Critical Literacy: The Four Resources Model & (Teaching) Reading

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Reading, from a critical literacy perspective, requires that teachers and learners make meaning beyond the text: from decoding, to comprehension, to critical language awareness. Where decoding is related to the technical skills of reading (linking sounds to letters and words), comprehension is related to cognition (being able to interpret the meanings available in texts). Critical language awareness (Janks, 1993; Fairclough, 2014) further requires understanding texts and language use as socio-culturally situated and as having both a social function and a social impact (Vasquez, Janks & Comber, 2019; Fairclough, 2001).

But, what might that mean for practice? Luke & Freebody’s (1999) Four Resources model outlines a framework for reading and the teaching of reading from a critical literacy perspective. Here, reading is viewed as being comprised of four main roles that a reader can and should take up:

1. **Text decoder**
   In this role, the reader is interested in how texts are built using sounds, letters, words, phrases, sentence types, paragraphing structures and so on. It is ‘code-breaking’ that involves accessing the text itself, before meaning can be made.

2. **Text participant**
   In participating with the text, the reader uses this role to make meaning from the codes of the text itself. Therefore, readers working at this level are interested in two main things: interpreting the text using their own prior knowledge, and accessing the intended meanings of texts by considering what meanings the author/text designer was trying to convey.

3. **Text user**
   As a text user, the reader must consider the social function(s) of the text being analysed. This is fundamentally connected to genre: the purpose, intended audience, form/structure, and function of texts. Genres emerge from ‘traditions of representations’ that make assumptions about what intended readers should know, how they think, and what they believe. Genre, and whether or not a text adheres to the rules of that genre, contribute toward whether or not a reader might find it convincing.

4. **Text analyst**
   Also known as the ‘critical turn’, the text analyst is interested in how the components of the text, the meanings available, and the social function of the text all relate to issues of power, identity, access, diversity and social impact. Here, the reader asks questions about who is included or excluded? Whose interests are served by the text? How might this text be used to reproduce or challenge certain social norms?

These are not linear or hierarchical ‘steps’ but represent the range of questions that can be raised when reading. Often, as is illustrated in the example text below, the codes in texts (i.e. word choice) can be critically analysed to unpack the assumptions that they represent. Or, the meanings available in a text suggest what values that author may or may not have held (or what was considered ‘normal’ when the author constructed the text). Therefore, it becomes useful to consider how the model can be used to engage with reading across ‘roles’ or ‘resources’ rather than trying to fit too neatly within the model itself.
The following diagram, adapted from Luke & Freebody’s (1999) Four Resources model, might be useful for teachers to use when thinking about the kinds of questions and activities that they use for teaching reading at secondary level:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text Decoder</th>
<th>Text Participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• What words or phrases stand out? What vocabulary or cultural knowledge is needed to access or decode the text?</td>
<td>• What initial meanings does the text elicit, as a whole or in parts?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How easy is it to read the text?</td>
<td>• Are there differences between connotative and denotative meanings?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What is most/least recognisable? To whom?</td>
<td>• What are the author’s intended meanings? How does this compare to the received meanings by the reader?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What grammar is needed to access or decode the text?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
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<th>Text Analyst</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• What genre is the text? How do you know?</td>
<td>• What assumptions are being made about the audience and what they know?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What are the conventions used?</td>
<td>• Who/what is included or excluded? Who/what is (mis)represented?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What effect does genre have on the way the text has been constructed?</td>
<td>• Whose perspective does this text represent? How do you know?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Who is the intended audience?</td>
<td>• Whose interests are served?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Where would you find this text? What would this text be used for?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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Figure 1: Luke & Freebody’s (1999) The Four Resources Model with questions for teachers

This model can be reframed by highlighting the main interest of each role:

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Figure 2: Reframing the Four Resources Model (adapted from Luke & Freebody, 1999)

By adapting the questions above, it becomes possible to engage learners as critical readers. And, by exploring the social issues that these texts represent in relation to the lived experiences of those
learners, critical reading becomes a practice of **critical literacy**. Here, critical literacy refers to ways of reading the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 2005) by seeing how meaning and experience, what Freire calls word-and-action, are inextricably linked. Reading in the classroom must connect to the lives of learners (Janks, 2014) and the communities they come from.

Look at the activities below and consider how the questions draw on Luke & Freebody’s (1999) model. Using Liz Lochhead’s poem, *Bairnsang*, I have identified ‘linguistic diversity’ as the social issue most prominent (is it possible to see gender, schooling, policing or socialisation, or even youth identity as possible social issues that learners might see in the poem?) The questions I have posed are colour-coded to match Figure 2 in this blog post. Further on, I also recommend possible activities that could contribute to reading this poem by exploring different social actions that learners could take as a result of reading Bairnsang – and with the aim of mobilising learners into the transformative practice that critical literacy yearns for.

Similar resources can be found in Janks and colleague’s (2013) *Doing Critical Literacy: Texts & Activities for Students & Teachers*. 
READING POWER: Linguistic Diversity

Read the following poem by Liz Lochhead (2003) and, in groups, discuss what you think it is about: What is the main idea or intention? Talk about what parts of the poem interest you most/least and whether or not you liked it.

