

# CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION AND LITERACIES: DISCUSSING KEY CONCEPTS

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to address some keys concepts regarding critical frameworks as far as literacies and language education are concerned. In order to meet such a goal, different approaches to what can be understood as critical will be presented and discussed. The theoretical framework which support discussions will rely on a varied group of scholars, such as Norton and Toohey (2001), Morgan (2004), Freire (2005), Luke (2013, 2014), Mills (2016), Menezes de Souza (2011), Monte Mór (2015), Rocha and Maciel (2015), among others. It is expected that the discussions presented may add to the knowledge already built in the area and to the debate about critical literacy and critical linguistic education.

**Keywords:** critical language education, critical literacies, critical pedagogy.

## Introduction

One of the main goals in language policies and in teacher education and discourse fields is, in general, to promote critical citizenship as well as to develop critical scholarship within the contemporary world (ROCHA; MACIEL, 2015; MONTE MÓR; MORGAN, 2014). But what does it mean to be critical? What are the main approaches to a critical education? Why have scholars long investigated this issue in

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education and language teaching and learning? Bearing these questions in mind, we believe that it is still worthwhile to debate them since language views can have effects upon educational policies and practices and consequently have strong impact on citizens' lives.

Monte Mór (2015) highlights the fact that critical perspectives have been approached for a few decades but they have not been aligned with the changes of our present times since they fail to keep pace with the impacts of globalization and with the new epistemologies brought up by the digital turn. Moreover, education and literacies are not neutral practices but are, instead, intensely shaped by dominant ideologies. Morgan (1998, p. 14) also reminds us that “what is or is not a ‘critical’ perspective is very much contingent on time, place, and the particular experiences of students”. In this sense, the implication of revisiting critical approaches to scholarship and practices may be widely necessary. Given this, we present and discuss some key aspects of different views on a critical stance concerning language education and literacies.

### **Critical frameworks on education, language and literacies: a brief overview**

The meanings associated with the concept of *critical* in education and language teaching are varied. In this sense, Monte Mór (2015, p. 33) highlights a wide range of possible understandings and definitions of what being critical may possibly mean when it comes to language education and literacies. In this sense, she has introduced two main aspects: firstly, she associates critical abilities with schooling; secondly, such abilities are more related to a person's critical perception of society without necessarily being the result of schooling.

In other words, Monte Mór (2015) suggests that we could approach the notion of criticality in a more dynamic and complex way. Based on the work of Gikandi (2005), she promotes reflections by distinguish in *criticism* and *critique*. While the notion of criticism is related to experts' critical positions in a variety of fields, including the literary critic, the film critic, the gastronomic critic, among others, the idea of critique, on the other hand, has to do with individuals' social perceptions of life and the world. Based on such philosophical views, Monte Mór (2015, p. 37) proposes a connection

between the social basis of the term critique and the conception of *being critical* as “a social construction”.

In practical terms, in language classes, the concept of *criticism* would usually focus on the development of some aspects that only a few groups of students would have perceptions about. From this perspective, the debates promoted in class would aim at addressing some particular aspects of what might be the subject of discussion, while others would be left aside. Likewise, this approach would generally place the teacher as the main expert.

In its turn, the aspect of *critique* would place both teachers and students in a more horizontal view of power distributions and truth validity towards broader and plural points of view concerning knowledge construction. The concept of critique, according to Monte Mór, can also be expanded based on Ricoeur (1977). The hermeneutic theories developed by Ricoeur (1977) connect the notion of criticality with the idea of *crisis* (*κρίση*) from Greek. In a language class, critical moments or moments of “crises” could occur when the student’s or the teacher’s interpretive hermeneutic *habitus* is interrupted by an unexpected point of view.

As stated by Maciel and Takaki (2015, p. 34),

hermeneutic habitus corresponds to an interpretation practice that assumes language as transparent and able to completely capture the reality. Reality is perceived as objective, totalizing, and measurable. One of the consequences of such reading practice and interpretation and what appears to dominate many contexts of English language teaching, among others, is to make the author’s intention of a certain text or event as a single truth, excluding this way the possibility of learners constructing other truths related from a specific context from which meanings are constantly resignified. This hermeneutic habitus does not allow readers to question the intention of the author and/or the central idea or those facts that are beneath the truth of the text or the event [...] the idea of rupture means to elaborate different interpretations from the historical defined ideas by certain groups of prestige [...] one example of rupture in this habitus is the recognition that the nature of language is malleable, paradoxical, and therefore subject to constant transformations and reinterpretations.

