CRITICAL LITERACY
FROM A CHINESE PERSPECTIVE

Yang Yang
University of Tasmania

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Address for correspondence:
Yang Yang
School of Education
University of Tasmania
Locked Bag 1307
Tasmania 7250 Australia
Phone + 61 3 6324 3792
Email Admin@lamb.com.ru
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Abstract:
Communication plays a significant role in both teaching and learning. The process of communication connects with transmitter and receiver which is always altered by texts, society and culture. Texts, as a visual language, are often encoded with presuppositions, prejudice, and discrimination. Literacy therefore does not just refer so much to encoding and decoding a text. Literacy should be seen as a meaning-making process in which readers and writers construct and deconstruct various kinds of texts to unearth hidden meanings intentionally embedded by the writers in the text. Critical literacy, as a type of pedagogical guideline thus does not only promote intellectual developments but also contributes to a profound understanding of discourse alternative critical views. Recently there is a tendency to promote critical literacy in countries whose cultures are vastly different from Australia and other Western countries. In the Chinese context, the introduction of critical literacy can be a challenge, culturally and educationally. This paper will include an exercise with a different understanding about literacy of people from a different culture, and examines different issues and problems if critical literacy is introduced in Chinese education system.

Keywords: Comparative and international education
Critical literacy from a Chinese perspective

Yang Yang
Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania

Introduction:

The complexity and variety of the modern information environment has brought a focus on the importance of critical literacy in pedagogy. Nearly five thousand years have passed since text has arisen in our lives. Text types have changed much during the revolution of society, economy and culture. The variety of texts now available includes traditional hand written texts, printed texts or books, newspapers, networked environments incorporating hyperlinks and many other media. In addition, texts also involve a discourse which is constructed of cultural values, beliefs, power relations, or even certain ideologies with regard to human purposes and intentions. Therefore, the identification of discourses that are constructed by various forms of texts is of utmost significance to teaching critical literacy competency.

This essay examines the importance of ‘critical literacy’ in pedagogy by firstly defining the various concepts and then identifying some of the key differences in terms of their respective concepts and contexts. This is followed by a discussion of the critical theory, and the importance of critical literacy in modern education. Critical literacy is not currently practiced to any large degree in China. The reasons why this situation exists is discussed and suggestions as to how critical literacy can be introduced to the contemporary Chinese education discourse are posited.
A review of the literature

Freire and Macedo (1987) defined critical literacy as a dialectical process which involves not only reading the word, but reading the world. “Critical literacy helps teachers and students expand their reasoning, seek out multiple perspectives, and become active thinkers” (McLaughlin & De Voogd, 2004, p. 52). Williams further explained critical literacy as “a counter-hegemonic structure of feeling” (1977, p. 22). Critical literacy is usually traced to critical theory in relation to pedagogy, or critical pedagogy. It is important to note here, before discussing critical literacy, that the critical theory or critical pedagogy is of much value for students in order for them to ask and challenge questions, and engage with their study critically. So far, most critical theories in China have been derived from some famous educationalists from North America, such as Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren and bell hooks.

The term ‘critical theory’ is used as an umbrella term to cover all critical issues that are categorized in many different perspectives. When viewed together, these various perspectives can be considered as a movement, which “constitute[s] only a small minority within the academic community and public school teaching as a whole, but it presents a growing and challenging presence in both arenas” (McLaren, 1989, p. 160). Such an idea reflects a concept that critical pedagogy is a multivariate public sphere.

Different terms have been defined on the basis of critical theory represented at different stages. For example, McLaren (1989) sometimes employed the term “the new sociology of education”, Macedo used the term “liberatory pedagogy”, hooks (1994) used “engaged pedagogy”, and Bartolome (1994) used “humanizing pedagogy”. No matter which term they employ, of most importance is that critical pedagogy is not confined to the abstract and theoretical level. There is a kind of interrelationship between practice and theory in critical social theory, that is to say,
critical pedagogy appears to produce a dialectic empowerment between practice and theory. “Dialectical thinking refers to dialogical thinking conducted in order to test the strengths and weaknesses of opposing points of view” (Beach, 2004, p. 27). Thus, it can be seen that dialectical thought is a process of solving issues by thinking issues over again and again, and it strives to seek contradiction, create new ideas and behaviours from contradictions so as to benefit from the differences in experience and abilities of students. This relationship breaks deeply ingrained epistemology and inspires cognitive change. It further provides an outlet where knowledge can be shared and produced, and provides intrinsic motivation and fosters independent contradiction solving skills in the learners.

