HABERMASIAN CRITERIA FOR CRITICAL LITERACY: EXAMPLES OF CRITICAL TEXT ANALYSIS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the connection between Jurgen Habermas's theory of communicative action and critical literacy. The term "literacy" in critical literacy is multiple in nature and encompasses print and non-print texts. Before the texts are analyzed critically, one has to understand them. And to understand the texts is to examine their underlying validity claims. This paper proposes that Habermas's criteria for evaluating validity claims in communicative action can be appropriated to analyze the texts in critical literacy. Examples of critical text analysis based on Habermas's criteria as well as their implications for reading assessment will be discussed.

Keywords: critical literacy, critical theory, literacy education, critical text analysis

INTRODUCTION

Critical literacy has been researched quite intensively in the past few decades. It is tied closely to Paulo Freire's (1984) pedagogy of the oppressed, which stresses the importance of human agency, empowerment, and liberation in literacy education. The literature about critical literacy has also expanded from the theoretical level to include an increasing number of practitioner-authored accounts of their critical literacy practices with literacy learners (Christensen, 2000; Heffernan & Lewison, 2000). The proliferation of theoretical discussions about critical literacy has broadened the scope of its connection to other disciplines such as sociology and philosophy. Meanwhile, the practitioner narratives have shown how critical literacy can be enacted in classrooms through student-centered, in-

quiry-based curricular units such as invitations (Van Sluys, 2005). While there are a plethora of theoretical and practical accounts of critical literacy, a discourse on the criteria for critical literacy is still scanty in the literature. There is little theoretical discussion on the criteria used to investigate unequal power relations and social/cultural ideologies in order to justify action taken on behalf of the underprivileged.

Therefore, this paper is concerned mainly with the exploration of criteria to ground critical literacy. It begins with a discussion of the origin and development of critical literacy. Then the criteria set forth by Jurgen Habermas (1984, 1987) in his theory of communicative action are argued to be viable grounds for evaluating claims in critical literacy. Examples of how to use the criteria to evaluate texts and their implications for reading assessment are presented at the end of this paper.

CRITICAL LITERACY

Critical literacy has its roots in the work of Paulo Freire. Freire is one of the most influential scholars/practitioners that has contributed to the development and advancement of critical literacy. In his pedagogy of the oppressed, Freire (1984) proposes that literacy education embodied in reflection and action is meant to empower the underprivileged through a dialogical process. He argues that educators should teach students to read both the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Freire's pedagogy has not only resulted in a revolutionary impact on the people, especially the working class, of his native country (Brazil), but also changed the conception of literacy education in the world.

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). Hence, 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). Literacy education perceived from this critical slant is no longer merely the instruction of literate techniques such as reading and writing. 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.

Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) reviewed a range of definitions of critical literacy that appeared in the research and professional literature for a span of three decades and synthesized them into four dimensions: (a) disrupting the com-

monplace, (b) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (c) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (d) 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 take for granted 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, Leland, & Harste, 2008, p. 8). 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) suggest 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 the issues 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 unequal power relations, redefine them, and take action to transform the status quo of the underprivileged. While each of the four dimensions has its own focus, Lewison et al. (2002) argue that they are actually intertwined. For example, action can be hardly taken without first disrupting and recognizing the biased norm.

Critical literacy has broadened our conception of literacy education and switched our focus from skill-based to inquiry-oriented instruction. Literacy learners are expected to be not only well-versed in basic literacy skills, but also sensitive to the implicit messages written into texts. However, there remains an important question to ask about critical literacy: what criteria do we use to evaluate claims we make and to justify action we take in critical literacy? Specifically, what criteria are there to tell what is true or false, truthful or untruthful, right or wrong? It is at this juncture that Jurgen Habermas's criteria used to validate validity claims in his theory of communicative action can be appropriated to supplement what is lacking in the literature of critical literacy.

THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

Jurgen Habermas is a German sociologist and philosopher in the tradition of critical theory. His theory of communicative action (TCA) steps beyond the scene of a lone, passive observer and replaces it with that of two or more sentient subjects communicating with each other. TCA is an action-based dialogical paradigm. The subjects in TCA assume a performative role in communicative action oriented toward understanding (Habermas, 1984). They are actors who commu-

nicate with other subjects and whose being requires the internalization of other subject positions.

