The Greek Review of Social Research, 2025, 165
Print ISSN: 0013-9696 Online ISSN: 2241-8512

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EXPLORING THE *CRITICAL* IN CRITICAL APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE EDUCATION

ABSTRACT

The article explores how the term critical is interpreted across four key approaches to language education: critical thinking, critical pedagogy, critical literacy, and critical language awareness. It examines the theoretical principles, epistemological assumptions, and pedagogical goals of each, highlighting both convergences and differences. Particular attention is given to the kinds of learners and citizens each approach seeks to cultivate. The analysis encourages reflection on how criticality is understood and enacted in diverse educational contexts, offering insights for more coherent and transformative language teaching practices.

Keywords: *critical thinking, critical pedagogy, critical literacy, critical language awareness*

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Received: February 28, 2025 Accepted: March 28, 2025 Published: July 30, 2025

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ΔΙΕΡΕΥΝΩΝΤΑΣ ΤΗΝ *ΚΡΙΤΙΚΗ* ΣΤΙΣ ΚΡΙΤΙΚΕΣ ΠΡΟΣΕΓΓΙΣΕΙΣ ΤΗΣ ΓΛΩΣΣΙΚΗΣ ΕΚΠΑΙΔΕΥΣΗΣ

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Το άρθρο διερευνά την έννοια της κριτικής σε τέσσερις προσεγγίσεις στη γλωσσική εκπαίδευση: την κριτική σκέψη, την κριτική παιδαγωγική, τον κριτικό γραμματισμό και την κριτική γλωσσική επίγνωση. Εξετάζονται οι θεωρητικές αρχές, οι επιστημολογικές παραδοχές και οι παιδαγωγικοί στόχοι κάθε προσέγγισης, και αναδεικνύονται οι συγκλίσεις και οι μεταξύ τους διαφορές. Ιδιαίτερη προσοχή δίνεται στους τύπους μαθητών και πολιτών που επιδιώκει να καλλιεργήσει κάθε προσέγγιση. Η ανάλυση καλεί σε προβληματισμό σχετικά με το πώς νοηματοδοτείται και εφαρμόζεται η έννοια της κριτικής σε διαφορετικά εκπαιδευτικά πλαίσια, προσφέροντας χρήσιμες επισημάνσεις για μια συνεκτικότερη και πιο μετασχηματιστική πρακτική στη διδασκαλία της γλώσσας.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: *κριτική σκέψη, κριτική παιδαγωγική, κριτικός γραμματισμός, κριτική γλωσσική επίγνωση*

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1. INTRODUCTION

For several decades the field of language education was dominated by views of language as an autonomous, homogenous, and rule-governed system that is totally separate from the social conditions of its production and utilization (Mitsikopoulou, 1999). These views originated from paradigms in mainstream linguistics which were developed in the framework of Western social scientific positivism (Dendrinos, 1999). Applied linguistics, in particular, was characterized by what Pennycook has called "political quietism" (1994, p. 14), promoting views of language teaching and learning as an ideologically innocent and neutral process, disconnected from the social construction of knowledge. Viewing language teaching and learning as apolitical has two important effects, according to Phillipson (1992): it construes the field of language teaching as narrowly technical; and it disconnects culture from structure, assuming that educational concerns can be divorced from social, political, and economic realities.

Beginning in the late 1980s, some research theorists pointed to the political and ideological dimensions of language teaching and learning (see, for instance, Auerbach, 1995; Bullivant, 1995; Dendrinos, 1992, 1997; Peirce, 1989; Pennycook, 1994, 2001; Tollefson, 1995). This research tradition draws on a functional theory of language (Lee, 1992), which focuses on its constitutive force to construct reality, not merely to reflect it (Richardson, 1990). Within this theoretical tradition, systemic functional linguistics (SFL) conceptualized language as a social semiotic system– a resource for making meaning in social contexts (Halliday, 1978).

Influenced by the varying views of language, the field of language education has increasingly embraced the notion of "critical", signaling a shift from traditional pedagogical approaches that focused on views of language as an autonomous and homogeneous rule-governed system toward approaches that consider the broader social, political, and ideological dimensions of language. This shift aligns with broader trends in educational theory, which have suggested critical perspectives focusing on reflection, resistance, and transformation, in an attempt to address global sociopolitical challenges related to inequality, discrimination, and the marginalization of certain linguistic and cultural groups (Fairclough, 1996). By integrating the critical perspective in language education, these approaches have sought to empower learners to become active agents capable of analyzing, questioning, and transforming the social structures that language both constructs and represents (Pennycook, 2010).

However, not all conceptualizations of *critical* align with the socially situated, power-conscious approach typically associated with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Critical Discourse Studies (CDS). While the term *critical* holds a prominent position in discussions of language education, the term has been interpreted differently across various educational traditions, each shaped by distinct philosophical foundations, pedagogical aims, and sociopolitical contexts. This paper examines four pedagogical approaches that incorporate the term *critical* in their titles – critical thinking, critical pedagogy, critical literacy, and critical language awareness – in order to examine how each conceptualizes the role of language in society and the responsibilities of learners within it. The aim is to delineate the diverse interpretations of *critical* within the field of language education and to consider the implications of these conceptual differences and their pedagogical applications.

These approaches offer diverse perspectives on how language functions within social systems and how learners can be encouraged to engage with it critically. The first of these approaches to be analyzed here, critical thinking, is rooted in positivist philosophy and cognitive psychology. It emphasizes reasoned judgment, logic, and analytical skills (Ennis, 1993), providing tools for evaluating arguments and evidence but treating language as neutral and decontextualized. From the perspective of CDA, such a reductionist view of criticality is problematic, as it overlooks the ideological dimensions of discourse and fails to account for how language constructs power relations and reinforces social inequalities.

In contrast, critical pedagogy views language education as a means for emancipation and social transformation. Grounded in the work of Paulo Freire, it seeks to equip learners with the tools to interrogate dominant discourses and to participate in reshaping society toward greater equity (Giroux, 1988). Furthermore, critical literacy, as developed in Australian educational contexts, builds on Freirean principles and focuses on texts and genres as sites of ideological struggle. It encourages learners to uncover hidden assumptions, question representation, and create alternative readings that challenge the status quo (Janks, 2010). Finally, critical language awareness (CLA) draws on CDA and brings these concerns directly into the analysis of language form and function. It highlights how language choices reflect, reproduce, and challenge power hierarchies (Fairclough, 1996) and seeks to cultivate learners' awareness of language as a social and ideological resource.

