CHAPTER 2

Comprehension Instruction from a Critical Theory Viewpoint

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Reading the world by reading the word.
—PAULO FREIRE (1998, p. xiii)

What is the goal of teaching reading? Is it for comprehension? If so, comprehension about what? What is the purpose of comprehension? In this chapter, these fundamental questions are considered from a viewpoint of critical theory to discuss teachers' comprehension instruction in the U.S. context. The opening quotation signals the framework of this chapter: The purpose of comprehension instruction is to empower students by assisting them to read the world and recreate it for social justice. As I write this chapter within a particular theoretical framework of critical literacies, teachers also often conduct their practice using a certain conceptual lens. By discussing reading from critical perspectives, this chapter aims to help teachers expand their lens on reading and invites them to implement critical literacies concepts into their comprehension instruction.

Critical literacies involve both reading and writing practices. However, for the purpose of this chapter on comprehension instruction, I particularly focus on reading practices. I broadly define *critical literacies* as cultural, social, and political practices that examine the relationship between language and power in texts. The term *critical* originated from the Greek word *kriticos* which is "the ability to argue and judge" (Luke, 2012, p. 5). Accordingly, the meaning of *critical* can be understood from the concept of "critique." I intentionally use the plural form critical *literacies* in this chapter to emphasize that rather than being a fixed practice, it is diverse and multiple processes and practices in cultural, social, and political contexts. Within these plural forms of literacies, *texts* are defined as printed and nonprinted materials, such as pictures.

I write this chapter based on the gap in the previous dominant discourse on reading comprehension in the United States. Over decades, reading comprehension has often been

viewed using linguistic and cognitive lenses that tend to focus on reading as individual and isolated skills sets, without much attention to the influence of cultural and historical contexts on reading (Muspratt, Luke, & Freebody, 1997). I challenge this view of reading as limited and incomplete, aligned with the contemporary critical scholars (Gee, 1996; Luke & Freebody, 1999; Morrell, 2008; Moje & Luke, 2009; Shannon, 2002) who emphasize sociopolitical aspects of reading.

Another rationale for writing this chapter is related to my experiences. I work with preservice and inservice teachers on a daily basis. For the past 10 years, I have found that many teachers who are taking the first literacy foundation course in a graduate program have not heard about "critical literacies." Although there are some who have heard about them, they seem to understand them in a different way. For example, I observed that many preservice and inservice teachers view critical reading and thinking as equivalent to higher order thinking. Higher order thinking, such as reasoning and inferring skills, is not necessarily critical thinking, which involves critical consciousness and social action (Freire, 1970), but I found that these two concepts are often viewed as being identical. Based on these experiences as a teacher educator and researcher in the field of critical literacies, I attempt to provide teachers with broader perspectives of reading from a critical stance. Throughout this chapter, I discuss the overview of critical literacies and suggest future directions relative to comprehension instruction. More specifically, I highlight critical reading in this chapter by discussing the following:

- Theoretical foundation of critical literacies.
- Contemporary research on critical literacies.
- Practical suggestions for promoting instructional practice of reading comprehension through critical literacies.

Theoretical Foundation of Critical Literacies

In this section, I discuss the theoretical foundation of critical literacies by focusing on how the theory is linked to other existing relevant theories that were developed and are now prominent in the United States.

Critical Literacies Theory and Relevant Theories

No literacy theory is constructed alone, and critical literacy theory is no exception. It is important to examine relevant theories, because they give insights into how the theory of critical literacies has developed. First, critical literacies theory shares common aspects with sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) by being rooted in constructivism. By focusing on the reader's identities, both sociocultural and critical literacies theories emphasize the agency of the reader in comprehending the text. Both theories see reading comprehension as an active and complex process, as opposed to behaviorist perspectives, which view it as a passive linear skill and "a behavior composed of isolated skills" (Tracey & Morrow, 2012, p. 41). The view of reading as a dynamic process shapes the teacher's role as a facilitator so that the student is able to construct and reconstruct the text rather than transmit what the author says.

