

Critical Creative Literacy for Bilingual Teachers in the 21st Century

Alma Flor Ada

University of San Francisco

F. Isabel Campoy

Transformative Education Institute

The Power of Language

The creation of language is unquestionably the highest human achievement. Language allows us to express all thoughts, share all feelings, record all discoveries, pass on to new generations the knowledge acquired in the past. Language can be an instrument for creating all forms of literature. But above all language frees us from the limits of existence, allowing us to imagine and dream new realities. If we, some day, manage to create a just and equitable world it will be because first we have been able to describe it.

Language Active nor Passive, Productive nor Receptive

Traditionally the four functions of language have been divided in passive or receptive and active or productive. Listening and reading have been seen as receptive and speaking and writing as productive, when through Critical Literacy lens, all forms of language should indeed be active and productive. Even while listening in silence, if we listen critically we will be producing questions and reflections.

Alma Flor Ada is professor emerita in the School of Education at the University of San Francisco, San Francisco, California. F. Isabel Campoy is president of the Transformative Education Institute. Their e-mail addresses are almaflor@almaflorada.com & fisabelcampoy@yahoo.com

Reading as Dialogue

For too long reading has been viewed as the process of extracting meaning from a text, whatever physical form that text may have. This approach to reading corresponds to a traditional form of education, what Paulo Freire described as “banking education”, an education where the student is seen as a receptacle of the content provided by the curriculum, rather than a constructor of meaning.

But true reading is far more than understanding what a text says, it is the dialogue that takes place between the reader and the text. It incorporates the reader’s emotional reactions to the words, the consideration of what has been said, in view of the reader’s previous knowledge and experiences, the critical reflections of the implications of what the text describes or proposes.

When reading is described in its complexity it may sound daunting or difficult to grasp by students. The contrary is true. When students are exposed to the true meaning of reading and the significance it can have for their lives, no matter how young they may be, reading becomes fascinating and they are far more motivated to engage in its process.

Initial Approach to Literacy

Students deserve to be introduced to reading from the dual perspective of the joy of reading—which includes the joy of being read to—and the profound meaning that reading can have in their lives: in the understanding of themselves and others, the understanding of their reality and the possibility of finding new approaches to aspects of their own lives.

From a very early age children can enjoy the power of a story or the charm of a poem, they can also appreciate the modeled conducts and situations and, above all, the invitation to relate what they have heard or read to their own reality.

The common practice has been to divide the reading process into a number of isolated skills placed along a continuum, scope and sequence. The assumption is that the skills must be mastered sequentially, thus students are moved from readiness to prereading skills, to word attack skills, and then to literal comprehension skills. Only when these landmarks are mastered will inferential skills be introduced. Critical thinking, problem solving, and creative responses are restricted to those students who have managed to reach the upper reading levels.

The unfortunate result is that a large number of students do not attain these levels. In many settings children begin to fail in kindergarten and by first grade they fall “below the norm” a situation that rather than improves results in wider gaps as the students are placed

in higher grades. These students are condemned as not being sufficiently good, bright, or capable in a system that imposes external norms, that presupposes what every child should learn or do at a given time, and does not provide for the students individual needs nor explores each students' possibilities for success.

If indeed all students are going to have the possibility to acquire a vital literacy that will enable them to participate fully in a 21st century society, we will do well considering a different approach to reading where the goal is to have students read with pleasure, ease, assurance, freedom, and enthusiasm, discovering the full potential of literacy in their lives.

Five Conditions Are Essential

Materials

The materials should be interesting, to awaken the students' desire to read. They should incorporate diversity in order to become "mirrors" and "windows." Mirrors that allow students to see themselves and their reality portrayed with dignity in some of the materials and windows to also see the very diverse people who form the society where they live and the world.

Oral Language Development

Strong attention should be placed on strengthening the students' oral language throughout their school years. There is a strong correlation between language development and reading efficacy, and thus oral language development needs to be seen as an integral part of literacy. Of course, developing strong speaking abilities will also benefit students in multiple ways, including its implications as a professional asset.

Oral reading can be an excellent practice for developing oral fluency as well as assurance in public speaking—it must be addressed with sensitivity, never making students embarrassed. Students can read to a very diverse audience all of which must be sympathetic and receptive.

Approach

The approach to the literacy process, whether at the initial stages or throughout schooling, must instill in the students confidence in their ability to learn.