The most important contribution to critical theory has been made by Paulo Freire who stressed education and political liberation for literacy campaigns. According to Freire (1970) in his famous book, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, “Education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived by educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression” (Freire, 1970, p. 65). Freire regards traditional educational methods as banking education, where the teacher is like the depositor, putting the particular knowledge in her students’ accounts, and the education process is over. Freire considers this type of educational process deprives students of their creativity and thinking abilities. Under this banking approach to education, knowledge was seen as a gift “bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (Freire, 1970, p. 58). “The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness
which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world” (Freire, 1970, p. 60).

Critical literacy

According to Giroux (1988), critical theory is endowed teachers with a cognitive framework aimed at either solving an existing problem or introducing a desired change. The basic assumptions are that teacher behaviour can be changed and that student attitude towards problems can be influenced through a set of ‘filters’ in cognitive framework.

“Most importantly, theoretical frameworks, whether conscious or not, operate as a set of filters through which people view information, select facts, study social reality, define problems, and eventually develop tentative solutions to those problems” (Giroux, 1988, p. 298).

That means, for example, if one learned some of Karl Marx’s theories, such as class conflict, ideological critique, etc, and then these theories would be integrated into the mind, the events observed would be analysed by his “class” and “ideology”, whether one realized it or not. The effects of thinking should thus be examined in order to investigate how they impact upon and even changes social action. In terms of the essence of critical pedagogy it seems to be as Giroux (1999) explained in an interview with Carlos A. Torres. He said that critical pedagogy is whose future, story, and interests does the school represent . . . Critical pedagogy argues that school practices need to be informed by a public philosophy that addresses how to construct ideological and institutional conditions in which the lived experience of empowerment for the vast majority of student becomes the defining feature of schooling. (Giroux, 1999, cited in Torres, 2002)

Therefore, Giroux argued that the purpose of critical pedagogy is to:

1. “Create new forms of knowledge through its emphasis on breaking down disciplines and creating interdisciplinary knowledge.
2. Raise questions about the relationships between the margins and centers of power in schools and is concerned about how to provide a way of reading history as part of a larger project of reclaiming power and identity, particularly as these are shaped around the categories of race, gender, class, and ethnicity.

3. Reject the distinction between high and popular culture so as to make curriculum knowledge responsive to the everyday knowledge that constitutes peoples’ lived histories differently.

4. Illuminate the primacy of the ethical in defining the language that teachers and others use to produce particular cultural practices” (Giroux, 1999, cited in Torres, 2002).

Although the critical pedagogy, in Giroux’s theory, is employed to address the issues of ideology in school as well as the relationship between school and society, the educational rationale, in his concept, very importantly asserted that students must be empowered to develop a sense of critical self-consciousness, in order to understand the impact of ideology which may suppress their social action. Banks’ concept (1994) is somewhat similar to Giroux’s argument. Banks has developed a multicultural curriculum for critical pedagogy that involves four successive levels: Contributions Approach, Additive Approach, Transformation Approach, and the Decision-Making and Social Action (Banks, 1994, p. 26). Primarily, Banks discusses how teachers can engage students to explore their perspectives to make decisions on issues, and help students to develop the commitment and skills needed to participate in social action.