Critical literacies theory is also relevant to sociocultural theory, which pays attention to the cultural, historical, and social context to understand the text. The importance of the context in critical literacies practices is shown through the work of sociocultural

scholars. For instance, Bakhtin's (1981) concept of *heteroglossia*, simultaneous existence of diversity within a language (Ivanov, 2001), indicates that reading is multiple and complex, and can be understood from a particular context. Another sociocultural theorist, Gee (1990, 1996, 2008) also illustrates the importance of the context through his seminal work on the difference between discourse (small *d* to represent language itself) and Discourse (capital *D* to represent language in use for social practice). Gee (1990) stresses that "what is important is not language, surely not grammar, but saying (writing)–doing–being–valuing–believing combinations" (p. 142). These combinations are what he termed *Discourse*, the language use in social context. The context includes not only the place and the time but also the reader's past experiences. Therefore, sociocultural theory implies that the teacher's role is to help students bring their cultural identities and backgrounds to the forefront in understanding the language and the text, which is the major component of critical literacies.

Along with these sociocultural perspectives of reading, Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory also shares similar aspects with critical literacies theory by focusing on the significance of the reader's identities and the social context to interpret beyond a single meaning of the text. Transactional theory implies that the reader transacts with the author to make meaning of the text, which is only ink and paper without the reader (Rosenblatt, 1978). It illustrates that reading is not a one-way transfer of the author's point of view to readers; rather, it is a back-and-forth, active transaction between the reader and the author in a given context. Rosenblatt intentionally used the term "transaction," compared to the term *interaction*, to illustrate the equal and dynamic role between the reader and the text.

In her quote, Rosenblatt (1984) recognizes the relationship between the word and the world, as does critical theory, by describing aesthetic reading as "what we are seeing and feeling and thinking, on what is aroused within us by the sound of the words, and by what they point to in the human and natural world" (p. 70). In transactional theory, the word and the world are not separate concepts, since the reader is "living through during his relationship with that particular text" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 25). This aspect implies that the teacher's role is to help the student to understand the world through the word by actively transacting with the author.

With these shared commonalities among the theories, however, the major difference is that critical literacies theory focuses more on language of power and ideology in the text than sociocultural theory and transactional theory. Critical literacies involve all dimensional reading practices: "second guessing, reading against the grain, asking hard and harder questions, seeing underneath, behind, and beyond texts, trying to see and 'call' how these texts establish and use power over us, over others, on whose behalf, in whose interests" (Luke, 2004, p. 4). As shown in this quote, compared to sociocultural and transactional theories, critical literacies pay more attention to whose voice is heard or silenced and how the power structure exists in the language. The premise of critical literacies is that the text and the language are never neutral (Bakhtin,1981; Hunt, 1992; Luke & Freebody, 1999; Vasquez, 2010), and they are designed to position the reader in a particular way.

In this frame, there is no absolute truth, and all texts including printed and non-printed materials need to be examined and re-created. The fundamental ideas of critical literacies have developed against the principles of New Criticism that promotes "close reading." By focusing on the structure in the analysis of the text, New Criticism does not pay much attention to the social, cultural, and historical context, the reader's response, and the author's intention. Compared to this New Criticism movement, by eliciting

students' critical consciousness about the text and the world, critical literacies emphasize the teacher's role in adding the dimension of "critical edge" to the student's reading comprehension. The premise of the teacher's role based on critical literacies theory is that the student's different perspectives and identities need to be involved in teaching reading comprehension.

Critical Literacies in the U.S. Historical Context

These pluralistic views of reading are important to consider in regard to how critical literacies have developed in the United States, in which they have a comparatively short history. It was fueled by the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s that focused on social justice. Perspectives of critical literacies are rooted in critical theory, which is concerned with the empowerment of human beings (Creswell, 2003). The basic tenets of feminist theory and culturally relevant pedagogy (Au & Jordan, 1981; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995) that challenge the status quo of the dominant culture are aligned with the components of critical literacies theories. By paying particular attention to underrepresented minority groups of students, critical literacies in the United States have been initiated and have developed along with the multicultural education movement, which focuses on educational equality and social justice.

Some scholars (e.g., Gee, 1996; Morrell, 2008) note that critical literacies theory originated from Greek scholars such as Socrates and Plato. However, the modern concept of critical literacies that focuses on language, ideology, and power has been largely influenced by Brazilian scholar Paolo Freire, a pioneering philosopher of critical pedagogy (McLaren, 2000). Freire's (1970) contribution to the literacy field is immense (Glass, 2001). Through his seminal book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), he describes teachers' roles as empowering students through the process of critical consciousness that he defined as *conscientization*. This critical consciousness cannot be developed when students are not given the opportunities to explore existing knowledge about the world.