Method

A transformative approach to reading allows students to experience that reading is immediately meaningful. They see reading as relevant to their lives and to the process of effecting positive changes in their world.

The *Creative Reading Method*, based on Transformative Education Methods, will be described later on in this article.

Parents

The school will make all efforts to have parents involved in the process both at school and home. There are multiple versions of parent involvement projects around literacy and processes for facilitating that parents become authors and share their writing with the class. See www.authorsintheclassroom.com

Creative Reading Methodology

The feud about initial reading methods took a great deal of educators' energy during the second half of the 20th century, with two major opposite camps: those advocating strict phonetic methods and those proposing a sight reading approach.

Somehow the merits and disadvantages of both approaches seem to have been recognized and it would seem that the most frequent implementations combine elements of both. The third approach, the "language experience" approach which gained support during the 1970s and 1980s, seems to have remained only in the classrooms of highly dedicated and creative teachers that see the importance of facilitating that children see their words in print and literacy as an integral reading and writing process.

The *Creative Reading Methodology* developed by us, supported by the theoretical principles of Transforming Education, is concerned with presenting reading to students in a way that reflects what reading represents for adults who are successful readers. In ideal conditions it can be initiated even before children are able to decode and continue throughout, but it can be initiated and implemented at any point.

The *Creative Reading Method* proposes that true reading is a dialogue between the reader and the text, whose relevance goes beyond the transmission of the information set forth in the text. This act involves four aspects. For the sake of exposition, we are naming them and discussing them separately, although in a reading act they may happen concurrently and be interwoven.

Descriptive Phase

The first thing that occurs when the reader encounters the text is discovering the meaning of the words. While this is necessary, it is certainly not the full act of reading, but merely its beginning. Traditionally, schools have approached reading as if this would be where reading

begins and ends. Here it is merely the beginning. While it is important that students indeed understand the information contained in the text, we suggest that the dialogue must not be limited to finding the “Who? When? Where? How? Why?”—the usual reading comprehension questions. The answers to these questions can be found in the text, are known by the teacher, and indicate whether or not the students have understood and can recall the information. These questions may be a starting point to the dialogue. They are important, but they are not enough. Should the discussion remain at this level it would suggest that reading is a passive, receptive, and in a way, domesticating process.

Personal Interpretative Phase

It is only natural that the reader will have an immediate reaction to the information received. Sometimes the nature of the information will be such as to evoke similar reactions in most readers, for example a tragedy, or a disaster. Yet, in truth, the reactions to the text will be determined by the individual reader’s personal knowledge and experience.

These personal reactions are part of the reading process and as such, ought to receive recognition in the classroom. Traditionally, students are sometimes asked if they liked the text or which part they preferred. We are talking of something more here. Students should be encouraged to weigh the information against their own experiences, feelings and emotions. This step is extremely important. It brings the reading process to the students’ grasp and makes it more meaningful. It also helps develop the students’ self-esteem by showing that their feelings, emotions, and experiences are valued by both the teacher and their classmates. Moreover, it helps students understand that the true learning occurs when the information received is analyzed in the light of one’s own previous experiences and knowledge.

Much has been said about the need for affective instruction that recognizes the emotional needs of students and the importance of acknowledging the realities of minority students. Unfortunately these considerations frequently remain peripheral, not truly essential to the learning process. *Creative Reading*, on the other hand, stresses the recognition of each student’s individuality as an integral part of that process. Clearly, as the student’s own experiences are being validated, so too are those of their family and community. Cultural validation is not something to be superimposed or added, but it constitutes part of the very core of the process.

Questions to stimulate the dialogue in this second phase might be:

- Do you know (or have you seen, felt, experienced) something like this?

- Have you ever (done, felt, thought, wanted, wished for) something similar?
- How is what you saw (experienced, did) different from what appears in the text?
- What would you (your family, your friends) have done (said, thought) in a similar situation?
- How do you feel after reading this text? Did you like it? Dislike it? Did it worry you? Made you happy (sad, angry)? Did it upset (frightened) you? Made you hopeful?

A better understanding of one's self, and of others, is an added benefit of this part of the dialogue. The respect for each person's experiences, modeled by the teacher, and encouraged in all, will contribute to increase the sense of self and self-assurance of everyone.