The concepts and approaches described above are highly desirable for the teaching of literacy. Critical approaches to literacy deal with written texts or other forms of language media, which are always embedded in a sense of power relations, culture, ideologies. Central to the concept of critical literacy is the key issue of critical thinking. Learners need to be equipped with the ability to critically evaluate what has been written so that they can make sense and meaning of texts. Critical reading, as defined by Thistlewaite (1990, p. 587), is when the reader: 1) questions what they
read; 2) uses background knowledge; 3) realises that everything needs to be read critically; 4) is able to identify illogical reasoning or bias; 5) uses reflective thinking. Wilson (as cited in Thistlethwaite, 1990, p. 587) adds to this list, “critical reading involves predicting”, and claims that “learners cannot read and think critically if they don’t have the background knowledge about key concepts, ideals and issues in the text”. Currently, the issue of critical reading in a social context or critical literacy has a range of different approaches in a variety of contexts.

Knobel and Healy (1998, pp. 2-3) identify the key characteristics in the different approaches to critical literacy practice as being: 1) language education can make a difference to student’s lives; 2) meanings of words and texts cannot be separated from the cultural and social practices in and by which they are constructed; 3) analysing and evaluating; 4) notion of what it means to be socially aware. Knobel and Healy summed up the essence of how critical literacy is differentiated from reading literacy by saying, “critical literacy involves analysing relationships between language, social groups, social practices and power” (1998, p. 4).

**Chinese texts and literacy**

The understanding of literacy cannot be separated from communication, which plays a significant role in both teaching and learning. The process of communication connects the transmitter with the receiver, and the process is always altered by texts, society and culture. Texts, as a visual language, are often encoded with presuppositions, prejudice, and discrimination (Van Duzer & Cunningham, 1999). Literacy therefore does not just refer so much to encoding and decoding a text (Cook-Gumperz, 1986). Literacy should be seen as a meaning-making process in which
readers and writers construct and deconstruct various kinds of texts to unearth hidden meanings intentionally embedded by the writers in the text (Atwell, 1987; Calkins & Harwayne, 1991). Critical literacy does not only promote intellectual developments but also contributes to a profound understanding of discourse. In the literacy teaching process, students receive writing information through a medium, in which noise, environment, time, and even the medium itself may alter the original written information. Therefore, when students received the written information, the outcome of this communication process may not be the whole code initiated by the writer. This could lead to misunderstanding. One other possibility is that the writer may be putting an intended message into the writing which lies beneath the literal meaning of the text. The meaning beneath this message may only be partially understood by readers. For example, there are many Marxist theoretical curricula published or produced in China. The purpose of offering Marxist theory in the national curricula in many learning institutions is to ensure different perceptions on Marxism for students and deepen the understanding of Marx’ thinking. Different understanding and meanings, however, may arise from different readers in different perspectives with regard to Marx’s abstruse and perplexing theories, which lead to inaccuracy of interpretation in the process of communication. The interpretation of meaning by readers, thus, may not align with the writers’ expectations. This is a matter of great concern when readers do not have the background knowledge about relevant concepts in the text and cannot, then, interpret correctly the meaning. Naturally, such occurrences can lead to failure of the literacy communication process. Still a possibility can be found in the fact that the reader, positioned by the writer’s voices, is often to believe that what have portrayed are facts, which will impose negative effects upon the understanding of written texts in literacy.
Newspapers, as important communication media, for example, are viewed as more truthful, honest and fair for providing facts and truth. However, most news presented by journalists is not always value-free. Different sets of cultural values, beliefs and ideologies can be revealed by different genres that are used by writers to convey an intended message. The analyses by Wang (2005) regarding Chinese news, for example, focus on the Chinese writers’ statements that were found to be intertextually constructed in Chinese newspaper commentaries on terrorism. The title of the Chinese text is ‘International terrorism: “The dark power that shakes the international strategic situation”’ (Wang, 2005, p. 774, cited in China Youth Daily, 2001). Wang argued that the Chinese text uses no direct or indirect quotations but quite a few descriptions to illustrate the situation. For instances,

(1) 有关资料表明, 世界范围内有组织的恐怖主义活动最早始于20世纪30年代末40年代初。

Some relevant data show that the earliest international organized terrorist activities began in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

(2) 另有统计表明, 半个世纪来, 已有超过20名总统、总理一级的人物死于恐怖性暗杀。

Other statistics show that more than 20 presidents and premiers have been assassinated by terrorists in the second half of the 20th century (Wang, 2005, pp. 774-775).