The article offers a critical examination of these four pedagogical approaches in order to foreground their distinct contributions to understanding the intricate interplay between language, power, and social justice. While only one of these approaches aligns directly with the tradition of CDS, the inclusion of the others serves an important comparative function: by juxtaposing diverse interpretations of criticality, we can more clearly delineate the epistemological commitments, reflexive orientations, and theoretical foundations that underpin the use of the term within CDA/S, positioning language education as a key site where ideologies, social identities, and inequalities are both made visible and actively contested. Although pedagogical considerations have not traditionally occupied a central position within the theoretical and methodological frameworks of CDA, this article brings them to the foreground, aligning also with the proposal to view students as critical text analysts (Mitsikopoulou, 2019), a pedagogical orientation that enables learners to recognize how the systematic use of some language features creates a particular view of the world. Drawing on earlier work in language education (Cots, 1996; Gebhard, 2008; McCarthy, 2001), the view of language students as critical text analysts seeks to equip them with the analytic tools to uncover implicit ideologies in texts, while also enhancing their metalinguistic awareness, context-sensitive interpretation, and negotiation of meaning.

By mapping the intersections and tensions among these four traditions, the article contributes to a broader understanding of what it means to engage critically with language in educational contexts. It highlights the potential of language pedagogies to foster critical awareness and to support learners in becoming active agents of discourse and social change. It, therefore, aligns with the theme of this special issue by engaging in reflexive inquiry, asking: What do we mean when we invoke "the critical" in CDA/S and related pedagogical practices? How might exploring related but ideologically distinct interpretations of "critical" sharpen our understanding and support the theoretical and political foundations of critical pedagogy in CDA/S?[1]

1. I will use the acronym CDA/S when referring to both CDA and CDS which constitutes a broader, more inclusive research field that encompasses CDA and other critical approaches to discourse.

2. CRITICAL THINKING[2]

Critical thinking is widely recognized as a key concept in many educational systems across the world, yet its interpretation and implementation differ significantly across educational traditions. Different understandings of critical thinking derive from distinct philosophical, cultural, and pedagogical principles and diverse underlying assumptions about knowledge, learning, and the roles of teachers and learners. A prominent view of critical thinking is rooted in the positivist tradition of the applied sciences, which emphasizes that knowledge should be based on observable phenomena (Gutek, 2003). This tradition suggests that learning can be broken down into measurable and quantifiable processes (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), and it focuses on learners' abilities to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize arguments through formal logical reasoning (Harris & Hodge, 1981). Halpern (2002) defines critical thinking as "purposeful, reasoned, and goal-directed – the kind of thinking involved in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions" (p. 6) while Cottrell (2005) refers to the development of skills involving mental processes such as categorization, selection, and judgment.

Critical thinking has been described as "a defining concept of the Western university" (Barnett, 1997, p. 2). University courses on critical thinking, often emphasizing the teaching of decontextualized micro-reasoning skills (Fung, 2005), have been introduced in various disciplines (e.g. Browne & Freeman, 2000; Epstein & Kernberger, 2004; Garrison, 1991; Gokhale, 1995; Gold, Holman & Thorpe, 2002; Twardy, 2004). With its roots in classical rhetoric (Billig, 1987; Kuhn, 1999), critical thinking in language learning uses methods found in natural sciences (Mitchell & Myles, 2013) to emphasize *objectivity, empirical evidence,* and *logical reasoning* in the acquisition of language. Language learners are expected to construct coherent and logically sound arguments, ensuring that their conclusions follow from their premises. Grammar is taught as a system of rules that the learners use in order to produce grammatically accurate language. From this perspective, language learners are often asked to deduce grammatical rules from given examples or solve linguistic puzzles through logical reasoning.

Overall, critical thinking in the positivist tradition uses formal tools (e.g., syllogisms, deductive and inductive reasoning) to evaluate arguments

2. Sections 2 and 3 of this paper have drawn on information presented analytically in Mitsikopoulou (2015), Chapters 2 and 3.

for logical consistency. It is assumed that arguments are transparent and so can be evaluated regardless of the sociohistorical context within which they are produced (e.g. who makes an argument and why). The positivist perspective posits language as a neutral medium, conveying logical argumentation and knowledge as objective, universal, and value free. This ahistorical and reductionist approach to analyzing arguments is, as will be shown below, problematic, assuming that "objective" truth can be reached through rigorous logical analysis.

2.1 Examples of Critical Thinking Activities in Language Learning

Activities of critical thinking in the positivist tradition often adopt a skills-based approach. They engage language learners in activities such as analyzing arguments, evaluating evidence, identifying the author's intent, distinguishing facts and opinions, separating relevant propositions from irrelevant ones, and identifying faulty reasoning and logical fallacies– those not founded in sound logic and solid evidence (Ellis, 1997).

A typical course on critical thinking places a central focus on argumentation (Kuhn, 1999) and teaches learners how to identify and evaluate arguments. Initially, learners are trained to identify main arguments within short, paragraph-length texts. As the course progresses, they apply techniques of argument analysis to more extended texts. For instance, learners may be asked to identify an article's main idea, the primary argument supporting it, and its conclusions. Next, instruction shifts to the second core skill: evaluating arguments. This stage involves assessing the validity and strength of arguments used to support claims. The development of critical thinking skills is supported through a variety of argumentative tasks, including analysis, synthesis, inference, interpretation, evaluation, and reasoning (Yeh, 2001). Moreover, learners often engage in drill-based exercises designed to analyze decontextualized statements. For example, some activities focus on helping students distinguish between claims and non-claims. Learners also practice developing sound reasoning skills. A common activity in this context involves providing learners with a list of logical fallacies – defined as errors in reasoning – and asking them to analyze arguments in a given text to identify the ones with faulty reasoning (Kanar, 1998).

In addition, learners are taught that critical thinking skills are essential for effective communication. These skills enable individuals to engage in various communicative tasks, such as arguing, explaining, making

decisions, predicting outcomes, exploring issues, finding solutions, and justifying actions (Allen, 2004). Textbooks on critical thinking emphasize its broader relevance, extending beyond educational and professional settings into multiple domains of social life (Moon, 2008). They also encourage learners to use these skills spontaneously in their everyday lives in the same way they practice these skills in the classroom (Browne & Keeley, 2007).

A key debate among theorists concerns whether critical thinking involves a generalizable set of skills or is specific to particular subjects. Some theorists support the view that the analytics skills of critical thinking are universal and applicable to all knowledge claims since they are grounded in logical principles independent of content, time, or space (Cottrell, 2005). Therefore, they can be used in any discourse context to evaluate logical reasoning and establish justified beliefs. Examples of such applications include freshman composition courses and academic study skill development (Ellis, 1997). Other researchers emphasize the importance of subject-specific knowledge in critical thinking, arguing that the varied epistemologies, reasoning methods, and argument types across disciplines mean that critical thinking differs from field to field (McPeck, 1981).

While alternative approaches to critical thinking have been suggested (e.g., Bailin et al., 1999; Papastephanou & Angeli, 2007; Walters; 1994), the skills-based approach continues to dominate teaching and assessment practices in both traditional and digital contexts. Learners' assessment is often based on standardized tests with content- and context-free multiple-choice questions (Ennis, 2006; Paul & Elder, 2007; Yeh, 2001). Critical thinking tests have been included in official, often nationwide, schemes of assessment (Mejía, 2009).