TCA is the core of Habermas's social theory which expands to include a theory of the social system and historical change, a theory of the ontogenesis and phylogenesis of symbolic consciousness and much more. It is a very broad social theory integrated through the concept of communicative action. It is not my intention to review Habermas's theory in detail in this paper. To gain a thorough discussion of Habermas's theory, readers are encouraged to read his two-volume work *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984, 1987). What will be presented below is centered on the concepts of validity claims and criteria used to validate them. These concepts are singled out for discussion as they form the foundation of Habermas's theory and connect closely to the critical text analysis in critical literacy that will be presented later in this paper.

Validity Claims and Criteria

Instead of "truth," Habermas uses "validity" to emphasize that truth should not be perceived monologically, but contested and validated dialogically or communicatively. A claim made in communicative action is a claim to validity, and Habermas argues that every meaningful act carries validity claims. A validity claim, according to Habermas (1984), is equivalent to "the assertion that the conditions for the validity of an utterance are fulfilled" (p. 38). In other words, a validity claim is an assertion made by an actor that his/her utterance is of "truth, truthfulness, and rightness" (Habermas, 1998, p. 24). However, the actor's assertion or validity claim can be accepted, refuted, or abstained from, depending on the extent to which the interlocutor is convinced.

The question is how the actors determine whether the validity claims are true, truthful (sincere), and right. That is, what are the criteria for evaluating the claims? Habermas suggests that the claims made in each meaningful act can be divided into three categories and that each category has its own criterion for validating the claims. The three categories, or what Habermas calls three formal-pragmatic worlds, consist of objective, subjective, and normative claims:

> The objective world (as the totality of all entities about which true statements are possible); the social [normative] world (as the totality of all legitimately regulated interpersonal relations); [and] the subjective world (as the totality of the experiences of the speaker to which he has privileged access). (Habermas, 1984, p. 100)

To the objective claims there is multiple access, whereas there is only privileged access to the subjective claims. Therefore, the criteria for the objective and the subjective claims are multiple access and privilege access respectively. The criterion for the normative claims is shared interests. Carspecken (1996, 2003) expands Habermas's concept of normative claims to include value claims and call

them normative-evaluative claims. Values, according to Carspecken (1996), are "views of what is good, bad, right, and wrong" (p. 76). Therefore, they are related to norms. In addition, he argues that position-taking is involved in understanding claims made in the normative-evaluative realm. For example, to know whether it is appropriate to fall asleep at a meeting is to take the position of other people at the meeting and try to understand how they see it from their perspective. In this paper, the term normative-evaluative claims will be used as it is broader in scope and aligned with Habermas's concept of normative claims.

An Example

Now let us look at an example to see how the validity claims and criteria play out in communicative action. Suppose we are colleagues at a university. I went to your office and asked, "Are you going to the AERA (American Educational Research Association) conference in April?" Turning sideways and seeing me, you replied, "Oh! I didn't know it was in April." Your response was a question about the objective claim I made. You were not sure whether the conference was in April. Since the criterion for evaluating an objective claim is multiple access, we could ask another colleague or check the date out on the AERA website. In other words, the answer could be found from multiple objectively accessible sources.

To the same question, you might respond, "No, I prefer a smaller local conference." This time you made a subjective claim in response to the question I asked. What was thematized in your response was no longer whether the conference was in April, but your personal preference about which conference to go to. The criterion for evaluating a subjective claim is privileged access. Therefore, you are the only person that ultimately knows whether the subjective claim you made was truthful, that is, whether you preferred a smaller local conference.

Another possible response from you might be, "Should I go to AERA?" In this case, a normative-evaluative claim was made in your response (i.e., an assertion that something is right or wrong, good or bad, appropriate or inappropriate) which questioned the value of going to the AERA conference. The criterion for evaluating a normative-evaluative claim is shared interests, and you did not think it met your interest to go to the conference.