Wang identified that “the purpose of including such sources is to set some distance between the writer and the text he/she produces, and to avoid any personal responsibility for what is written” (Wang, 2005, p. 775).

(3) 早在30年前，联合国已经开始为消除恐怖主义而努力。

30 years ago, the UN began to make efforts to eradicate terrorism.

(4) 1988年3月10日，23个国家在罗马签署了一项条约，要求签约国起诉或引渡那些在公海实施暴力行径的恐怖分子。

On 10 March 1988, 23 countries signed a treaty in Rome to bring
accusations against, or extradite all the terrorists conducting terrorist activities in high seas (Wang, 2005, pp. 775-776).

“These sources are not attributed to any specific agency, but are taken as some widely circulated information to establish the background of the argument of the text” (Wang, 2005, pp. 775-776). The types of Chinese text, when analysed on the basis of news article argued by Wang, revealed that the Chinese writer stressed the use of outside sources for illustrating what happened and few personal arguments are found in the text.

However, within Chinese language textbooks, as commonly used by teachers in Chinese literacy teaching, it has been identified that specific discourses are constructed or some strong values and beliefs are conveyed in the written language in order to position the students to believe what is described. Liu (2005) has indicated that patriotism, cultural values and beliefs, and pro-science and technology are identified to dominate the Chinese textbooks. These discourses, for example, were usually of the type “How beautiful Beijing is!”, “Don’t be half-hearted!”, “We will make more wonders.” etc. (Liu, 2005).

Because this closed discourse system is so different from their own living environment and social reality, child readers inevitably encounter a kind of contradiction or ideological shock. Facing a different reality in their families and social interactions, and reading alternative portrayals of the capitalist social order through popular cultural artefacts, media and the internet, child readers of the textbooks would be greatly disorientated and bewildered by the contradictions. Child readers would be disempowered in the reading and learning process (Liu, 2005, p. 259).

These discourses, however, may have a definite weakness which influences the way students think. Therefore, the role of critical literacy becomes more important and demanding in teaching literacy as it has to assist students to identify the purpose
or function of the written text and the writers’ motives.

Another difference found at the culture and text level itself between the English and Chinese languages is the perceptions and expressions of ancient Chinese language, which are expressed by different ways of both present Chinese and English languages. For example,

子曰: “学而时习之，不亦说乎？有朋自远方来，不亦乐乎？人不知而不愠，不亦君子乎？” (Confucian Analects, 2000, p. 1)

Confucius said: “learn and constantly practice, what one has already learned Isn’t happy

The Master said: Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application? (Legge, 1960, p. 9)
The Master said, To learn and at due times to repeat what one has learnt, is that not after all a pleasure? (Waley, 1938, p. 83)

Friends come from afar Isn’t delightful
That friends should come to one from afar, is this not after all delightful? (Waley, 1938, p. 83)

Others don’t know(merits) but not feel displeased Isn’t a man of complete virtue
To remain unsoured even though one’s merits are unrecognized by others, is that not after all what is expected of a gentleman? (Waley, 1938, p. 83)

The typical beginnings of the translation of ‘子曰’ in Confucius Analects are often presented as ‘The Master said’ or ‘Confucius said’. There are important differences between the two interpretations with regard to the appellation or title at the beginning, beyond what the texts suggest. ‘子’ is an honorific title for Confucius. Therefore, most Chinese philosophers usually employ the honorific ‘the Master’ as a general translation of ‘子’, whereas, the title ‘the Master’ is not often employed by most Western writers. In fact, it very rarely occurs in the written English language,
because a first name used as an appellation in the English-speaking world would show friendliness in a familiar way as compared to the more polite Chinese appellation. Thus, the use of ‘Confucius said’ is more conventional in English translation, and only few Western people (i.e., Legge, Waley, etc.), who have a profound understanding of the Chinese literature across different cultures, know how to interpret accurately.