Freire challenges the teacher's role as a knowledge transmitter by addressing the issue of "banking education." In the banking education model, in which teachers "deposit" their knowledge in students who are "depositories," there is no room in the instruction to empower students to read the text. Due to the social and political characteristic of texts, Freire reminds teachers not to position students as passive ones who simply absorb the author's statements as truth and fact. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) eloquently summarize Freire's (1970) critical literacy concept: "Critical literacy views readers as active participants in the reading process and invites them to move beyond passively accepting the text's message to question, examine, or dispute the power relations that exist between readers and authors. It focuses on issues of power and promotes reflection, transformation, and action" (p. 14).

The legacy of Freire's reading comprehension concept is shown throughout many scholarly works in the literacy field. Critical literacy theory has been developed by many educational scholars, including Ira Shor, Colin Lankshear, Peter McLaren, Henry Giroux, Patrick Shannon, Allan Luke, Hilary Janks, and Barbara Comber. The Australian scholar, Allan Luke, made a particularly noticeable contribution to the U.S. literacy field. Under the criticism that critical literacy is complex and vague in terms of implementation in the classroom, Luke makes critical theoretical concepts more applicable for teachers by developing four resource models with his colleague (Luke & Freebody, 1999). These models (e.g., code breaking, meaning making, text using, and text critiquing) provide teachers with guidelines on how to teach reading comprehension. Luke reminds teachers

that the models are not hierarchical in order and need to be integrated with each other. The models show that reading comprehension is incomplete when text-critiquing practices are missing in teachers' instruction. These particular practices allow students to position themselves as analysts and critics of texts, which is crucial for students' ownership of reading to name and rename the world.

Compared to Luke's models on how to use texts on a microlevel of discourse analysis, Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) seem to provide a broader guideline on how to teach critical reading by synthesizing previous research. They provide a four-dimensional framework: disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on the sociopolitical issues, and taking action. As shown in multiple studies (e.g., Luna et al., 2004; Lee, 2012), these four dimensions seem to be used continuously as guidelines when teachers implement critical literacy in the classroom. The incorporation of Lewison et al.'s (2002) framework within the classroom indicates that these scholars have made a noticeable contribution to the U.S. critical literacy field.

These specific models have continuously been developed for classroom teachers, but researchers with diverse lenses and foci often use critical literacies concepts within the U.S. educational field. For example, critical literacies have often been discussed through the lens of "new literacies" (New London Group, 1996) by focusing on technology (e.g., Alvermann, 2008; Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011), popular culture (e.g., Mahiri, 1998; Morrell, 2008), or multiple literacies (e.g., Harste, 2003). The approaches among these "new literacies" are slightly different, but their theoretical orientation is similarly rooted in poststructuralism, which values pluralistic ideas of reading and different forms of representation.

Diverse approaches are key to critical reading: "There is no single or simple or unified approach to critical literacy. . . . They don't purport to provide a universal, incontestable, scientific answer about how to teach. Instead, they very deliberately open up a universe of possibilities, of possible critical readings, critical reading positions and practices" (Luke, 2004, p. 5). Due to this nature of complex and diverse forms of critical literacies, scholars in the field have a dilemma in completely capturing what critical literacies actually are and what applications of critical literacies theory look like. The dilemma comes from the basic tenets of critical literacies. Since critical literacy promotes diverse approaches to reading, a critical approach is not reducible to a fixed and stable teaching technique, method, or approach (Pennycook, 1999). This dilemma of the critical researcher might continue unless the criticism is resolved: "Critical theory is abstract and far removed from the everyday life of schools" (Breunig, 2005, p. 110). These critiques appear to prompt researchers in relevant fields to focus more on classroom applications, and to urge them to design more specific models and guidelines, as shown in the examples in Luke and Freebody's (1999) and Lewison et al.'s (2002) work.

Contemporary Research Trend on Critical Literacies

As discussed in the previous sections, critical literacies have a strong theoretical, historical, and philosophical foundation, rooted in critical theory, which is concerned with the empowerment of human beings. Critical literacies have increasingly become recognized as important in the literacy field, as evidenced by the fact that the current edition of this book has added this as a new chapter. However, the complex definitions and applications of critical literacies seem to cause misunderstanding for teachers. In response to the urgent call for teacher applications of critical literacies, contemporary researchers tend to

pay more attention to classroom examples. This section focuses on several studies conducted from 2000 to the present that reflect the current trend of research in the critical literacies field.