2.2 Critique of Critical Thinking in the Positivist Tradition

Critical thinking, in its various forms, has received significant criticism. One line of critique challenges the assumption that generalized and transferable ''thinking skills'' are universal and applicable across contexts, arguing that such skills fail to transfer effectively beyond the narrow settings in which they are taught (Atkinson, 1997). Others have highlighted its exclusivity and reductive nature, framing it as a highly normative and "logistic" model that privileges objectivity and rationality (Martin, 1992).

Critical thinking has also been characterized as a form of "analytic reductionism", aimed at breaking down arguments into their premises and

conclusions for logical analysis (Walters, 1994). To illustrate this concept, Walters refers to the character of Mr. Spock from *Star* Trek, a Vulcan who lives by reason and logic without the interference of emotion. Spock exemplifies the principles of conventional critical thinking instruction. He breaks arguments into their smallest components, identifies logical fallacies, and draws conclusions following evidence and logical reasoning. However, this mode of thinking excludes imagination, insight, and intuition, resulting in reasoning that is reactive rather than innovative. The problem with this approach, as Walters contends, is that while this approach may prepare learners who excel at mechanical, logic-driven analysis, it fails to cultivate creativity. Although logical analysis is necessary for academic and professional success, it is insufficient for preparing students to be responsible and creative citizens.

Similar concerns have been raised about the reductive tendencies of critical thinking, particularly in its treatment of language as a neutral vehicle for conveying arguments. Pennycook (1994) suggests that the tendency of critical thinking towards reductionism can oversimplify the complex nature of language as a social practice shaped by context, power relations, and interpersonal dynamics. Furthermore, language education should teach learners not only to deconstruct existing ideas but also to use those ideas as foundations for creative and unconventional thinking. Along similar lines, it has been suggested that a critical thinking approach, which teaches learners argumentative skills and engages them in activities like responding to comprehension questions and analyzing texts, can equip them with resources to understand the world around them. However, this approach does not prepare learners as future citizens to act upon their environment (Mitsikopoulou, 2016).

Critiques have also addressed what critical thinking frameworks tend to omit. It has been argued that constructing knowledge is not purely a cognitive act, but one deeply shaped by worldviews, beliefs, and assumptions (Giroux, 1994). This view emphasizes two missing components in conventional critical thinking instruction: the relationship between theory and facts, and the inseparability of knowledge from human interests, norms, and values. Without attention to these dimensions, critical thinking becomes detached from the sociocultural and historical contexts in which arguments are situated (Burbules & Berk, 1999). A further point of critique refers to the treatment of knowledge within such frameworks, which often presents it as objective and decontextualized rather than as an inquiry into complex, problematized issues.

It should be noted, however, that the analytical lens of the positivist critical thinking approach contrasts sharply with the one found in Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) in CDS. Rooted in critical theory, constructivism and post-positivism, argumentation in DHA is differently conceptualized as socially and historically situated and discursively constructed. It is, therefore, analyzed as a social practice embedded in discourse and realized in *topoi*, argumentative schemes or reasoning patterns that link specific arguments to conclusions and reveal how language legitimizes ideological positions through implicit logic (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Argumentation is viewed in DHA as a tool of domination and resistance (e.g., in legitimizing exclusion, racism, or nationalism) and logical fallacies are examined for their ideological function and persuasion impact in specific socio-historical contexts, not as reasoning errors.

3. CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Critical pedagogy has its roots in critical theory, a sociological and philosophical school of thought developed in the early twentieth century. Critical theory, which emerged and evolved primarily during the late 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, was developed by German intellectuals of the Frankfurt School. It drew on multiple traditions, incorporating elements of (1) Marxism, which emphasized liberation from political and economic domination; (2) phenomenology, with its focus on describing and interpreting lived experience; and (3) psychoanalysis, which aimed to decode the cultural and symbolic dimensions of social life (Kaplan, 1994). In addition to critical theory, critical pedagogy also derives from the traditions of American progressive education and social reconstructionism (e.g., work by John Dewey, George Counts, Harold Rugg, & Theodore Brameld). It critiques how education often aligns with capitalist market ideologies (Apple, 2000, 2001) and how schools frequently reproduce dominant cultural norms. Still, critical pedagogy asserts that education holds transformative potential, capable of reshaping culture and social institutions (Stanley, 1992).

Emerging in the United States during the 1980s, critical pedagogy was first linked to critical theory by Henry Giroux. He described it as a "critical foundation for a theory of radical pedagogy" (Giroux, 1983a, p. 1). In his seminal work *Theory and Resistance in Education* (Giroux, 1983b), Giroux proposed a radical approach to knowledge that positioned schools and pedagogy as central to broader societal change. His vision intertwined

the pedagogical and the political, aiming to redefine both through a mutually transformative lens.

Inspired by the work of Paulo Freire, a core figure in critical pedagogy, theorists developed a critique of formal education that stressed its sociopolitical and historical dimensions. A fundamental principle of critical pedagogy is that education is inherently political, positioning schooling as a cultural and political enterprise as well as a site of contestation and struggle (Gounari, 2020, 2022). In fact, critical pedagogy situates schools within their historical context and examines their role as part of the broader social and political structures of a class-driven society, challenging the perceived neutrality of education promoted by both conservative and liberal ideologies (McLaren, 1989). It also critiques right-wing conservatives and neoconservatives for advancing reactionary agendas within schools and universities (Apple, 2000). Moreover, it rejects the view of schools as neutral institutions whose primary function is to equip students with the knowledge and skills required for integration into society and the workforce. This perspective obscures the relationship between power and knowledge and treats culture as detached from politics.

Critical educators further challenge the liberal narrative of schools as neutral institutions capable of promoting social and cultural equality. According to critical pedagogy theorists, the interrelationship among school, culture, and power has long been ignored, because both conservative and progressive educators often refuse to acknowledge schools as political arenas that both repress and construct subjectivities. Aronowitz and Giroux (1991) contend that schools not only shape subjectivities through language, knowledge, and social practices but also actively discredit, disorganize, and dismantle specific ways of experiencing and interpreting the world.

Although varying definitions and conceptualizations have led to multiple interpretations of critical pedagogy, all share the belief in the political nature of education and its important role in developing learners' capacity for critical reflexivity (Biesta, 1998). Shor defines critical pedagogy as:

> habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse (Shor, 1992, p. 129).