In discussing that the appellation of English writers may be different from those of Chinese writers in translation, students need to identify that, based on different traditions, values and positions, different cultures will have different ways of encoding texts from the same resources. Most importantly, the ancient Chinese language can express a very profound meaning with very few characters. Thus, the way of translating ancient Chinese is an art in itself and word choice would substantially influence one’s ideas. Here again, Legge (1960) used the phrase ‘a man of complete virtue’ to describe the meaning ‘君子’. The corresponding implications of the original term would be more accurate than ‘the gentleman’ used by Waley (1938).

Therefore, critical literacy is needed to empower students to identify important differences between the comprehension of English and Chinese language at various levels of discourse. It would be significant to see how English writers translate the ancient Chinese, with respect to what different culture is conveyed in the written texts from one language to another. Of interest would be what they consider important, what less important and what marginal; how they produce different discourses of the writing, and what linguistic devices they use to achieve the specific purposes.
There is a sense of power, values, beliefs and culture inherited within all the texts that need to be identified by taking a critical attitude. The teaching of critical literacy provides students with opportunities to clarify these discourses where different language modalities have different meanings for different people, and to negotiate the intertextual relations embedded in the texts in order to be critically literate.

**Difficulties in Chinese classrooms**

Critical literacy plays an important role in the teaching of literacy in Australia and other Western countries. It is not a replacement of other literacy approaches such as phonics, Whole Language, and genre-based curriculum. Whether or not critical literacy should be effectively included in the Chinese curriculum is a matter of debate. The argument for the introduction of critical literacy in the Chinese curriculum is based on the view that language, society and culture are profoundly linked.

In current Chinese classrooms, learning is passive and learners display low motivation and self esteem. In comparison, Western pedagogical approaches involve independent or autonomous learning, problem-based learning and co-operative learning, simulated learning, and experiential learning. Western approaches also include a movement from a ‘teacher-centred approach’ to a ‘student-centred approach’, and a consensus that students must be active participants in the learning process in order to promote deep understanding of what has been learned. The major learning of Chinese students is to recite the correct information received from teachers rather than to search for and communicate meaning. Therefore, the traditional Chinese teaching environment encourages a more passive student role rather than a role in which the student is an active thinker of knowledge. Due to the nature of the
traditional approach, Chinese students, as recipients of knowledge, play a passive role in the teacher-centred teaching process. Chinese students are positioned to passively accept to the ‘facts’ taught by teachers from the textbook uncritically, rather than to identify the meaning, even if they have their own views and thinking. Freire (1970) called this teaching approach ‘Banking Education’, which leads to a process where knowledge is formed and generated by textbooks, homework and recitation. Savage (1998) criticized the text books available to teachers as being of little help in the development of critical thinking, in the sense that they do not provide students with a chance to do very much thinking beyond restating the previously learned information. He prescribed that teachers need to be taught to use text books as an instructional resource in order to promote critical thinking in students. He also pointed out that critical thinking is unpredictable and, therefore, cannot be easily evaluated by objective tests. This unpredictability causes concern for Chinese teachers who are usually judged in terms of the results revealed by objective tests, due to the current emphasis on standardized tests. This factor, according to Savage (1998), may also be the cause of a reduced emphasis on development of critical thinking by the teachers in their classrooms.

Therefore, integrating critical literacy approaches directly into Chinese discourse may cause considerable confusion, especially in realising the idea of active thinking. The current situation is that Chinese people are deeply influenced by Confucian thinking and the method of lecturing. This creates a situation where most Chinese teachers to be unable to practise a new critical approach (Zhu, 2003). As a result, instead of using the Western concept, they will continue to adopt a banking approach. This has led to no significant improvement in students’ performance, let alone
encouraging students to be critically literate. It seems that Western approaches may not transfer to China, where different culture, beliefs and ideologies exist.

Therefore, a new curriculum must be developed in order to introduce critical literacy into China, based on Chinese culture and Western problem-posing teaching methods.