The studies that use the framework of critical literacies are diverse and discuss adolescent reading in terms of issues including technology and identity, thereby broadening the realm of reading to adolescents' cultures and environments outside of the classroom. Much research in these areas uses the framework of "new literacies" that include digital literacy, media literacy, and popular culture. For example, Morrell (2008) shares how his urban adolescent students in an English language arts class construct and reconstruct their identities by using hip-hop music as an important text. Teachers need to provide many opportunities for students to connect their outside lives to texts, and can do so with more creativity, such as that demonstrated by Morrell.

Along with the earlier study by Morrell (2008), Yoon's study (2013) also targets adolescents in the classroom. Yoon discusses how the teacher who defines herself as a critical teacher promotes students' critical thinking by encouraging them to think from multiple perspectives rather than reading the text from one side, the author's point of view. The interesting finding is that despite the teacher's implementation of critical literacy concepts in the classroom through dialogue, students feel that this is a routine and less engaging way to focus on multiple perspectives. The study suggests that the teacher's passion about critical literacy is not sufficient, and more dynamic activities that enable adolescent students to connect to their current life are needed.

Aside from these studies focusing on adolescents, recent studies in the field of critical literacies also focus on teachers who work with younger students (e.g., de Silva & Hill, 2013; Leland & Huber, 2008; Rogers & Labadie (in press); Sahni, 2001; Vasquez, 2010; Wetzel, Peterson, Weber, & Steinbach, 2013). Some teachers may think that critical literacy is appropriate for older students but not for younger children. Due to the nature of social and political reading, teachers might not believe it is an age-appropriate practice for younger students. The lack of young participants in past studies seems to confirm this concern. Before the 2000s, critical literacy practice among younger students had not been widely discussed in the United States. Although there are some studies (e.g., Comber, 2001; O'Brien, 2001), these were situated in countries outside of the United States, such as Australia.

However, since 2000, critical literacies research has targeted more young students, as shown in the numerous studies that focus on PreK–6 grade levels. Students need to be aware of this concept in order to develop a richer understanding of the world as they age and develop. For example, Vasquez (2010) provided specific examples of eight teachers who work in the K–6 classroom settings. The students engaged in the critical literacy practice by doing daily activities such as talking about books and acting on social issues that come from their conversation. The Wetzel et al. study (2013) was also conducted in an elementary classroom. In a fourth-grade classroom setting, the three participant teachers promoted students' critical thinking through discussions of social issues during read-aloud and independent reading.

Another distinctive point of current research is that critical literacies do not focus solely on students in mainstream classrooms. Contemporary researchers also discuss how critical literacy applies to all learners, including English language learners (ELLs) in diverse classroom settings. For instance, Chun's study (2009) focuses on promoting ELLs' critical thinking by using a graphic novel, *Maus*, in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom setting. In the study, students were encouraged to position themselves in the character's shoes and reconstruct the text with critical consciousness. In addition, Lau's

study (2013) focused on beginning ELLs' literacy practices through the curriculum of discrimination and cultural adjustment. This study suggests that the students learned not only language skills but also a sense of efficacy for social change. Both the Chun (2009) and the Lau (2013) studies of ELLs indicate that critical literacy practice is successful when teachers design curricula that are relevant to students' social lives and culture.

Besides these empirical studies, several researchers who used content-analysis methodology discuss critical reading by using various texts, including multicultural literature. For example, Yoon, Simpson, and Haag (2010) reviewed multicultural literature books to examine the issues of cultural assimilation and cultural pluralism. They found that some multicultural books are not "multicultural" but instead promote an assimilation ideology. Based on these findings, the authors suggested the following ideas: (1) Teachers help students read the book not only from a literary element perspectives but also from social and political perspectives; (2) teachers help students to examine whether the text is for all students, not just mainstream students; (3) teachers may also think about whether their use of the text can develop students' critical thinking, beyond higher order thinking.

In summary, the reviewed studies suggest that, although the focus of the studies is different, the common idea is that the teacher's role in comprehension instruction is to use diverse materials and approaches to challenge the status quo of the more traditional canon and to create a potential model for social justice (Gates & Mark, 2006). Also, this brief literature review of current studies indicates that critical literacies can be applied to both young and older students, across the classroom settings, and across materials, including multicultural literature and graphic novels.