Drawing on Freire, Giroux (1983, 1988) suggests that the term *critical* in critical pedagogy refers both to the development of *a language of critique* aimed at raising learners' awareness of dominant ideologies and a *language of possibility*, which facilitates the creation of counterhegemonic discourses and practices in educational settings. Through a language of critique, teachers can interrogate how subjectivities and identities are shaped by historically specific social practices and ideologies that predispose learners to particular ways of thinking and acting (Giroux, 1997). This process also encourages both teachers and students to examine how social differences are discursively constructed and sustained. The language of possibility complements critique by empowering teachers to explore how knowledge and power relations are constructed across various social practices, thereby offering learners opportunities to consider alternative perspectives and possibilities for change. Giroux further observes that radical education has often prioritized the language of critique over the language of possibility, emphasizing that the development of a critical consciousness also requires envisioning and enacting alternatives. Embedded in the language of possibility is *hope*, conceived as a theoretical construct, which could provide alternatives for a better future, "for a different, less-ugly world" (Freire, 1974, p. 91). Benesch (2001) notes that by overlooking hope as a theoretical construct, some theorists were led to view critical pedagogy as a negative and depressing pedagogy.

Another significant concept in this framework is *voice*, not as a liberal humanistic expression of free will, but as the creation of space for marginalized individuals to articulate their experiences. This allows "the voicing of their lives [to] transform both their lives and the social system that excludes them" (Pennycook, 2001, p. 101). Within a critical pedagogy, voice transcends mere speech, embodying the potential to articulate alternative realities. Moreover, the notion of voice is crucial for understanding students' social lives both within and outside the classroom and exploring how these experiences shape their learning.

Closely related to the concept of voice is the notion of *difference*. Giroux describes critical pedagogy as a *politics of difference*, which goes beyond a mere celebration of plurality. Within this context, he argues, "student voice must be rooted in a pedagogy that allows students to speak and to appreciate the nature of difference as part of both a democratic tolerance and a fundamental condition for critical dialogue and the development of forms of solidarity" (1988a, p. 72). This notion of difference enables teachers to conceptualize student identities as constructed through

multiple, often contradictory subject positions. It also equips both teachers and students with the tools to analyze how social groups are constituted and to examine "historical differences that manifest themselves in public struggles" (Giroux, 1997, p. 220).

Critical pedagogy theorists have also highlighted the significance of the *hidden curriculum* in schools, described as "the tacit teaching to students of norms, values, and dispositions that goes on simply by their living in and coping with the institutional expectations and routines of schools day in and day out for a number of years" (Apple, 2004, p.13). These unspoken norms and values – concerning competition, success and failure, work and play, discipline, stereotypes, and divisions based on gender and class, among others – are subtly transmitted to students as common sense (Kanpol, 1999). Students internalize these implicit social distinctions as natural, simultaneously absorbing visions of how social institutions are structured and their own roles within these systems (Apple, 2004). Such practices, although not explicitly outlined as educational goals in official documents, contribute to the reproduction of dominant ideologies that support existing structurally based inequalities and maintain the ideological hegemony of the most powerful classes in society. In this context, the concept of the hidden curriculum should go beyond exposing the implicit assumptions shaping school experience. It must also connect with the notion of liberation, enabling the development of a theory of schooling that addresses both the reproduction of societal norms and their potential transformation, since the ultimate goal of critical pedagogy is the development of critical consciousness.

In fact, concerning its political goals, critical pedagogy shares several core features with CDA although they originate from different disciplinary traditions (linguistics and education). These features concern their commitment to social justice, power analysis, and the transformation of oppressive structures. Concerning power relations and ideological structures, both CDA and critical pedagogy focus on how language reflects, sustains, and challenges power, with critical pedagogy seeking to empower students to question dominant ideologies in educational practices. They both encourage critical reflexivity, with CDA examining how researchers position themselves in discourse and critical pedagogy exploring teachers' and students' engagement in critical self-reflection of their roles within systems of power. Concerning emancipatory goals, they both aim to uncover hidden power dynamics in discourse and to challenge hegemonic discourses, with critical pedagogy similarly educating for liberation,

enabling students to become agents of change. Both also consider the historical, social, and political context in which discourse is produced as they attempt to deconstruct common-sense assumptions.

3.1 The Notion of Literacy in Critical Pedagogy and Related Activities

For Freire, literacy is not a neutral or merely technical skill, but a deeply political process that involves critically engaging with language in order to interpret, demythologize, and transform cultural narratives and unjust social structures. It is closely connected to building both individual and collective self-esteem while cultivating a commitment to transform the social conditions of one's community (Burbules & Berk 1999). As such, literacy is not merely about decoding a text, but about preparing citizens to analyze, question, and resist systems of oppression. Freire famously argued that "reading the word" is inseparable from "reading the world", emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between literacy and social consciousness (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 35). He warned that illiteracy constrains people's ability to interpret reality, express their understanding, and ultimately reimagine their understanding of the world (Freire, 2006).

Freire (1974, 1985) argues that education should focus on the development of *conscientization* – a critical consciousness enabling teachers and students to connect their personal experiences with the broader social contexts in which they are embedded. This critical consciousness is the first step toward *liberatory praxis*, an ongoing cycle of reflection and action. For Freire, changes in consciousness and concrete action are inherently interconnected. Critical pedagogy, then, aims to empower students, leading them to emancipation and helping them transform their lives.

In Freire's view, literacy is an act of knowing – one that positions learners as active participants in the reading process rather than as passive objects of the teacher's instruction. Within this pedagogy of inclusion, literacy provides "the possibility for participation, the possibility for different languages and cultures and forms of knowledge to be allowed a pedagogical role" (Pennycook, 2001, p. 103). This approach redefines the traditional teacher-student dynamic, creating a collaborative space where both parties critically examine the socially constructed nature of knowledge. In such classrooms, "students analyze their reality for the purpose of participating in its transformation. They address social

problems by sharing and comparing experiences, analyzing root causes, and exploring strategies for change" (Auerbach, 1995, p. 12). Elaborating on this, Auerbach and McGrail (1991) suggest that the impact of critical pedagogy lies in its potential to bring about gradual and cumulative transformations. By increasing students' confidence, validating personal experiences, and encouraging shifts in perspective, critical pedagogy aims to reshape classroom social dynamics and empower learners to critically engage with and examine their everyday realities.

In this conceptualization of literacy, teachers play a significant role in enabling learners to critically examine their histories, experiences, and cultural environments while recognizing and decoding the dominant culture's codes and signifiers, in order to escape their own environments (Macedo, 2006, xiii). Consequently, in an educational context shaped by critical pedagogy, teachers must constantly teach a dual curriculum: a curriculum that empowers students to make sense of their everyday life, and a curriculum that equips them with tools valued in the dominant culture, such as specific skills for social mobility (ibid.). Although the development of such skills may be important, as McLaren (1989, p. 188) argues, critical pedagogy prioritizes "schooling for self and social empowerment" over the mastery of technical skills aligned with marketplace logic. He particularly emphasized the need to consider the purposes for which these skills are developed and applied. Along similar lines, critical pedagogy engages learners in activities that focus on alternative practices and suggests optional reading materials. It allows learners to choose what to read while introducing alternative forms of assessment by assigning learners responsibility for their own learning. This form of assessment involves learners in making course design decisions and preparing meaningful assignments (Benesch, 2001; Lin, 2004).