The rupture of hermeneutic *habitus* could happen in a moment of interaction when students come up with different views/perspectives that may break the student's previous assumption. Being open to listening and discussing is a crucial element for the moment of 'crises'. The main important aspect in this perspective is not to promote a deep understanding of a certain analysis but to open space to consider how some positions can change or expand one's point of view. For similar perspectives in the classroom, see Pennycook (2001), Morgan (2011), and Maciel (2014).

Based on Ricoeur, Monte Mór (2015) also draws attention to the *hermeneutic of suspicion* as a critical approach. This concept refers to an exercise of intense and continuous doubt and the consequent act of questioning our views and beliefs. This assumption could foster a critical approach to the ways we build knowledge and engage in meaning making processes. One interpretation concerning this presupposition could be that through the hermeneutic of suspicion, the student/subject would consider that there is a *truth* that has to be reexamined or unveiled. Other authors, such as Vattimo (2007) claims that there is a truth, but every truth is a weak truth; that is, it is contingent and contextual, which means that people from different socio-historical contexts will have different presuppositions. In this sense, the teacher should be sensitive to finding moments to promote ruptures or crises or even, according to Vattimo (2007), in order to weaken the so-called 'universal' truths, in order to pluralize concepts and perspectives.

Some authors, influenced by critical pedagogies, have associated critical approaches to social changes. Norton and Toohey (2004, p. 1), for instance, state that critical approaches to second language teaching are interested in social change". From this perspective, instead of being simply defined as "a means of expression and communication", language can be understood as "a practice that constructs, and is constructed by, the way learners", as individuals, "understand themselves, their social surroundings, their histories, and their possibilities for the future" (NORTON; TOOHEY, 2004, p. 1). According to those authors, since new inequities and intersecting forms of oppression have arisen as intrinsic features of our contemporary and increasingly globalized society, critical pedagogies are utterly necessary to investigate and question the ways in which "social relationships are lived out in

language” and how “ issues of power” are often developed and obscured in “language research and educational practice”.

In most language classes, as Morgan (2004, p. 174) contends, attention paid to the role that language plays in creating and perpetuating inequalities is limited or framed in ways that can be overly abstract and disengaged from everyday lives and communities. As he argues, we need to develop politically engaged language practices that explore and question everyday power relations in order “to criticize the racist and sexist blunders inherent in the stereotypical representations of our cultural *others*”.

Similarly, while supporting a critical framework to language, culture and education, Kubota (2004, p. 40) defends what she calls “critical multiculturalism”. From her point of view, when it comes to critical and multicultural language education, the focus should turn to “demystifying hegemonic knowledge and dismantling a social, racial, and economic hierarchy”. From such a perspective, it is important to recognize that “all individuals are participating in the cultural production of domination and subordination in one way or another” (KUBOTA, 2004, p. 40). As Monte Mór (2015) has pointed out, the hermeneutic exercise of doubt and suspicion can play an important role as far as the breakup with authoritative and dominant discourses and practices are concerned.

### **Critical Pedagogies and Literacies**

Both Critical Pedagogies and Critical Literacies have a similar focus on language education from a more social perspective. The plural forms we have attached to both also connote the rich variety of interdisciplinary perspectives and purposes attributed to these terms. As they are complementary, it is difficult to define them separately based on the minor and often contingent differences discussed by critical scholars (e.g. Crookes, 2013), particularly from a language education point of view. We do not intend to place them in opposition but to consider them as important movements regarding critical approaches in language teaching. We have decided to group the authors as they have addressed either critical pedagogies or critical literacies in their papers.