Critical/Multicultural/Anti-bias Phase

Once students have compared and contrasted what is presented in the reading, with their personal experiences and given the opportunity to acknowledge their feelings, they are ready to move on to a critical analysis and to the level of generalized reflection.

The questions asked at this level will help students draw inferences about the information presented.

- Is this right (moral, appropriate, healthy, kind, courageous, generous, just, equitable)?
- Who benefits (suffers) from these conditions? Does it benefit everyone alike? Or does it favor some at the expenses of others?
- What would be the consequences if all would adopt this idea (behavior)?
- Are there alternatives to this situation? What are the alternatives? What do they depend on?
- In which way would diverse people (of different ethnicity, culture, genre, age, sexual orientation, physical ableness, class, education) react to this?
- Has anyone been excluded from this text? Who is left out? Why?
- What are the author's intentions? Is there a point the author tries to prove?

The analysis, of course, will be determined by the students' level of maturity and previous experiences. Yet let's be aware that critical thinking is a process that can and should get underway very early, though naturally in terms of that which is familiar to the students.

Creative/Transformative Phase

The goal of the process is not met with the awakening of the students' critical awareness as a mere intellectual exercise. Rather, the process is completed only when the students can draw on it in order to make decisions regarding the world around them. Precisely, the power of reading is not only that it can delight, entertain, or enrich us, but also that it enhances our sense of self and gives us tools to make decisions for improving or enriching our lives.

The dialogue can be encouraged with questions like:

- In which ways do you understand your reality better?
- How can I act to transform my inner self? My social reality?
- What can you do in a situation like the one in the text?
- In which ways would you speak/act differently now?
- How can you improve your life/conditions/relations?

The dialogue at this phase is aimed at guiding students to discover aspects of their lives that they can improve and encouraging them to make decisions with that purpose in mind. Of course, it is not a question of the children changing the entire world, but of changing their own world, by beginning to assume responsibility for their own lives and for their relations with others.

The Significant Role of Parents

The reasons why students in the United States whose home language is other than English may develop their oral language skills at a slower pace are generally thought to include the following:

The displacement of the nuclear family (parents and children) and the separation from the extended family (grandparents, uncles and aunts), thus lessening child/adult interaction.

The absence of one parent from the home, or the need for both parents to work outside the home, frequently at odd hours, thus reducing not only the time but the quality of attention that parents can make available to their children.

The relatively low levels of literacy and formal schooling of many parents.

Yet, there is another reason for the lag in the acquisition of oral language skills, even more prevalent and detrimental than those mentioned above:

Parents and children alike perceive, in too many instances, the home language to be less important than English and have the mistaken notion that the best way to learn English is to give up the home language.

Parents who hold to this idea reflect the natural desire of all parents to have their children acquire a strong command of the English language. Their very human attitude is deeply rooted in the unconscious. Their mistake lies not in wanting their children to speak English well, but in thinking that turning away from one's first language makes it easier to acquire a second. Yet, all evidence indicates that the opposite is true. Surprising as it may be to some, the best way for a child in the process of acquiring English as a second language to master English is to continue developing the home language and to master it well.

The skills required for mastering a language are basic and general, and unrelated to the specific language (English, Spanish, Chinese, Filipino, etc.) in which they are applied. When children develop language skills in their first language those skills will lay the groundwork for acquiring and perfecting the second language. Furthermore, if children do not fully develop language skills in their first language, this limitation can adversely affect not only their cognitive growth but also the acquisition of higher language skills in the second language.

Aside from serving as the basis for children's cognitive growth and for their acquisition of a second language, there are other equally important reasons for the development of the home language or mother tongue.

Some of these reasons are sociocultural:

- Only by using their home language will children be able to fully relate to their culture and come into possession of the cultural heritage that is theirs.
- Mastery of two languages is useful and valuable in its own right and provides many positive opportunities of interaction with people.
- The society of the United States needs bilingual people in order to maintain relations with non-English speakers throughout the world and with many members of this society.

There are educational reasons:

- Languages are part of the academic curriculum and in many instances they are a requirement for admission to universities. It is a painful contradiction that students be encouraged or allowed to lose at an early age abilities that later could be of academic advantage.

There are also psychological reasons:

- A person's psychological strength is derived from his or her self-concept.

One's home language is a part of one's personal identity. Renouncing that language is tantamount to renouncing a part of one, and this is harmful to a positive self-image.