An analysis of lesson plans on the Iraq war by Rethinking Schools, an activist organization embracing the perspective of critical pedagogy revealed that learners were involved in activities that aimed at raising learners' empathy and critical questioning, rather than providing neutral or "objective" accounts of the war (Mitsikopoulou, 2015). For instance, learners would be asked to interrogate the narratives used in media texts and official documents about the war, to focus on questions like "whose interests?" and "why?" to critically analyze the causes and implications of the war and examine media representations. In addition, they would explore the historical context of war, read alternative, non-corporate media texts, and antiwar literature, watch anti-war films, and write anti-

war poems. They would analyze pictures from the war, and focus on big ideas such as the human cost of war, and veterans' post-war experiences. These activities aimed to develop empathetic and critically aware learners who challenge hegemonic truths. Overall, activities in critical pedagogy aimed at developing learners' "language of critique" and "language of possibility", helping them theorize their experiences and envision alternatives to existing systems of oppression.

Central to critical pedagogy is the concept of critical thinking, which is conceptualized in ways that differ significantly from the positivist tradition. While the latter often emphasizes context-free, transferable cognitive skills, critical pedagogy frames critical thinking as a socially and politically situated practice. As Benesch (2001) suggests, critical thinking should move beyond abstract reasoning to interrogate the social, historical, and political foundations of conventional knowledge. Indeed, in critical pedagogy, critical thinking is understood as *praxis*, a dynamic interplay of reflection and action aimed at transforming society. It involves uncovering how language constructs social realities and encourages students not only to analyse arguments logically but also to question and challenge dominant narratives. Consequently, although critical thinking holds a prominent position in several curricula worldwide, it is essential to examine how the term is being used: as a transferable cognitive skill within a positivist framework, or as a socially and politically situated practice, as proposed by critical pedagogy.

3.2 Critique of Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy has been the subject of critique mainly along three lines identified by Pennycook (2001). The first refers to the political nature of critical pedagogy, which could be alienating for some teachers (see also Johnston, 1999). Critics argue that critical pedagogy often remains at the level of grand theorizing oriented, focusing on broad critiques of schooling rather than offering practical guidelines for teaching. Usher and Edwards (1994, p. 218) talk about a "curious silence on concrete educational practices", while Gore (1993, pp. 110-111) warns that "in the juxtaposition of its abstract metatheoretical analysis of schooling with its abstract dictates and declarations for what teachers should do", critical pedagogy may lead to a prescriptive kind of pedagogy. However, it should be noted that critical pedagogy should be understood as a broader framework, not a teaching method, allowing individual teachers to adapt its principles to their

specific contexts (Johnston, 1999). Moving beyond the "fetish of method" (Bartolomé, 2003), which conceptualizes the curriculum as a rigid series of steps to be followed, critical pedagogy should be perceived as a political project that has been variously adapted in different educational settings, as research publications have repeatedly illustrated over the last decades.

A second point of critique concerns the concepts of voice and inclusion, particularly the lack of clarity regarding how the expression of one's voice contributes to empowerment and facilitates social change. Indeed, this has been one of the most misunderstood aspects of critical pedagogy. As Simon (1992) argues, the important notions of voice and dialogue have often been trivialized in practice, reduced to superficial exercises in which students' voices are merely acknowledged rather than meaningfully engaged. Such practices, however, stand in contrast to the deeper goals of dialogicity that critical pedagogy envisions. Moreover, failing to move beyond a North American framework of individualistic idealism (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993), critics wrongly accuse critical pedagogy of romanticizing the notion of voice, equating it narrowly with the writing and speaking of marginalized people (Luke, 1996), rather than understanding it as part of a broader project of collective agency and transformation.

A third point of critique concerns the transformative vision of education within critical pedagogy, which has been challenged for its rationalist assumptions, namely the expectations that students will logically arrive at an awareness of their oppression, while teachers are implicitly positioned as possessors of universal truth (Ellsworth, 1989; Lather, 1992). This critique implies a hierarchical model of knowledge that runs counter to the emancipatory goals of critical pedagogy. Similarly, Gore (1993) criticizes the lack of reflexivity within critical pedagogy, pointing to its failure to put its own assumptions to critical scrutiny. Further critique on this point has emerged from African American researchers who support the view that critical pedagogy has often marginalized issues of race or treated them as secondary to class struggle. Scholars such as Ladson-Billings (1999) and Allen (2004) argue that critical pedagogy has inadequately addressed the lived realities and epistemologies of racially minoritized communities, and in doing so, risks reproducing the very exclusions it aims to critique. They consequently call for more culturally responsive, historically grounded, and racially literate approaches to transformative education. Similarly, Gounari (2022) calls for a more context-sensitive praxis that avoids universalizing claims and focuses more on the complexities of power, identity, and social location.

4. CRITICAL LITERACY IN AUSTRALIA

The concept of *critical literacy* has been interpreted in various ways and is often discussed in abstract terms (Brown, 1999). However, one case in Australia offers a distinctive and empirically grounded case of how critical literacy can be theorized and enacted in classroom practice. It is important to examine this approach as part of a broader analysis of critical perspectives on language education, not only because of its unique pedagogical contributions but also due to its global impact – influencing curriculum design and teacher education in Asia, Europe, and North America – and its adaptability to contemporary, multicultural contexts.

This section examines how critical literacy has been conceptualized and implemented in Australia, where it has evolved into a distinctive approach shaped by three key influences: Freirean critical pedagogy, Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), and the Sydney School's genre-based pedagogy. Drawing on the work of Paulo Freire and developed by scholars such as Allan Luke, Peter Freebody, and Barbara Comber, Australian critical literacy emphasizes the role of language and literacy in shaping power relations, social inequalities, and cultural identities, with the aim of empowering learners to critically analyze and challenge dominant discourses through close, systematic textual analysis. These contributions extend and reframe Freirean critical pedagogy to suit contemporary, multicultural, and multilingual classrooms in Australia's local context.

SFG provided a framework for analyzing how language constructs meaning in texts through concepts such as transitivity, modality, and theme/rheme at the sentence level and above the sentence level. SFG offered teachers and students the analytic tools to explore how information is organized within a sentence and enabled them to recognize how texts serve specific social functions and how language choices can influence perceptions, either reinforcing or challenging social hierarchies. Curricular interventions based on the teaching of SFG (Halliday & Martin, 1993) and its specialized metalanguage were introduced in various educational contexts in Australia. Students were asked to analyse different types of texts using this metalanguage.