According to Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008, p. 23), critical pedagogies tend to draw on “social and critical educational theory and cultural studies”, so that there can be examination of school and educational practices “in their historical context” and as a “part of the existing social and political fabric that characterizes dominant society”. This way, as these authors claim, “critical pedagogies can provide teachers and researchers with a better means of understanding the role that schools” - as well as educational practices and every individual that takes part in the educational process – “play within a race-, class-, and gender-divided society” (DUNCAN-ANDRADE; MORRELL, 2008, p. 23). As they further develop their main arguments regarding critical pedagogies, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008, p. 24) state that, although there seems to be no agreement on whom may have originated such an educational philosophy, Paulo Freire, mainly due to his popular book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), can certainly be said to be “an important mentor” to worldwide educators and researchers. Based on the words of many different authors, such as Muspratt et al. (1997), Giroux (1997), and Cervetti et al. (2001), Monte Mór (2015) states that Freire has been widely acknowledged for having founded this critical educational project, more often named Critical Pedagogy.<sup>4</sup>

According to Monte Mór (2015), from a freirean perspective (FREIRE, 1996; 2001), education should be concerned with the development of a critical citizenship. In order to engage critically in social practices, individuals should have to develop a type of literacy which would enable them to detach him/herself from common sense since new inequities and intersecting forms of oppression have arisen as intrinsic features of our contemporary and increasingly globalized society and consequently analyze their views of the world in a more and more profound and rigorous way, becoming more and more able to perceive critically the way he or she exists in society.

As opposed to the concept of education as an act of memorization and information deposit, which aims at preparing the individual to adapt to the market,

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<sup>4</sup>It's interesting to note that Henry Giroux claims to have proposed the term Critical Pedagogy to Paulo Freire as a less challenging alternative to Radical Pedagogy, which was Freire's original term (CROOKES, 2013, p. 77). Though Freire is rightly credited as a founder of this educational movement, other critical antecedents are worth considering (e.g. the work of Dewey, Freinet, the social constructionists, etc.; Crookes, 2013, Ch. 4).

Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008, p 24) reinforce Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy as a "problem posing education for freedom". Having the idea of *praxis* at its core, Critical Pedagogy, as proposed by Freire (2005), focuses on empowering the learners/citizens to question the understanding of reality - perceived as static - and helping them to see education as an important tool to subvert the dominant social order and its values. It is worthwhile to state that these authors are referring to Freire's early theories, developed in the 70's with a strong emphasis on emancipatory views of education (Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Pedagogy of Freedom). His late works, for instance, Pedagogy of Tolerance (FREIRE, 2005), have focused more on ethical issues.

It is worth reiterating that, similar to the notion of Critical Pedagogies, Critical Literacies elude a singular, one-size-fits-all definition. Nor should we counterpose these notions along dichotomous or graduated/evolving terms. Both can be said to have embraced modernist influences at various times, for example, an orientation towards unveiling the "truth" of the text and its intended "false consciousness" (cf. emancipatory modernism, Pennycook, 2001; the early Critical Discourse Analysis work of Fairclough, 1995). Both, as well, have embraced postmodern/post-structural influences (see e.g. Pennycook's 2001 distinction between "emancipatory modernism" and "problematizing practices"; also this point is nicely detailed in Crookes' book, *Critical English Language Teaching in Action*; 2013).

In short, Critical Literacies and Critical Pedagogies can have both modernist and postmodern/post-structural dimensions to them. In fact, a recent trend in Critical Literacy work is to re-engage with (emancipatory) modernist assumptions – in the form of a New Materialism focusing on named/claimed "realities" (LUKE, 2014) and calls for the fostering of English as an International language (EIL) teachers as *organic intellectuals* (cf. Gramsci in Kumaravadivelu, 2016) focused on *acting* in transformative, action-oriented ways that counter the inadvertent passivity that can arise from hyper-reflexive or overly intellectualized approaches to critical language teacher education (see e.g. Morgan, 2014; Norton & Morgan, 2013). Christian Chun's (2017) approach to Critical Pedagogy has been exemplary in this regard, grounded in an



interdisciplinary understanding of media studies, semiotics, politics and neoliberalism, yet applied in practical ways and towards possible solutions to worldly problems.