KIDSPOEM/BAIRNSANGS
By Liz Lochhead (2003)
1 it wis January
2 and a gey dreich day
3 the first day Ah went to the school
4 so my Mum happed me up in ma
5 good navy-blue napp coat wi the rid tartan hood
6 birled a scarf aroon ma neck
7 pu’ed oan ma pixie an’ my pawkies
8 it wis that bitter
9 said noo ye'll no starve
10 gie’d me a wee kiss and a kid-oan skelp oan the bum
11 and sent me aff across the playground
12 tae the place Ah’d learn to say
13 it was January
14 and a really dismal day
15 the first day I went to school
16 so my mother wrapped me up in my
17 best navy-blue top coat with the red tartan hood,
18 twirled a scarf around my neck,
19 pulled on my bobble-hat and mittens
20 it was so bitterly cold
21 said now you won’t freeze to death
22 gave me a little kiss and a pretend slap on the bottom
23 to the place I’d learn to forget to say
24 it wis January
25 and a gey dreich day
26 the first day Ah went to the school
27 so my Mum happed me up in ma
28 good navy-blue napp coat wi the rid tartan hood,
29 birled a scarf aroon ma neck,
30 pu’ed oan ma pixie an’ ma pawkies
31 it wis that bitter.

Source: http://www.ayecan.com/read_scots/liz_lochhead.html

Why do you think Lochhead has chosen to begin the poem in Scots language?

Can you name the variety of Scots language? Explain. Can you name the variety of English being used? Explain.

Why do you think Lochhead chose to place these two languages alongside each other?

Have you ever had to change what languages you use and/or how you use language? Why?
> When?
> Where?
> With whom?

Find the examples of alliteration and assonance in the poem.

Which language are these devices associated with? In what way might this be significant?

What comment is the poet making about how language (and English) are valued in schools?

What variety of English does the poet use in the final stanza? Does this reinforce or contradict the main message of the poem?

Rewrite the final stanza so that it better reinforces the poet’s intentions.

Why do you think Lochhead chose to use the poem genre?

How might the message differ if Lochhead chose to write a media report?
A text-based approach to critical literacy requires that texts serve as objects of analysis in the classroom, as well as springboards for socio-cultural action. Therefore, while it is important to break down the text by asking a range of questions from across the four resources model (Luke & Freebody, 1999), it is also important to consider how the text might enable a range of classroom activities.

Consider how the following activities might be used in the critical literacy classroom to engage learners with issues of linguistic diversity:

**Activity 1 – Redesign**

Liz Lochhead’s poem, *Bairnsang*, can be read as an experience of how schools can be places where different languages and language varieties are policed. On one hand, a variety of Scots language is used to represent the speaker’s identity at home, and this is ‘replaced’ by English when they go to school. On the other hand, there are many varieties of English and the poet selects Standard English to represent the language valued most by schools and education.

- In groups, discuss whether or not you and your peers have ever shared this experience.
- List examples of words and phrases that you think you CANNOT use in your English classroom. These words and phrases can be in English (formal/informal), slang, or any other language you might have access to. Avoid using swear words. For example, you might speak to your teacher in a more formal way than you would speak with your friends.
  - Highlight the words you might be able to use outside of your English classroom, but still at school. Explain why this might be.
  - What are the conditions of use? That is, who can you use these words with? When? Where? Why?
  - Create a second list wherein you translate the words and phrases from the first list into Standard English. Do any of the words or phrases sound more ‘socially acceptable’? Why/why not?

**Activity 2 – Classroom Language Policy**

As a class, or in groups, discuss the following questions:

1. English is considered a language of power. Do you agree? Why/why not?
2. What do you think this means for other languages?
3. Are some versions/varieties of English more powerful than others?
4. Do you think language is related to identity? In what ways?

Now consider how language should be used in your classroom and whose languages count as valuable:

- Take a survey: What languages and language varieties are used by the students in your class? In your school?
- Write a language policy for your classroom that is inclusive and affirming of diversity, taking into consideration:
  - What languages can be used in the classroom?
  - When can/should different languages or language varieties be used? For what purpose(s)? Why?
  - How can different languages be used to help you understand the Standard English you need in order to complete your exams?
Does your school have a language policy? What does it say and how does it compare to the policy you have designed for your English classroom?

**Activity 3 – Linguistic Prejudice**

Find examples of texts that represent:

1. How people in your school, community, region, country experience linguistic prejudice.
2. How people in your school, community, region, country give power to their linguistic diversity.

These texts could include print or online advertisements, posters, street art, poems, prose, extracts from literature, music and music videos, social media posts, and so on.

In a group, select ONE text and create a poster in which you:

1. Annotate the text to show how it works.
   Whose identities are being represented?
   How do the features of the text relate to the message the text is trying to convey?
   How does the text reproduce or challenge norms related to linguistic prejudice?
2. Create a title for your poster that highlights the social issue you have identified.
3. Find a space in your classroom or school to display the poster.

Think carefully about your audience and how to make the ideas in your poster (i.e. your analysis) easy to understand.

**REFERENCES**


BIO:

Navan N. Govender is a Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland, United Kingdom. He holds a Bachelor of Education degree (specialising in secondary English teaching), and Bachelor of Arts with Honours in Applied English Language Studies, and a PhD in Applied Language & Literacy Education in the field of critical literacy. His PhD investigated how critical literacy could be used to engage student teachers with issues related to sex, gender and sexual diversity in South Africa. Currently, he is working to understand critical literacy’s role in Scottish English language and literacy education as well as in initial teacher education.

Specific fields of study include: literacy studies; critical literacies; multiliteracies, multimodalities and visual literacies; transmodality; representation, gender and sexual diversity; critical discourse analysis; sociolinguistics; social semiotics; and social justice education.

Navan teaches on the Professional Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) programme, offering classes in critical literacies and multimodalities as well as a range of English methodology classes for secondary schooling educators.