The above three types of scenarios can certainly happen in reality. They show that once disagreement or misunderstanding occurs, one or more validity claims are foregrounded and contested between actors. If our goal is to reach understanding, we should be ready to give reasons to support our validity claims. I will defend my argument if you disagree, or consent to your counter-argument if your reason makes more sense to me. This back-and-forth communicative action presupposes the categorical difference among validity claims (i.e., objective, subjective, and normative-evaluative claims) in order for the actor to tell which type

of claim the other party foregrounds and challenges. The criteria set forth for the validity claims also have to be abided by for reasons to be assessed.

CRITICAL TEXT ANALYSIS

The term "literacy" in critical literacy is multiple in nature. For example, it encompasses print and non-print texts conceived and practiced within social contexts where values, beliefs, and assumptions are formulated. One has to understand the text before he/she can analyze it critically. And to understand the text is to examine whether its claims are valid. Therefore, the validity claims and criteria used in communicative action provide a viable framework for critical literacy to evaluate its validity claims. In what follows, I will demonstrate how to apply Habermasian criteria in critical text analysis by examining two advertisements and one comment on a reading assessment called Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS).

ADVERTISEMENT A

AA Fitness Center has three different strength training areas, including one of the largest free weight rooms in the city. Despite its reputation of being a "guy" or "jock" thing, strength training is important for everyone. With a regular strength training program, you can reduce your body fat, increase your lean muscle mass, and burn calories more efficiently.

Analysis

An advertisement like this is not uncommon in our daily lives. Actually, it is seen so often that we become used to it. Yet there are many claims, legitimate or not, made in this advertisement. In what follows, the advertisement is dissected into three statements for the ease of analysis.

1. AA Fitness Center has three different strength training areas, including one of the largest free weight rooms in the city.

This statement can be further divided into two parts: (a) AA Fitness Center has three different strength training areas, and (b) it has one of the largest free weight rooms in the city. The first part consists of an objective claim as the strength training areas refer to objects that can be observed and counted repeatedly. The principle of multiple access is the criterion used to evaluate the claim. If anyone disagrees with the claim, he/she can observe and count whether there are three strength training areas at AA Fitness Center.

Similarly, the second part of the statement is also a claim made in the objective realm as the free weight room is an object open to multiple obser-

vations and measurements. However, there may be a disagreement about the definition of "largest." Some people think that it depends on how big the room is; others look at how much equipment it has; still others think that the number of trainers and members should be taken into consideration. Nevertheless, all of the aforementioned aspects have one thing in common: they are all in the objective realm and can be determined through multiple observation and counting procedures. Therefore, if a consensus is reached on what aspects should be considered in determining the size of a free weight room, then this claim becomes verifiable. Again, multiple access is the principle in play in this case because many people can be invited to evaluate if AA Fitness Center has one of the largest free weight rooms in the city by looking at the aspects agreed upon.

2. Despite its reputation of being a "guy" or "jock" thing, strength training is important for everyone.

Most people tend to regard statements like this as "subjective," by which they mean "just opinion." They think that whether strength training is important or not varies from one person to another. However, the core principle in determining the validity of this statement is not privileged access. Whether strength training is, in fact, important is subject to debate regardless of whether I or anyone else personally believes it important or not.

Instead, a normative-evaluative claim is thematized in this statement: strength training should be important for everyone, but not for guys and jocks only. Though not spelled out, a "should" claim is implied in this statement. A normative-evaluative claim is contested by finding a consensus between the parties in dispute and then arguing from it toward the norm or value position in disagreement. For example, a possible consensus between AA Fitness Center and its prospective customers in this case can be that health is important for everyone. Based on this consensus, AA Fitness Center can then move on to argue that strength training leads to good health and thus should be important for everyone. Therefore, the principle of shared interests is in play.

3. With a regular strength training program, you can reduce your body fat, increase your lean muscle mass, and burn calories more efficiently.

A claim foregrounded in this last statement is made in the objective realm where multiple access is used as the criterion. It is an objective claim in that body fat, lean muscle mass, and calories refer to objectively accessible concepts that can be determined through multiple observations and measurements. There may be a disagreement about the term "regular." However, it is still a concept in the objective realm that is subject to the principle of multiple access. In other words, once a consensus is reached

on the definition of "regular," two hours a day and three days a week for example, then it can be observed and measured repeatedly.