Heavily influenced by SFG, the Sydney School's genre-based pedagogy in Australia sought to make the conventions of different text types (genres) explicit. This pedagogy supports the view that any critical literacy pedagogy seeking to address educational inequities for students from lower socioeconomic and minority backgrounds must incorporate

explicit and systematic instruction in the linguistic and semiotic modes of texts (Derewianka, 1990; Martin, 1989; Threadgold, 1989). The goal was to equip learners with the knowledge needed to produce texts valued by academic and professional institutions, providing all learners–regardless of background – access to powerful forms of language traditionally reserved for socioeconomically advantaged groups (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). Particularly in states like Queensland and New South Wales, these ideas were incorporated into curriculum design, teacher education, and policy initiatives, offering rich, practice-based examples of how critical approaches to language education can be enacted at a systemic level. Although not strictly critical in intent, the Sydney School's genre-based pedagogy has influenced equity-focused literacy instruction.

Drawing on the influences of Freirean pedagogy, SFG, and genre-based approaches, Lankshear (1997, p. 44) conceptualizes critical literacy through two key dimensions: developing a critical perspective on texts and understanding the broader social practices that are "mediated by, made possible, and partially sustained through reading, writing, viewing, transmitting, etc., texts". He further frames critical literacy around four educational goals for classroom learning within the context of an inclusive pedagogy:

a. Clarify the connection between the word and the world: Enable learners to make explicit the relationship between language and their lived realities.
b. Examine social and discursive practices as historical constructs: Provide opportunities to view these practices as products of history rather than natural or fixed.
c. Analyze the impact of language and discourse: Encourage learners to explore how different uses of language can shape varied outcomes for individuals and groups.
d. Appreciate diverse ways of doing and being: Provide opportunities for learners to value the vast range of existing and potential human experiences and behaviours.

According to Luke (2000), critical literacy seeks to reshape literacy education to better serve marginalized learners, particularly those who have been excluded from accessing dominant discourses and texts due to factors such as gender, culture, or socioeconomic status. In parallel, historical, ethnographic, and sociolinguistic studies have reconceptualized literacy as a social practice, emphasizing its multiple forms (hence the

use of *literacies* in the plural) and its embeddedness in broader social institutions, discursive practices, and ideological frameworks (Gee, 1996; Street, 1993). Building on this understanding, critical literacy in the Australian context has been employed to challenge dominant narratives in media, literature, and educational texts.

The critical literacy tradition in Australia shares several conceptual and analytical foundations with CDA, particularly in its focus on the relationship between language, power, and ideology. Both approaches are grounded in critical theory, drawing on thinkers such as Foucault, Gramsci, and Freire. They reject the notion of language as neutral, instead understanding it as deeply embedded in ideological and power structures, with a shared commitment to social justice and educational equity.

A central concern of both CDA and Australian critical literacy is the relationship between language and power. For instance, CDA, especially in the work of Fairclough (1992) and the DHA developed by Wodak (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2016), examines how discourse constructs social identities, hierarchies, and knowledge systems. Similarly, the Four Resources Model by Luke and Freebody (1999) highlights how texts position readers, often working to naturalize dominant ideologies. In these frameworks, teachers and students are encouraged to interrogate whose interests are served by particular texts and whose perspectives are silenced or marginalized.

In terms of pedagogical application, CDA offers analytical tools, such as the examination of topoi, intertextuality, and framing, that can be used in educational contexts. These tools help students uncover implicit assumptions and analyze how texts reproduce or resist dominant narratives. Australian critical literacy frequently draws on these methods, especially in secondary English classrooms, where students are taught to critically engage with real-world texts. Finally, the integration of critical text analysis in classroom practice encourages students to become active and critical participants in meaning-making. Learners might analyze news articles for bias, identify recurring linguistic patterns that reinforce stereotypes, or investigate the representational politics of textbooks and policy documents.

4.1. Activities and Pedagogical Models of Critical Literacy in Australia

A number of pedagogical models have been developed in Australia for critical literacy. One that provides a comprehensive framework for literacy

education that combines the development of basic literacy skills together with the critical analysis of texts is the Four Resources Model. Developed by Freebody and Luke (1990), this critical literacy model reconceptualizes literacy as a multi-faceted social practice and identifies four key roles for readers: code breaker, meaning maker, text user, and text analyst. As *code breakers*, readers decode the linguistic features in order to understand how a text works. As *text participants*, learners draw on prior knowledge to interpret the literal and implied meanings of texts in order to examine how ideas are represented and how cultural meanings are constructed. As *text users*, learners focus on the purpose of texts and on how different genres function in specific contexts to produce new knowledge. Finally, as *text analysts,* readers critically analyze texts and question underlying assumptions, power relations, and ideologies embedded within them. This model illustrates clearly that effective literacy is not just about technical proficiency but also about critical engagement with texts and the sociocultural practices in which they are situated (Luke & Freebody, 1999). By incorporating insights from critical theory, genre theory, and systemic functional linguistics, the model provides a pedagogical tool that teachers can use to scaffold literacy.

In the context of critical literacy in Australia, students are introduced to various genres (Burns & Hood, 1998) from different discourses (literary, media, professional, etc). For example, they may be asked to analyze a news article, in order to identify how language is used to present a particular social issue, such as immigration. By examining lexicogrammatical features, naming devices, cohesive elements, and other features used in texts learners identify media representations and learn to recognize the power dynamics at play in a text (Mitsikopoulou, 2020). Critical literacy activities may also address the historical marginalization of Indigenous voices through analysis of Indigenous literature, examination of how Indigenous issues are presented in the media and discussions about the ongoing impacts of colonialism (Morgan, 1997). Such activities invite learners to critically examine dominant narratives and reflect on the broader implications of historical and contemporary representations of Indigenous peoples.

Critical literacy activities often begin by deconstructing texts to reveal implicit assumptions, biases, and power dynamics. In groups, learners identify underlying assumptions, share interpretations, and challenge one another's perspectives. Eventually, they understand how texts operate within social contexts and examine how language constructs social identities and power relations (Comber & Simpson, 2001). Next, learners

proceed to the reconstruction phase in which they are asked to create their own text (in the same or another genre from the original given to them) with alternative representations of the same issue or topic (see Rothery, 1996, for the genre-based teaching/learning cycle). Similarly to critical pedagogy, critical literacy in Australia seeks to empower students to move beyond the passive consumption of texts and to transform them into active participants and citizens capable of reshaping discourse and challenging dominant discourses and ideologies.

4.2. Critique of Critical Literacy in Australia

The Australian critical literacy approach has been subject to criticism, mainly concerning its complexities and limitations in practice. A primary concern is the overemphasis on ideology, with critics warning that prioritizing sociopolitical agendas over the development of basic literacy skills may lead to an unbalanced curriculum, potentially placing learners who struggle with basic reading and writing skills in a disadvantageous position (Henderson, 2009).