As Mills (2016, p. 41) points out, “a critical orientation to literacy studies”, which certainly involves language, “begins with a concern about social inequalities, social structures, power and human agency”. For this author, “critical orientations to literacy, whether in relation to new media or old, derive from a variety of schools of thought”, which can range from “the Frankfurt School Institute of Social Research to Paulo Freire’s ideals” (MILLS, 2016, p. 41). Most importantly, according to Mill’s discussions, is the understanding of what is central to critical approaches. From a critical perspective, the main aim is to “disrupt hegemonic discourses in terms of who has access to literacies and literacies practices, and how the inequitable distribution of literacy can be changed” (MILLS, 2016, p. 41).

Critical literacies theories have also to do with new, critical or multiliteracies, under the influence of freirean ideas, particularly in relation to the ideological nature of language, education and literacies. For Monte Mór (2015), the concept of critical literacy assumes that language reveals a political nature and also recognizes the role of the power relations that support language practices and knowledge construction.

When discussing critical literacies, Comber (2003, p. 355) states that such a perspective has to do with a “focus on power and language”. Comber (2003, p. 356) also approaches the notion of critical literacies “as an evolving concept” and highlights the fact that Freire “is typically credited with its genesis”. Based on Luke and Freebody (1997, p. 16), Comber (2003, p. 355) understands that “defining critical literacies”, from a static or rigid perspective, would go “against the grain of those who promote its repertoires of practices which foreground *debate*, *dissonance* and *difference*”. Echoing the words of Kamler and Comber (1996) and Luke (2000), she adds to this idea by stating that the nature of a critical literacy perspective should be “locally contingent, dynamic and subject to revisions in terms of its effects”, always taking into account how such critical literacies “are constituted in different contexts (COMBER, 2003, p. 356).

According to Comber’s views, educational practices developed from a critical literacies approach, “draw on perspectives from feminism, anti-racist education, critical



discourse analysis, multiculturalism, theories of social justice and more” (COMBER, 2003, p. 356). This is an important point, because, from this perspective, critical literacy can “contribute to the production of a discursive space” in language education (COMBER, 2003, p. 360). Consequently, critical literacy can be seen as “an evolving repertoire of practices of analysis and interrogation [...]”, which can be said to involve at least “three principles for action” (COMBER, 2003, p. 356), as follows: i) repositioning students as researchers of language; ii) respecting student resistance and exploring minority culture constructions of literacy and language use; iii) problematizing classroom and public texts (COMBER, 1994).

As far as languages and the work with multimodalities are concerned, Luke (2014, p. 20) reminds us that critical literacy has never simply been a matter of “reading or functional Literacy”. He argues that some questions can be considered of central importance in this field, such as: “What is *truth*? How is it presented and represented, by whom and in whose interests? Who should have access to which images and words, texts and discourses? For what purposes?”.

Luke (2014, p. 20) highlights that at the core of critical literacy projects or practices, lie “struggles over power” and, as such, they are “struggles over the control of information and interpretation, text and discourse”. It means that, as individuals, we engage in social practices which reveal power struggles and that power is always unevenly distributed. This way, we should fight for social, cultural and language equity in education, language and literacies fields.

From Luke’s perspective, critical literacy can be seen as a political orientation which leads each and every critical literacy project to develop strong connections with “the possibility of using new literacies to change relations of power, both people’s everyday social relations and larger geopolitical and economic relations” (LUKE, 2014, p. 28). He also calls our attention to the fact that there is no single or universal model to approach critical literacies and that “models of critical literacy are not exempt” from their ideological nature (LUKE, 2013, p. 141). Based on Muspratt et al. (1998), Luke (2013, p. 141) claims that, rather than being seen as “*true* or *untrue*”, critical literacy models or projects are “normative bids to construct a particular kind of cultural and

political subject”. In his discussions about possible theoretical and practical problems related to critical literacy projects, Luke (2013) strongly defends a more pragmatic approach, so that social change can be achieved. In his own words:

[...] models of critical literacy in and of themselves require a commitment to the existence and accessibility of *truth*, *facts* and *realities* outside of texts in question and, potentially, as having an existence independent of their immediate discursive construction. (LUKE, 2013, p. 146)

As this quote from Luke indicates, since new inequities and intersecting forms of oppression have arisen as intrinsic features of our contemporary and increasingly globalized society, critical literacies require and integrate both political and philosophical awareness of how particular paradigmatic statements regarding knowledge, reality, and methods for their verification, are normative, suggesting possible courses of action while restricting others. In this sense, adopting a critical approach requires a more open, pluralist and democratic view regarding realities and discursive constructions in specific contexts. The notion of critical literacies can be related to other equally important concepts. In order to discuss them, we bring the theorizations developed by Mills (2016), which establish some interconnected terms to conceptualize critical approaches to literacies.

