skills into the critical literacy lesson given previously. This paper argues that emergent literacy learners can learn both critical literacy and foundational literacy skills at the same time if proper scaffolding is provided.

WHO ARE EMERGENT LITERACY LEARNERS?

According to Sulzby and Teale (1996), emergent literacy refers to the reading and writing behaviors that precede and develop into conventional literacy. Such behaviors include the earliest literacy concepts and varieties of social context in which children become literate. Therefore, emergent literacy learners are children who are in the process of learning what reading and writing are for and how to read and write. Most emergent literacy learners begin to discover the sounds of language in relation to the written forms of words and the purposes of books. Specifically, they explore the alphabetic principle (i.e., learning how to recognize sounds and match the sounds and written letters to form words), learn about books and how they are structured to gain information and enjoy stories, and comprehend and experiment with written language.

Children enter school with differences in their exposure to and what they know about texts. For some children, there is little literacy learning at home, and emergent literacy happens primarily in school. For other children, emergent literacy begins at home and is systematically taught when they enter school. Some kindergarteners hardly know the alphabet while others know the sounds the letters make and can even write a few words. Some have been read to extensively at home and understand the basic structure of stories, but many have not. Most emergent literacy learners, i.e., children usually in preschool, kindergarten, and first-grade classrooms, will need considerable help from teachers to become competent and independent readers and writers.

CRITICAL LITERACY AND EMERGENT LITERACY LEARNERS

The challenge of teaching critical literacy to emergent literacy learners is that they are in the beginning stage of learning to read and write and, therefore, are not skilled at reading and writing. Yet critical literacy is usually thought of as higher-order thinking or critical thinking and thus believed to be geared toward older or high-ability students (Lewison et al., 2015). In this sense, critical literacy is considered too difficult for primary grade students, much less

emergent literacy learners. Nevertheless, as mentioned previously, critical literacy can be taught to a broad spectrum of learners, ranging from elementary students, to college students, to pre-service and in-service teachers. Research has also shown that critical literacy can be implemented with young students as well as English language learners (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Sahni, 2001; Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996; Van Sluys, 2005; Vasquez, 2001b; Wallace, 2001). Kim Huber, for instance, documented how she helped her first-grade students explore critical picture books and take action to change the community around them (Leland & Huber, 2015). Huber's school participated in a food drive for a local food pantry, and her students were reminded each morning and right before going home for the day to bring in more food items. There was even a contest set up to see which class could bring in the most items. To help her students understand the meaning of a food drive, Huber decided to read a critical picture book, *The Lady in the Box* (McGovern, 1997), to her students. The next day, "the children came in loaded down with more items. No one made a comment about winning, but instead they talked of how the food would be used by people who did not have enough to eat" (Leland & Huber, 2015, p. 70).

Therefore, though emergent literacy learners are in the initial stage of using traditional reading and writing skills to express themselves, their ability to engage in critical literacy is out of question. The key to creating a critical literacy inquiry for emergent literacy learners is providing proper accommodations such as using picture books and allowing the learners to use alternative forms of literacy, e.g., drawing and dramatization, to express themselves. A children's book with illustrations is designed to appeal to a wide audience and focus on a story, told with humor and unforgettable language (Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2013). It presents issues in a way to which young readers can relate. The illustrations make the text accessible to readers who would not be able to comprehend the text by decoding the words alone. Therefore, children's books, especially picture books, offer a feasible way for emergent literacy learners to learn an otherwise-difficult-to-understand concept such as critical literacy. Another accommodation that can be provided is through the use of alternative

forms of literacy. Leland, Harste, and Helt (2000) showed that, when “learning disabled” students are allowed to use multiple forms of literacy such as speaking, drawing, dramatization, etc., they are able to demonstrate a good understanding of what they have read. Similarly, emergent literacy learners can express their comprehension of what they have read or been read to through the use of alternative forms of literacy in addition to the conventional written language.