Another significant critique is the issue of teacher preparedness and professional development. Implementing critical literacy requires teachers to use specialized metalanguage, have a thorough understanding of sociopolitical contexts and employ sophisticated pedagogical approaches. However, many teachers report feeling underprepared, as such training is often inadequately addressed in professional development programs. Without appropriate support, there is a risk of oversimplifying or misapplying critical literacy principles (Comber & Simpson, 2001).

Another point of critique concerns the lack of consensus about the meaning of the concept of critical literacy. Different interpretations have often resulted in inconsistent applications of the approach. Some theorists warn that this vagueness may eventually lead to superficial engagement with texts instead of genuinely critical analysis (Luke, 2000).

Resistance from parents and communities has been another obstacle to the implementation of critical literacy. Some parents view it as excessively politicized or an inappropriate imposition of personal values in education. This resistance has created friction between schools and communities and made it difficult to maintain critical literacy programs without controversy (Knobel & Lankshear, 2005).

A further critique involves the focus on textual analysis in critical literacy practices, which often emphasizes the deconstruction of texts to

highlight power differences or ideological flaws. While this is a key goal of critical literacy, critics argue that an overemphasis on deconstruction can result in cynicism rather than empowering students to create and engage with alternative, more equitable narratives (Morgan, 1997). Moreover, genre theories have been criticized for focusing too heavily on formal linguistic structures and conventions, potentially leading to a mechanistic approach to literacy education (Luke, 1996).

Finally, there are notable assessment challenges associated with critical literacy. Since standardized assessment tests are typically designed to measure traditional literacy skills, they fail to capture the sociopolitical awareness that critical literacy aims to develop. This disconnect creates tensions between policy requirements and classroom practices, complicating efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of critical literacy programs (Comber & Simpson, 2001).

5. CRITICAL LANGUAGE AWARENESS

Critical Language Awareness (CLA) was developed in the United Kingdom in the early 1990s as part of a broader movement in applied linguistics. Influenced by Norman Fairclough and the Lancaster School of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which aimed to reveal implicit ideologies and power structures in texts, CLA examines the relationship between language and power. It explores how language both reflects and constructs social reality (Fairclough, 1992), affecting the way people understand the world and their place within it.

One of the key principles of CLA is that all language is ideological since it reflects the interests of particular social groups and contributes to the maintenance of existing power structures (Fairclough, 1989). Consequently, language use cannot be neutral, but it is always shaped by the historical, cultural, social, and economic contexts in which it occurs.

Rejecting the view of language as merely a tool for communication and drawing on Halliday, CLA views language as a form of social practice. It proposes that learners should be involved in a critical analysis of texts to reveal how language choices simultaneously reflect and reinforce dominant ideologies. As Fairclough (1996, p. 6) suggests in the introduction to the well-known edited volume under the title *Critical Language Awareness*,

> a language education focused upon training in language skills, without a critical component, would seem to be failing in its responsibility to

> learners. People cannot be effective citizens in a democratic society if their education cuts them off from critical consciousness of key elements within their physical or social environment (Fairclough, 1996, p. 6).

Inspired also by Freire's (1970) work on critical pedagogy, CLA encourages the development of critical consciousness which involves raising learners' awareness of how language can be used to oppress or empower individuals (Clark et al., 1990). CLA aims to help learners become critically aware of how linguistic choices influence their own positions in society, as well as those of others. Most importantly, it encourages learners to develop strategies for identifying and contesting the devices that texts use in their attempt to position and manipulate readers (Kress, 1989). Moreover, for Talbot (1996), "one thing people can become more aware of is how language shapes or 'constructs' them as particular sorts of social subjects, affecting various aspects of their social identities" (p. 174). In this way, CLA seeks to empower learners by raising their awareness of how language works to reinforce social inequality (Clark, 1996) and to provide them with the tools to resist manipulative discourses and promote social change.

The text-context relationship is also central in CLA given that language use is embedded in social contexts and is influenced by social, cultural, and political factors. Therefore, the analysis of language from a CLA perspective involves understanding how texts and discourses are shaped by their contexts and how contexts, in turn, affect the ways people think and act. Moreover, it is suggested that any text – whether spoken, written, multimodal, or digital – should be analyzed in relation to the societal structures that shape it (Fairclough, 1992).

5.1. Examples of CLA Activities in Practice

As part of a broader movement in applied linguistics, CLA was incorporated into language education programs, such as ESL/EFL, early literacy, literature, and adult basic education (Janks, 1993; Hamilton, Barton & Ivanič, 1994). In these language education programs learners are asked to critically analyze texts from a variety of genres and discourses (media texts, such as editorials, newspaper reports, advertisements and advice columns, political speeches, and doctor-patient interviews, among others). Students, as critical text analysts (Mitsikopoulou, 2020), are asked to examine how an article, e.g. a news article, represents a particular social group and discuss how language choices position this group in the specific context.

Acknowledging that critical reading has not generally been encouraged in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, with either lower or advanced proficiency level learners, Wallace (1996) attempted to introduce critical reading in her classes and concluded that her students began to think of the roles of texts, readers and the media generally in more critical reflective ways. She suggests the introduction of critical reading, from primary to tertiary level, through activities that challenge the ideological assumptions and the propositional knowledge of texts. She further claims that as teachers "we need to guide readers to an awareness of ideological content simply because it is so often presented as 'obvious'" (Wallace, 1996, p. 61). By encouraging learners to question taken-for-granted assumptions, we guide them to consider alternative ways of thinking and communicating.

In an academic writing context, Ivanič and Simpson (1996) examined the writers' responsibilities and rights and suggested specific activities that could be used in similar contexts. These include class discussions on the different ways writers may represent themselves, peer readings that analyze representations of authorial voices, or analysis of authorial voices in published academic texts. Clark (1996) similarly proposes CLA activities that encourage learners to reflect on their own language use and to consider how their linguistic choices might contribute to the reproduction or challenge of existing power relations. This reflective practice, she argues, may promote a more conscious and ethical use of language, one that aligns with principles of social justice and equality. Ivanic (1990) stresses the importance of co-constructing knowledge through the collaboration and dialogue developed between teachers and learners in CLA activities.

On several occasions the critical analysis of texts is suggested to be conducted through Halliday's SFG (Fairclough, 1992), using metalanguage that adheres to a view of language as social practice. However, the purpose of CLA should not only be in terms of raising learners' awareness, according to Clark (1996), but it should also "help them on the way to emancipation by giving them the chance to challenge existing conventions and the right to offer alternatives in order to help shape new conventions" (p. 124).

More recent work on CLA has suggested that out-of-classroom digital language practices of EFL university learners, such as virtual conversations, can be used as classroom material to develop learners' critical language awareness about various social, cultural, political, and racial inequalities (Sultana & Dovchin, 2019). On another occasion, learners were asked to collect data on their own speech, something that offered them a higher

level of metalinguistic awareness and allowed them to better understand "the linguistic landscape of their social worlds". The importance of such an activity is that it brings these worlds into the classroom and foregrounds them as "valuable cultural and linguistic spaces for learning" (Alim, 2010, p. 218). In another recent project on the linguistic landscape in Eastern France with lower secondary students, interdisciplinary activities were used in the development of critical language awareness. These included creating language biographies using home languages, participating in a linguistic landscape photo marathon in the town, and other activities to enhance learners' identities and raise their awareness of the power dynamics in their local environment (Cadi et al., 2023).