First of all, it is important to point out that Mills (2016, p. 42) strongly suggests that “any serious analysis of literacy studies” is related to questions of *domination* and *privilege*. Based on Apple (1982), Mills (2016, p. 42) states that we should be attentive to the way critical literacies and pedagogies “function in the process of social struggle, whether tied to race, class, gender, belief or other identities”, as well as to the way “they may also legitimate or alternatively critically challenge the continued privileging of dominant groups”.

Another important argument when it comes to critical literacy approaches is *ideology*. For Mills (2016, p. 44), “literacy is often complicit with an ideology of politics and exclusion”. Similarly, Riggins (1997) states that literacy can be “a form of cultural capital that is distributed in selective and uneven ways to different groups”.

Mills' view on ideology is based on Kincheloe's definition (2007) and it can this way be understood as "meaning making that supports forms of domination" (MILLS, 2016, p. 43). Mills (2016, p. 44) also quotes Luke and Freebody (1997) to claim that critical pedagogical work is supposed to deal with textual competence, but also and most importantly, to critically evaluate "how literacies are used and valued, and how they are exchanged for status in different fields or linguistic markets". In other words, when it comes to language education, adopting a critical literacy approach means engaging in a dynamic exercise of questioning – practices and discourses. From this perspective, different views and ideologies can be compared and contested, so that the mainstream social order can be broken.

From a critical literacies perspective, according to Mills (2016), *oppression* is something that also deserves to be looked at closely, mainly because it can work differently in different contexts and situations. The author calls our attention to the fact that the concept of oppression has changed or been expanded in critical theory, reflecting complex intersections of race, gender and sexuality as well as economic exploitation. He explains that its meaning was originally linked to colonial domination and then "extended to interrogate the many forms and sites of oppression", such as "the inadequate educational provision for certain groups (MILLS, 2016, p. 45). Based on West (1992, p. 85), Mills (2016, p. 45) states that one way for us to begin to fight oppression is to educate children so that they can see that "meanings change according to social positions of those who hold and make them".

Finally, another concept of central importance to critical approaches to literacies is *agency*. For Mills (2016), *agency* can be related to our capacity for deep conscientization or awareness of reality and for social transformation, as well. Mills (2016, p. 46) stresses that "becoming literate does not guarantee access to social power". Given this, when applied to literacies, agency begins to "unfold" when we are taught "literacy practices that provide foundation for participation in work, community and family life", and we are likewise "encouraged to challenge" social order and practices (MILLS, 2016, p. 46). This way, we understand that agency can also be perceived from hybrid views, as suggested by Medina (2006). In the core of his hybrid

conception, “the speaker’s agency is neither fully autonomous nor completely heteronomous” (MEDINA, 2006, p. 140). As he sees it, “the emancipation and autonomy of speakers can never be taken as a given” (MEDINA, 2016, p. 139). Therefore, the concept of *agency* should “mark the demise of the traditional notion of responsibility tied to unqualified notions of authorship, autonomy, and sovereignty” so that it could involve “discursive responsiveness to one another”, as well as entail the possibility of transgression and “the responsibility for resignification” (MEDINA, 2006, p. 140-141).