The four dimensions of critical literacy (FDCL) developed by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) is used in this paper to demonstrate how critical literacy can be taught to emergent literacy learners. Lewison et al.’s (2002) FDCL is a result of a comprehensive review of research on critical literacy for a period of three decades. FDCL is not simply based on one single research study, but represents the studies done by many researchers/practitioners in different settings and times. In addition, FDCL clearly lays out the key features/dimensions of critical literacy that help set the stage for exploring what critical literacy can look like in practice. Therefore, FDCL is a theoretically-based framework that serves as guidelines for putting critical literacy into practice. However, it is important to note that FDCL is not claimed to be representative of all the theorizing about critical literacy, nor is it supposed to be inclusive of all the critical literacy practices. FDCL is a framework characteristic of common features of critical literacy synthesized by Lewison et al. (2002) through the survey of a plethora of theoretical accounts and practitioner-authored narratives of critical literacy that appeared in the academic and professional literature.

Lewison et al. (2002) reviewed a range of definitions of critical literacy and synthesized them into four dimensions: (1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice. The first dimension, disrupting the commonplace, is to question the routines, beliefs, habits, theories, practices, etc. that we encounter and are used to in our lives. It focuses on interrogating our everyday world, including “how social norms are communicated through the various arenas of popular culture and how identities are shaped by these experiences” (Lewison et al., 2015, p. 8). To

paraphrase Luke and Freebody (1997), this dimension interrogates texts by asking how the texts try to position us. The second dimension, interrogating multiple viewpoints, is meant to make difference visible and subject it to critical scrutiny instead of striving for consensus and conformity. Luke and Freebody (1997) suggested that multiple and contradictory accounts of an event be juxtaposed to investigate whose voices are heard and whose voices are missing. The third dimension is focusing on the sociopolitical issues such as gender bias, bullying, and poverty that are related to students' lives. It goes beyond the personal concerns and attempts to situate them in the sociopolitical contexts/systems (Boozer, Maras, & Brummett, 1999). The last dimension is taking action and promoting social justice. It is aligned with Freire's (1984) proposition that literacy learners should be actors rather than spectators in the world. The purpose is to empower the underprivileged to challenge and redefine unequal power relations and take action to transform their status quo. While each of the four dimensions has its own focus, they are actually intertwined (Lewison et al., 2002). For example, action can be hardly taken without first disrupting and recognizing the biased norm. In what follows, I will demonstrate how critical literacy in the form of FDCL can be taught to emergent literacy learners through appropriate scaffolding.

HOW TO TEACH FDCL WITH APPROPRIATE SCAFFOLDING

In this section, I will use a children's picture book, *Piggybook*, by Anthony Browne (1990) to demonstrate how to teach FDCL to emergent literacy learners. *Piggybook* features Mr. Piggott, Mrs. Piggott, and their sons, Simon and Patrick. Mrs. Piggott is busy with household chores: fixing breakfast, washing dishes, making the beds, vacuuming the carpets, etc. before she goes to her own job. After work, she continues this routine while Mr. Piggott and the boys lounge around, occasionally demanding things of her. One day, though, Mrs. Piggott is gone. A note saying simply, "You are pigs," is all she leaves behind. The three males literally have become pigs, and the house turns into a pigsty without Mrs. Piggott there to take care of things. When she returns, they beg her to stay. Mr. Piggott and the boys help with the household chores while Mrs. Piggott fixes the car.

Since it is likely that young children may not be able to read the book on their own, the teacher can read the book aloud to them, show them pictures, and pause once in a while to see if they have questions or if they follow along and understand the book. After the reading of the book, the teacher can help the children understand the four dimensions of critical literacy through the book.