5.2. Critique of Critical Language Awareness

Critical Language Awareness (CLA), though influential in promoting reflective and socially conscious language education, has received several critiques, particularly from applied linguists. One major concern is that it places excessive emphasis on issues of power and ideology, often at the expense of addressing students' practical language development needs, especially in EFL/ESL contexts (Widdowson, 1995). Critics argue that CLA's abstract and complex nature may pose difficulties for students with lower language proficiency, as engaging in discourse analysis or ideological critique typically demands advanced language skills. According to this view, CLA may neglect the systematic teaching of grammar and linguistic competence – skills that are essential for students to function effectively in both academic and civic contexts (Carter, 1990).

Additionally, CLA has been criticized, much like CDA, for being overtly political, and for promoting a specific political agenda instead of learners' critical thinking. According to this view, this approach may alienate learners who may not share the same ideological positions. Another common critique focuses on CLA's emphasis on negative dimensions of language such as its role in sustaining inequality, neglecting its positive functions, such as facilitating cooperation, social cohesion, and creativity (Cameron, 1995). As such, some suggest that CLA would benefit from adopting a more balanced approach that recognizes both the empowering and oppressive roles language can play.

Despite the criticism that CLA has received for complexity, political bias, and overemphasis on ideology, CLA programs represent a significant contribution to applied linguistics and language education. They continue

to influence language education worldwide. However, CLA failed to maintain lasting momentum in British education. One major factor was the shift in national education policy during the 1990s and 2000s toward standardization, accountability, and skills-based instruction. CLA's emphasis on ideology, power, and discourse clashed with the depoliticized focus of government policy, and initiatives like the National Literacy Strategy promoted more functional and grammatical models of language. Additionally, CLA's perceived political charge, which was rooted in its critique of dominant institutions and discourses, was seen as a potential threat by conservative policymakers and administrators, leading to reluctance to formally incorporate it into curricula.

Another major barrier was the lack of institutional support and teacher training. Implementing CLA required teachers to have good background knowledge in linguistics, discourse analysis, and sociopolitical theory, areas in which most were not formally trained. Without systemic professional development, teachers struggled to apply CLA meaningfully, and it was often reduced to superficial language awareness activities, according to Clark and Ivanic (1997). Furthermore, the approach lacked clear pedagogical coherence and classroom analytic tools, making it difficult to operationalize. In contrast, other models like genre-based pedagogy as presented in the case of Australia and the Four Resources Model offered more structured, adaptable, and teacher-friendly alternatives. Consequently, while CLA had a significant theoretical impact, its practical limitations and competition from more robust frameworks contributed to its limited adoption in UK schools.

6. CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of the four approaches presented in this article has aimed to illustrate different understandings of the "critical" in language education. Critical thinking, critical pedagogy, critical literacy, and critical language awareness approaches rely on different theories of language and have embedded in their different understandings of how knowledge is constructed and how social subjects – teachers and learners – are positioned in educational discourse.

The analysis conducted in this article has also revealed that the four approaches belong to two different schools of thought in language education. Critical thinking in the positivist tradition has emphasized logical reasoning, analytical skills, and objectivity in learning, focusing

on equipping learners with essential reasoning abilities and neglecting the sociocultural dimensions of language use. It, therefore, adheres to what has been defined as educational pragmatism, which systematically reduces educational issues to problems and solutions. In this particular case, it is critical pragmatism which acknowledges that our standards, beliefs, values, and discourse practices themselves require some kind of evaluation and appraisal (Cherryholmes, 1988).[3]

Critical pedagogy, critical literacy, and critical language awareness, on the other hand, adhere to emancipatory literacy pedagogies and have been suggested as alternative approaches to pragmatism (Mitsikopoulou, 2010). Critical pedagogy, for instance, is inherently political, seeking to empower learners to question and transform oppressive social structures. Expanding on critical pedagogy, critical literacy, particularly in the Australian context, focuses on text analysis and explicit instruction of genres in order to empower marginalized learners by giving them access to valued text types. Finally, CLA has brought together elements of critical pedagogy and critical discourse analysis, focusing on raising learners' awareness of how language reinforces social inequalities. When these approaches emerged, they had a clear focus on questions of power and inequality and they offered valuable insights into the transformative potential of language education.

Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) typology of citizen education provides a useful lens through which to evaluate the educational orientations of different critical approaches to language and literacy. Critical thinking in the positivist tradition, often found in mainstream education, aligns most closely with the promotion *of personally responsible citizens*. This tradition emphasizes logical reasoning, individual moral responsibility, and problem-solving skills, but tends to treat knowledge as neutral and avoids engaging with broader social or political structures. While students may learn to think clearly and act ethically, they are not necessarily encouraged to interrogate systemic injustices or question dominant ideologies. In contrast, critical pedagogy, critical literacy in Australia and critical language awareness reflect a commitment to cultivating *justice-oriented citizens*. These approaches not only promote critique of texts and discourse but also emphasize structural analysis, ideological awareness,

3. Critical pragmatism, according to Cherryholmes (1988), is an alternative to vulgar pragmatism which accepts unquestionably explicit and implicit conventions, rules and discourse practices and is thus socially reproductive.

and transformative action. For instance, critical pedagogy, grounded in Freirean principles, explicitly seeks to unveil and challenge oppressive systems. Australian critical literacy, with its classroom-based applications and incorporation of systemic functional linguistics, empowers learners to identify and disrupt normalized power relations in texts. Similarly, CLA equips students with tools to critically analyze how language sustains inequality and marginalization. While aspects of *participatory citizenship* may be promoted – especially through collaborative learning or civic engagement tasks – the overarching goal of these critical approaches is to develop learners who question the status quo and act toward social transformation.

Where do we stand today in relation to the approaches presented? Pennycook suggested that the use of the term critical "has perhaps reached saturation level" since much of this work has become conventional and applied linguistics today has shifted anyway to a "broader and more critical conceptualization of language in social life" (2010, p. 1). Moreover, our attention today has moved away from old static language ideologies and a critique of monolingual ideologies towards more plurilingual approaches (Karavas, 2024), given the cultural, social, and geopolitical concerns which are characterized by multiplicity, hybridity, and diversity. Globalization, mass immigration, and technological advancements have dramatically marked the field of language education shifting our understanding of language and language learning toward more plurilingual practices and more fluid ways of meaning construction (Dendrinos, 2024). However, new theorizations of language and language learning are still in the making and the concept of critical is still relevant since it enables us to question the terms and the frames within which we operate.

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