Complementing such ideas, Morgan and Ramanathan (2005) discuss contemporary education and its relation to critical literacy by highlighting the importance of citizenship development. According to those authors, in the contemporary educational field, an important role to be played by critical literacy is the building of a “citizenry that is able to negotiate and critically engage with the numerous texts, modalities, and technologies coming at learners” (MORGAN; RAMANATHAN, 2005, p. 152). For educators, such negotiation is arguably more challenging than ever as they seek to help students engage with the proliferation of hyper-partisan sources of information (i.e., “fake news” in a “post-truth” era) based on emotional and/or xenophobic appeals rather than evidence-based deliberation or rational argumentation. As this new generation of students turns increasingly to social media for information about public life, we should be alert to the ways that the technologies of social media, in turn, monitor our students’ on-line activity, providing them with personalized and narrowly focused forms of information that re-affirm rather than challenge or expand prior beliefs and prejudices.

### **Critical literacies: building final remarks**

Of necessity, Critical Literacies need to be dynamic, agile and versatile in response to evolving challenges and new textual configurations of power, some of which we have outlined above. As Monte Mor and Morgan (2014) have discussed earlier, critical approaches to language teaching and learning can be seen as a kind of

tightrope walking between conformity and critique, potentially and inadvertently reinforcing forms of oppression that are the object of transformative practice. The proliferation of “critical thinking” modules within post-secondary/post-graduate settings is arguably one example when the focus of instruction turns towards instrumental tasks and cognitive processes equally or more conducive to the exigencies of business economics rather than social justice concerns. Another example of tightrope walking relates to the conceptual value of fostering doubt and suspicion in the service of critical awareness and consciencization, areas of critical work in which poststructural, postmodern, and postcolonial questioning of singular “truths” have been particularly beneficial. At the same time, an unintended outcome can be a paralysis and passivity from teachers arising from a loss of epistemic “confidence” from which principled decision-making can be made in classrooms.

Such challenges are reflected in ongoing efforts to engage in the ethical dimensions of Critical Literacies and Pedagogies as well as in the re-engagement with action-oriented literacies addressing material realities that are more immediate to students’ interests and life chances. Certainly, there are many “real” topics worth our consideration at this time, such as the authoritarian backlash against critique: e.g. from the “gag laws” and sanitization of curricula in Brazilian schools to USA President Trump’s ongoing efforts to demonize and discredit media that disagree with or dispute his claims. Critical literacies will indeed need to be versatile and agile in addressing the profound doubt that he and his supporters have engendered around the value of evidence-based information, upon which informed democratic decision-making can be made.

Looking forward, other important points of consideration are the conceptual and material influences that have been under-developed in this paper but may become crucially important in the ongoing development of Critical Literacies and Pedagogies. Again, in recognition of global and local political developments, we can see, repeatedly, the growing appeal to emotion over reason in the ways that citizens are asked to decide their political futures. More curricular attention to the nexus of critical literacies and emotional/affective domains seems essential. As well, and common to both Brazil and

Canada, greater attention to indigenous wisdom and ways of knowing may offer important critical insights into how we work with texts and meaning-making possibilities that have been historically suppressed. Related to indigenous knowledge, as well, is a particular relationship to the environment, one that has been superseded by Eurocentric assumptions in the mastery of nature, and all of the destructive environmental havoc this way of knowing continues to produce. Critical Literacies and Pedagogies informed by eco-linguistics (STIBBE, 2015) or post-humanist epistemologies (APPLEBY & PENNYCOOK, 2017) are positive developments for the future. We look forward to these and other critical innovations for the future.

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## **PERSPECTIVAS CRÍTICAS NA EDUCAÇÃO LINGUÍSTICA E LETRAMENTOS: DISCUTINDO CONCEITOS-CHAVES**

### **RESUMO**

O objetivo deste artigo recai na condução de discussões sobre vertentes críticas nos campos da educação linguística e dos letramentos. Para tanto, são apresentadas diferentes abordagens frente ao que se conceitua como crítico. O aporte teórico que embasa tais reflexões envolve uma gama diversa de autores, entre eles, Norton and Toohey (2001), Morgan (2004), Freire (2005), Luke (2013, 2014), Mills (2016), Menezes de Souza (2011), Monte Mór (2015), Rocha and Maciel (2015). Espera-se que as discussões apresentadas possam acrescentar ao conhecimento já construído na área e ao debate acerca de letramentos críticos e da educação linguística crítica.

**Palavras-chave:** educação linguística crítica, letramentos críticos, pedagogia crítica.

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