FIRST DIMENSION: DISRUPTING THE COMMONPLACE

Disrupting the commonplace is questioning the norm, the routine, or what most of the people do or take for granted. It is “seeing the everyday through new lenses” (Lewison et al., 2002, pp. 382-383). A commonplace is a routine or, sometimes, a bias that is practiced, but seldom questioned in our society. *Piggybook* presents Mrs. Piggott as a traditional woman in a household, taking care of all the chores while Mr. Piggott and their sons take what she does for granted before she leaves. Mrs. Piggott’s leaving disrupts the commonplace that women are expected to do all the household chores even though they have to work. To help emergent literacy learners think critically about the role women or girls play in a family, the teacher can first ask them to write or draw about what their father, mother, and siblings do at home. They can share their writings or drawings in pairs/small groups and then before the whole class. After the sharing, the teacher can ask the children what would happen if their mom, like Mrs. Piggott, decides to quit what she does. This question will help them think critically about what they usually take for granted about what a mom does at home and maybe how they should help their mom with the household chores.

SECOND DIMENSION: INTERROGATING MULTIPLE VIEWPOINTS

Interrogating multiple viewpoints highlights the importance of examining an issue from multiple angles in order to have a better understanding of the issue. To help emergent literacy learners understand how gender affects the roles men and women play in a family, the teacher can assign them to play the characters, Mr. Piggott, Mrs. Piggott, and their sons, Simon and Patrick, in *Piggybook*. The teacher can even assign the children to play the characters opposite to

their gender to put them in others' shoes. In this way, they are invited to think about the gender issue from different perspectives.

THIRD DIMENSION: FOCUSING ON SOCIOPOLITICAL ISSUES

Focusing on sociopolitical issues is going beyond the personal and attempting to understand the sociopolitical systems to which we belong. *Piggybook*, on the surface, consists mainly of a story about the daily routine of a traditional/typical family where household chores usually fall on the wife/mother even though she has to work. Yet by including an episode of Mrs. Piggott's leaving home for a while to protest what is expected of her, the author attempts to take the story beyond the personal level and brings a sociopolitical issue, e.g., the role of women in society, to the attention of the readers. In fact, situating a personal issue within a sociopolitical context helps us better understand the personal issue and how it relates to, and is shaped by, the broad sociopolitical system. To help the children explore how gender differences may affect what they are expected to do, the teacher can ask them, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" They may come up with a list of occupations such as a doctor, a nurse, a teacher, a firefighter, a police officer, etc. The teacher can follow up with a question like "Can a woman be a doctor?" "Can a woman be a firefighter?" or "Can a man be a nurse?" Alternatively, the teacher can simply show two photos, a man and a woman, and ask the children which one of them is a doctor and which is a nurse. The questions and photo-matching activity will help them think critically about how we are perceived or what we are expected by our society because of our gender.

FOURTH DIMENSION: TAKING ACTION TO PROMOTE SOCIAL JUSTICE

Critical literacy is not simply a topic of conversation, but serves to empower literacy learners to act as humans with agency – humans who have the potential for making positive change. This line of thinking, i.e., taking action to promote social justice, is aligned with Giroux and Giroux's (2004) view that knowledge "is about more than understanding; it is also about the possibilities of self-determination,

individual autonomy, and social agency” (p. 84). A critical awareness of literacy education is still not critical literacy unless action is taken. Freire (1984) urges us to be actors instead of spectators and argues that critical literacy/pedagogy should be a true praxis which consists of reflection as well as action. To help the children transform their knowledge into action, the teacher can ask them to write or draw about what they can do at home to help their mom with household chores. The learners can talk about their writings or drawings, pick one or two things they would like to do to help, and share what they have done the following week.

The example above shows that a children’s picture book can help emergent literacy learners understand an otherwise-difficult social issue, i.e., social expectations of gender, on the one hand, and makes critical literacy in the form of FDCL accessible to them, on the other hand. In addition, alternative forms of literacy such as speaking, drawing, and role playing allow the children to show their understanding which would be difficult, if not impossible, to express through the traditional form of literacy such as writing.