ADVERTISEMENT B

At BB Cleaning Service, we are committed to cleaning your house like it was our own. We take the time to understand all your needs, work with your budget, and customize an expert cleaning service that you'll be completely satisfied with every time guaranteed.

Analysis

The analysis of advertisement B is presented not only to reiterate some of the analytical skills discussed above, but also to demonstrate how a subjective claim, which was not elaborated in the previous analysis, is identified and evaluated.

1. At BB Cleaning Service, we are committed to cleaning your house like it was our own.

A major claim made in this statement is concerned with an objectively accessible fact that the workers at BB Cleaning Service will clean your house the way they clean their own. Whether this claim is true or false can be verified through multiple observations. If anyone disagrees with the claim, he/she can observe how the workers at BB Cleaning Service clean your house and their own house and see if they do both jobs equally well. Since it is an objective claim, the core principle here is multiple access.

2. We take the time to understand all your needs, work with your budget, and customize an expert cleaning service that you'll be completely satisfied with every time guaranteed.

This statement consists of several claims. Instead of discussing them one by one, I will focus on the subjective claim: … that you'll be completely satisfied with every time guaranteed. This is a subjective claim in that only you know whether you are completely satisfied with the service. For BB Cleaning Service to defend this claim against any counterclaims, it can point out consistent, objectively accessible modes of behavior exhibited. And these modes of behavior have to be culturally defined as indications of "satisfaction." For example, BB Cleaning Service can argue that you are satisfied with its service because you have been a long-time customer and have never switched to other cleaning companies. This behavior is an indication of your satisfaction with its service that is objectively observable. However, people can still dispute BB Cleaning Service's claim by saying something like: "You are just acting as if you were satisfied." They

can argue that you might not be completely satisfied, yet BB Cleaning Service is the only cleaning company in town. Or its service is not so good, but its price is fairly low.

Therefore, "satisfaction" cannot be reduced to the objectively observable behavior. The existence of a state of "satisfaction" differs in kind from the existence of an object such as a free weight room. The latter kind of existence is structured by the principle of multiple access, but the former is structured differently: repeated observations of objectively accessible indicators can never absolutely settle the question of whether you are satisfied. Only you have privileged access to your subjective state.

A Comment on DIBELS

"I have decided to join that group of scholars and teachers and parents who are convinced that DIBELS is the worst thing to happen to the teaching of reading since the development of flash cards" (Pearson, 2006, p. v).

What Is DIBELS?

DIBELS stands for Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills. It is a standardized reading assessment created for elementary school students, especially kindergarten through 6th grade. It evaluates five areas of reading, i.e., phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, accuracy and fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, identified by the National Reading Panel (University of Oregon, 2014). Students are allowed only one minute to finish each section of the test except for Daze (a reading comprehension section) for which three minutes are given. The score depend primarily on how fast and accurately the test is completed.

Analysis

A normative-evaluative claim, among other claims, is foregrounded in the above comment that …DIBELS is the worst thing to happen to the teaching of reading…. This is a claim made in the normative-evaluative domain because it is concerned with what is right or wrong, good or bad, appropriate or inappropriate. The criterion for evaluating this claim is shared interests. Whether DIBELS is the worst assessment is subject to contestation among the stakeholders that include scholars, teachers, and parents as mentioned above. The consensus reached based on their shared interests represents their normative-evaluative view on DIBELS. Their consensus, of course, can be further contested if more stakeholders, such as school administrators and students, are included in the discussion. While this process may be continuous, the criterion used for adjudicating the claim stays unchanged. It is based on the shared interests of the contestants that the claim is validated.

In reality, standardized tests, like DIBELS, have been criticized for their limitations (e.g., see Callahan, 2004; Nichols & Berliner, 2007). This is especially true if the tests are examined from the Habermasian perspective discussed previously. Hence, the following section is devoted to a discussion of the implications of Habermas's framework for reading assessment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR READING ASSESSMENT

The Habermasian framework and its relationship to the critical text analysis presented above help us look at reading, especially reading in critical literacy, and reading assessment in a new light. Instead of reading for information, we read to understand and evaluate validity claims embedded in the text. In this section, the discussion is concerned with how reading assessment is viewed when it is relocated within the Habermasian framework. While there are a number of ways to approach this issue, I will focus on how questions for reading assessment can be categorized according to the criteria suggested by Habermas for evaluating validity claims. Recall that there are three kinds of validity claims that are evaluated by their respective criteria. Similarly, the questions for reading assessment can be divided into three categories, and the answers to them are assessed differently.