**Possibilities to implement Critical Literacy in Chinese discourse**

The introduction of a new problem-based curriculum may contribute to the effective instruction of critical literacy in China. Closely related to critical literacy is the issue of cognitive thinking/critical thinking. Posing questions enables teachers to engage students in higher levels of cognition, or, more specifically, critical thinking (Johnson, 1997). The strategy of posing questions is acknowledged to be the one with the strongest impact upon the thinking of students among various teaching strategies (Callahan & Clark, 1988). Teachers use questions to regulate the thinking and learning processes of their students, and the questions asked by the students, on the other hand, reflect their thoughts and understanding of particular subject matter (Elder & Paul, 1998). If we want to engage students in thinking through the content then we must stimulate their critical thinking, posing questions that lead them to further questions (Elder & Paul, 1998). A problem-posing paradigm, as opposed to a Banking approach, could thus be introduced to the Chinese education discourse.

A practical curriculum framework can be designed, as follows, for embedding critical literacy in China’s curriculum discourse. Cognitive or critical questions have been included within the entire framework which sees critical literacy as a social practice.
### Theme: Current issues of terrorism

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<th>Activity contents</th>
<th>Proceeding of pedagogy</th>
<th>Duration</th>
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| Ask students to read the news (relevant to terrorism) and discuss the following questions about the types of the article: | 1. What is the news about?  
2. Who is the potential audience?  
3. What kind of genre of news does the author develop?  
4. What is the perspective of the writer?  
| Ask students to identify the meaning of the article. Teachers guide students to acquaint consensus’s perspectives about terrorist group and terrorist activities. | 6. What is terrorism?  
7. Where is the terrorist group from?  
8. Who organized them?  
9. Why are terrorist groups organized?  
10. Discuss the motivation and actions of terrorists.  
11. Who benefits from terrorists’ activities? | 35 min   |                                                               |
| Teachers encourage students to develop a critical awareness of politics, society, race and ethics, and discuss possible practical action through problem-posing and dialogue. | 12. Open-ended discussion  
13. Discuss the relationship among politics, human rights, racial equality, peace, etc. | 40 min   |                                                               |

In the critical literacy teaching process, teachers need to ask students to respond to the questions around issues. Freire (1970) believed that “critical literacy educators engage in actions which seek to liberate learners from oppression, rather than an educational model where the teachers as subjects narrate knowledge to the students as objects, critical literacy is problem-posing education” (Freire, 1970, pp. 57-67).

In problem-posing education, men develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see themselves, not as a static reality, but as a reality in process .. The form of action men adopt is to a large extent a function of how they perceive themselves in the world. Hence the teacher-student and the students-teachers reflect simultaneously on themselves and the world without dichotomizing this reflection from action. (Freire, 1970, pp. 70-71)

The task of students is not only to answer the question but also to challenge the question in this interactive process. Posing questions requiring one right answer does
not encourage critical thinking, which seeks instead various possible answers. For that, Chinese teachers need to ask their students to examine causes and consequences in order to develop the critical skill of developing their own ideas and reaching their own conclusions based on evidence. “They (students) must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of men in their relations with the world” (Freire, 1970, p. 66). In problem-posing teaching, the aim of teachers is to let students know “through dialogue with them both their objective situation and their awareness of that situation – the various levels of perception of themselves and of the world in which and with which they exist” (Freire, 1970, p. 84). This educational method breaks the traditional relationship of teachers and students, in which teachers were accustomed to read the content aloud from a textbook while students listened to the teacher passively with their gaze fixed on their books. “The teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach” (Freire, 1970, p. 61).

To sum up, problem-posing approaches foster critical thinking and literacy skills needed for gaining understanding from texts. The role of the teacher is that of a facilitator as s/he helps the students focus on critical thinking and tailors the process through which students form their own opinions and develop attitudes. Establishment of a critical learning environment, thus, requires encouragement and promotion of inquiry, thinking, critical awareness, and developing understanding in students. The author hopes that this new learning environment will help develop Chinese students’ thinking skills which include being more analytical, dialectical and critical.
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