- Emotional well-being is linked to interpersonal communication, to family relationships, and to the degree of integration within the nuclear family, the extended family and the community.
- Giving up one's first language diminishes the interaction between children, their family and their community.

A common saying states: "A bilingual person is worth twice as much." A more significant expression if we are to believe we educate our students not only for their own self-development, but also for their potential to contribute to society, could be "A bilingual person can do twice as much good and contribute to the betterment of twice as many people."

Parents can offer the most effective collaboration in oral language development and in the acquisition of literacy skills. So that they may better fulfill that role, it is frequently necessary to assist them in understanding the meaning and importance of those processes.

A *Creative Literacy* program will facilitate a continuous parents' participation. While this participation can take place daily at home, it is very valuable to have the opportunity to share with parents our goals for their children, to listen to the parents' goals, and to discuss how they can best be acquired.

A good way to ensure parents' presence at the school is to create a program where their children participate: staging a play for example, or designing an evening in which the students sing, recite, and read some of their writing. Storytelling sessions, which give parents a model of how they interact with their children and books, followed by a display of books parents can borrow are excellent possibilities.

Once the parents are at the school, the importance of their children having a strong command of the mother tongue might be explained to them. Any doubts the parents may have in this regard should be discussed and dispelled. Ways in which they can best help their children's oral language development will be described. They might include:

- Ask their children to describe what they did and learned at school on a daily basis, asking for specific details
- Encourage their children to share their thoughts and feelings with them. The parents should not feel compelled to offer solutions, but they should know that it is important for their children to have someone with whom they feel close and share their feelings.
- Talk with their children about their own experiences, both current

ones and those of their childhood and youth. These experiences will not only enrich their children's lives, but also give the children confidence in sharing their experiences as well.

- Ask their children for suggestions when there is something to be done, bought, or repaired. Once the children have expressed their opinions and suggestions, they should be asked to explain their reasons. Their opinions deserve respect.
- Encourage their children to reflect on everyday experiences, including what they see on television or Internet through questions like: Why did this happen? Could it have turned out differently? What possible solutions can you think of?
- Teach their children songs, sayings, games, and riddles; tell them stories or legends they remember, and, whenever possible, read books with their children.

If students acquiring English as a second language are to find a successful role in a highly technological, information-oriented society, if they are going to escape from the present statistical predictions, they need to master the art of communication. They need to become truly literate and develop critical and creative thinking skills.

Transferability of Language and Literacy Skills from First to Second Language

The reading process is highly dependent on the person's command of the oral language. A reader unfamiliar with many words in a text will not be able to derive meaning. A student uncertain of the grammatical patterns of the language will not be able to anticipate them in the text. Reading will become a painful and meaningless experience and can lead to functional illiteracy.

Asking students to learn to read English without sufficient oral command of the language is to expect far more than the average person is able to accomplish.

The basic nature of literacy skills is not limited to a given language. Although the application of some skills such as decoding and vocabulary building may be language specific, and vary from language to language, the nature of the skills themselves are common across languages.

Students who are accustomed to look for details and contextual clues, to identify cause-effect relationships, to infer meaning and to evaluate and react to what is written in their native language will certainly be able to transfer all of these skills to reading a second language.

Furthermore, even in those aspects of reading which are language

specific, the experienced reader in one language will have little difficulty in mastering the sound-symbol relationship of another. A child who has developed good vocabulary building habits in one language will be able to transfer these habits to a second language.

Some of the many skills with total transferability from Spanish to English:

INITIAL READING

- Auditory discrimination: recognition of initial sound and rhyme.
- Visual discrimination: position, size, shape, relationship between capitals and small letters.
- Identifying scenes, characters and details in pictures; establishing sequence; oral retelling.
- Recognizing meaning of punctuation.

DECODING SKILLS

- Vowel sounds: Short English vowels corresponding to Spanish vowels
- Consonant sounds: b, d, f, g, k, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, z.

COMPREHENSION SKILLS

- Finding contextual clues and details.
- Determining what, who, when, where, how, why.
- Understanding concepts of synonyms, antonyms, homonyms.
- Understanding use of humor, irony, sarcasm.
- Distinguishing reality and fantasy.
- Establishing comparison and contrast.
- Identifying character's personality and motivation. Analyzing feelings.

INFERENCE SKILLS

- Establishing cause-effect relationship.
- Determining author's motivation and purpose.
- Anticipating results.