Objective Questions

Objective questions are questions in the objective realm that presuppose the fact that the answers to these questions can be assessed through the principle of multiple access. For example, objective questions regarding the story of *The Three Little Pig*s (Seibett, 2002) can be: "How many pigs are there in the story?" and "What is the second pig's house made of?" These two questions share the commonality that their answers can be determined through repeated observation and counting procedures. Questions like these can be formulated in the forms of true-or-false, multiple-choice, and filling-in-blank questions. The answers can be accessed objectively unless modifiers are involved. For example, consider the question, "Is there a big tree in front of the first pig's house?" The modifier "big" has to be defined clearly in terms of its height or age, or compared to the pig's house or the trees nearby. In this case, the question should be designed in a way that such explanations are allowed in the answer.

Normative-Evaluative Questions

Normative-evaluative questions are built on the principle of shared interests. The answer to this kind of question is formulated by finding a shared value or interest between disputants as a basis and then working toward a value or interest in dispute in an attempt to reach a consensus. A normative-evaluative question about *The Three Little Pigs* can be: "Should the wolf eat the pigs?" To answer it

affirmatively, one has to first find a value or interest shared by most people, including a possible antagonist. For example, one can argue that everyone has to eat to survive. If this claim is agreed upon, then he/she can proceed to claim that the wolf has to eat the pigs to survive.

On the contrary, if a negative answer is sought, one still has to approach the argument by first finding a value or interest shared by most people. In this case, one can argue that no lives should be killed. Suppose this position is shared by his/her disputant, then the proposition that the wolf should not eat the pigs can be presented. No matter which way the question is approached, the principle of shared interests structures the process of argumentation. Due to the fact that a back-and-forth contestation is required to answer a normative-evaluative question, its answer should be presented in an essay format. Alternatively, an open discussion or debate is also a good choice. However, true-or-false, multiple-choice, and filling-in-blank questions are not suitable as they do not allow space for discussion.

Subjective Questions

Subjective questions are structured in the subjective realm where the principle of privileged access is used to assess the validity of the answers to such questions. A subjective question related to *The Three Little Pigs* can be stated: "Does the wolf like to eat the pigs?" One can argue that the wolf does because he chases them from house to house, trying to eat them. The argument is based on an observation of an objectively accessible pattern of behavior shown by the wolf. Although the outward behavior of the wolf is an indicator of what he might think about the pigs, we actually do not know the answer for sure. Only the wolf himself knows whether he likes to eat the pigs or not. Even if he ate the pigs, it did not necessarily mean that he liked them. It might be simply because there was no other prey nearby while he was so hungry and could not wait. Unless the subjective state of the character in question is disclosed clearly, the answer is subject to multiple speculations and interpretations. Therefore, subjective questions should be structured in ways to allow an open discussion or debate. Again, true-or-false, multiple-choice, and filling-in-blank questions are not appropriate in this case.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, Habermas's framework has been shown to supplement critical literacy through examples of critical text analysis and their implications for reading assessment. The analysis demonstrates that validity claims in the text can be identified and evaluated by the criteria suggested by Habermas, depending on the types of claims they fall into. Three types of claims, i.e., objective, subjective, and normative-evaluative claims, are discussed in relation to their criteria which are

multiple access, privileged access, and shared interests respectively. The analysis above also makes explicit the limitations of standardized testing that is used in many kinds of reading assessment. It shows that reading comprehension should be assessed differently, depending on which types of questions are asked.

In fact, the applicability of Habermas's framework is much broader in scope. It can be appropriated to identify and evaluate validity claims embedded in various forms of texts and speech acts in communicative action. Illegitimate claims, such as unequal power relations and social/cultural ideologies, are subject to validation through the criteria put forth by Habermas. This paper is hoped to promote more conversations about the applicability of communicative criteria not only in critical literacy but also in other disciplines.

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