INCORPORATION OF FOUNDATIONAL LITERACY SKILLS INTO CRITICAL LITERACY

It is true that pictures or illustrations in children’s books supplement words to help emergent literacy learners comprehend the text. In addition, alternative forms of literacy such as speaking, drawing, drama, etc. allow the children to express their understanding of the text in a way they feel comfortable with and are capable of. Yet these accommodations do not address the need to teach emergent literacy learners the foundational literacy skills, such as the alphabetic principle and phonemic awareness, mandated by academic standards.

According to Kim, Boyle, Zuilkowski, and Nakamura (2016), children need to acquire the alphabetic principle and phonemic awareness about language in order to become successful readers and writers. The alphabetic principle is the understanding that spoken sounds can be represented by written letters (Dewitz, Graves, Graves, & Juel, 2020). The relationships between sounds and letters are usually predictable. For example, the letter p usually makes a /p/ sound (the

convention /p/ is used to represent the sound of the letter p) whereas the letter c can make a /s/ sound as in city or a /k/ sound as in cat. Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate individual sounds, called phonemes, in spoken words (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2006). For example, the first sound in the word hat is /h/. Changing the first sound or phoneme from /h/ to /p/ will change the word from hat to pat and thus change the meaning of the word as well. Children who have been read to have frequently heard the sounds in spoken words linked to the printed words and letters, and this has helped them understand the alphabetic principle and gain phonemic awareness. Adams (1990) showed that children with difficulty learning to read have problems with letter recognition and phonemic awareness.

Therefore, a demonstration that incorporates the instruction of foundational literacy skills into a critical literacy lesson is presented below to show how to teach emergent literacy learners the alphabetic principle and phonemic awareness. The demonstration is an extension of the critical literacy lesson based on *Piggybook* presented previously. The teacher can use a big book edition of *Piggybook* to do a read-aloud to the children sitting in a semicircle on the floor. After a page is read, the children are asked to find the letter p in the words from the book. For example, a child may come up in front of the book and point to the p in Piggott, and another child may point to the p in Patrick. Then the teacher can ask the entire class, “Which letter in Piggott makes it say /p/?” Wait for the children to respond, “p.” The teacher follows up with another question, “Which letter in Patrick makes it say /p/?” The children should respond, “p.” The teacher reiterates, “The letter p says /p/,” emphasizing the /p/ sound when saying “Piggott.” Then the children say “Piggott” over and over again, stressing the /p/. The teacher can show the children a large “pig” cut out of construction paper with “Piggott” and “Patrick” printed on the paper pig. The children are invited to find some other p words in the book or in the classroom for the teacher to write on the paper pig. The teacher, for example, writes down the following words on the paper pig with the letter p underlined: pig, pigsty, up, carpet, paper, and help. The paper pig with the words on it can be tacked to the wall for future reference and for the addition of new p words.

The above example shows that after the students have explored the critical literacy lesson, the teacher can pick out certain words from the picture book, *Piggybook* in this case, to teach reading and writing based on these words. In this way, both critical literacy and foundational literacy skills are taught.

CONCLUSION

Though critical literacy has been intensively researched and become widely known in academia, it does not seem to take root in the classroom. Lewison et al. (2002) found that “teachers have read a little and maybe attended a conference session, but they readily admit they don’t know much about what critical literacy is or what it means for them as teachers” (p. 382). It is not surprising that emergent literacy learners are not thought of as ready to learn critical literacy. This myth, however, is debunked by ample research in the critical literacy literature. This paper shows that young children can be taught critical literacy through proper scaffolding, including the use of children’s picture books and alternative forms of literacy such as speaking, drawing, and drama. This paper also shows that foundational literacy skills are important and can be incorporated into a critical literacy lesson. As a result, the emergent literacy learners can learn both critical literacy and foundational literacy skills simultaneously without sacrificing one for the other. In this way, teachers teach not only to the standards, but beyond them to help emergent literacy learners think critically about the texts they read.

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