CRITICAL READING SKILLS

- Validation of content against previous experience or information.
- Determining author's perspective and intent.
- Identifying absurdities, misrepresentations, misconceptions, bias and/or prejudice.
- Determining possible effects of text on readers and personal implications for future action.

Students taught to read in their mother tongue will have better opportunities for discovering the meaning and joy of reading. If they are allowed to become efficient, independent readers in their own language they will approach reading in English with the self-confidence of a competent reader. Thus, success will be assured.

Critical Creative Literacy and the Exercise of Freedom

*“The world is not dangerous because of those
who do harm but because of those
who look at it without doing anything.” —Einstein*

As a nation, the United States has established itself as a defender of democracy. It goes as far as blockading countries and declaring and fighting wars in the name of democratic principles. Thousands of lives are sacrificed to defend democracy, and to gain or preserve the right to vote in free elections. Yet a large number of U.S. citizens fail to vote in national elections. Although schooling is free and compulsory, a large number of youth do not complete high school and society is seeing a growing number of incarcerated people as well as increasing poverty.

An empowering education would lead to a citizenship ready to question existing conditions, to make their voices heard in support of what they hold important—a citizenship ready to take responsibility for bringing about change and improving social conditions.

Are we as free as we believe?

Freedom is a concept highly regarded in our society, and it is ardently defended even to the extent of fighting and killing to protect it. Yet, it is a most elusive concept that is not easily exercised. Most of us believe we are free, but no one can claim to be free. We can only claim the freedom of our individual acts. And it is not easy for an act to be truly free.

To act freely requires reflection and courage.

*“Few are those who see with their own eyes
and feel with their own hearts.” —Einstein*

Rather than freedom, our actions frequently reflect:

- habits
- group expectations
- media suggestions or publicity
- peer pressure
- unconscious reflexes
- indoctrination

And frequently, rather than act, we simple are victims of inertia and remain silent or passive.

A true act of freedom is a demanding act.

It requires:

- **Knowing the history leading to present circumstances**

To understand the reality in all its complexity; usually requires having knowledge of how present circumstances have developed.

Why is this as it is? Who determined that it would be? Who are the beneficiaries of the present conditions?

- **Recognizing all possible alternatives**

We have been socialized to accept “what is” rather than encouraged to consider “how it could be.” But to act in freedom we must always pose the question: *What are the alternatives to this situation?*

There are always alternatives. And even if we were to discover that continuing the present reality is the best alternative, we can only be satisfied that we have acted in freedom if we critically and honestly consider all other alternatives.

- **Weighing the possible consequences of each alternative**

Once we have seen the alternatives we must weigh not only their feasibility but primarily their consequences: *Who will be impacted by each alternative? Who will benefit and prosper? Who will suffer?*

- **Having the courage to choose**

Now that we know the alternatives and their consequences, we can act freely. Of course, all free actions are not good actions.

It is possible that choosing the best alternative, the more just or equitable alternative, may demand from us a sacrifice or great courage.

This is the opportunity to grow to be the person we want to be.

A healthy and just society

In order to create a healthy and just society, education must support the growth and liberation of all participants. Human liberation is the result of praxis, an ongoing cycle of growth and learning.

Praxis requires:

- reflection and preparation for action
- followed by reflecting on the results of our action, both positive and negative
- leading to new insights and therefore to new actions

Unlearning ethnocentrism

Critical reflection will allow us to begin the difficult process of unlearning the ethnocentrism held by all cultures and the racism and biases it promotes.

To participate in a global society, critical analysis of our culture is essential

To understand, respect, and appreciate other cultures, we must be able to critically analyze our own.

Universal human rights require growth and change in all cultures

No one individual culture is perfect and all cultures are in constant evolution.

Supporting universal human rights requires a deep analysis of long-held beliefs and practices, particularly those that are unconsciously learned and maintained.

Conclusion

The purpose of a *Critical and Creative* approach to literacy is not to place the burden of our responsibility on students, but rather to liberate them from the feeling of being trapped by unmalleable, self-defeating circumstances. Through actual demonstration and experience, teachers need to give students the confidence that they are indeed the protagonists of their lives, that they can improve their present environment, their human relationships, and their emotional responsiveness. If teachers succeed in giving this much to students from homes where language is other than English, they will have succeeded in validating the language experience for those who otherwise might have found little relevance in the classroom.