Suggestions to Improve Comprehension Instruction

These findings of contemporary research, along with my experiences as a teacher educator and researcher, suggest several important implications for teachers' instruction to improve students' comprehension. These practical suggestions are grounded in the framework of Freirean theory, which advocates the teacher's role as an agent for social change. Freire asserts that teachers should encourage students to read text with an awareness of power structures at work in society. Teachers who help students engage in reading might consider the following:

1. Add more authentic dialogue in the classroom before reading around the topic. Freire (1970) suggests that the dialogic form of education, rather than the banking education model, be employed in the classroom. Dialogue is a necessary process for students' empowerment: "Only those who listen, speak. Those who do not listen, end up merely yelling, barking out the language while imposing their ideas" (Freire, 1997, p. 306). In this dialogic process, a teacher might not position him- or herself as an authority figure who delivers knowledge but as a listener and learner who produces knowledge with students. Human beings are ontologically incomplete, and they learn and grow through questioning and examining the world (Freire, 1970). Teachers' support to facilitate this process through dialogue is necessary for students' reading comprehension and empowerment.

2. Build in students' minds a habit of posing questions and critiquing sociopolitical issues on a daily basis. Developing students' critical consciousness might be daunting in the beginning, when students are familiar with traditional forms of reading: that is, finding answers from the text as a passive reader. Teachers can be models for challenging this

practice. For example, they can start by questioning a political issue that they watched in the news, such as the relationship and power issue between the United States and China. In this 21st century, students need to work with students from outside of their own country. The teacher can promote students' dialogue by talking about current political and social issues around the world, such as Syrian chemical weapons and nuclear weapons in North Korea. Through this exercise, teachers might encourage students to apply critical literacies outside the classroom, such as when they are at home or communicating with their parents and friends.

3. Provide students with as many opportunities as possible to reconstruct and redesign the text. Freire (1970) notes that it is important for students to name and rename the world by being engaged in texts. For instance, the picture book *My Name Is Yoon* (Recorvits, 2003) can be recreated from the reader's perspectives. Students can redesign the book by presenting a voice that is silenced in the book. The key component of critical literacy is to empower students by encouraging them to position themselves with agency. Rather than just following what the authors present, encourage students to redesign the text with their own voice (Janks, Dixon, Ferreira, Granville, & Newfield, 2013).

4. Broaden the realm of materials by including nonprinted reading materials and TV shows. The classroom should be the safest place for students to feel comfortable to talk about any issues around them and around the world. Ask students to bring any materials that help them think critically. For example, encourage students to compare two TV companies, such as Fox News and CNN, and how and why they portray the news in a different way. Since critical literacies can be implemented using any types of materials, bringing the news media and movies into the classroom might be useful for students to make connections. More specifically, critiques of movies such as *Red 2* can be based on the stereotypes of certain ethnic groups. It is important to help students connect the school curriculum to outside cultural, social, economic, and political issues. In this way, students may feel that their learning in the classroom is connected to their daily life and find meaningful social and political issues to explore.

5. Bring students' cultures into the classroom. Accommodating students' different backgrounds and identities is another major component of critical literacy practices. Among numerous reading strategies, *making connections* might be one of the most important strategies that many related theories, including transactional theory, support. Research shows that students are more engaged when reading materials are relevant to their lives (Kamil, Pearson, Mosenthal, Afflerbach, & Moje, 2011). To help students act for social justice, more dynamic activities that allow students to be involved with real-life experiences might be needed for successful critical reading development.

6. Apply critical literacies concepts to any content area, with any student, and across the year. The topic of critical literacies does not need to be covered as a curriculum at a certain time, but it does need to apply to any content area, and across the year. Given that studies indicate that critical literacies are for not only older students but also younger students, it is important to involve all students, including ELLs, in the practice. As Lee (2011) claims, it is a myth that the subject of critical literacies is for high-ability students only. All students' critical consciousness can be developed earlier, and the practice needs to be started earlier to build the habits of the critical mind.

There is no fixed form of critical literacies practice, and there are many diverse dimensions of critical literacies (Lewison et al., 2002). The practice of critical literacies can focus on not only social actions but also promotion of multiple perspectives.

However, the basic tenet of critical literacies is to empower students to read the world by reading the word.

Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed comprehension instruction from a critical theory viewpoint. My major purpose was to provide theoretical perspectives of critical literacies and practical suggestions for teachers to help students engage in "a critical reading of reality" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 36). More specifically, I began this chapter by discussing the need for critical reading in the 21st century. Relevant theories, including sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and transactional theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), are examined to provide insights on how critical literacies theories have developed and how these theories are interconnected with each other through major tenets.

By focusing on the historical and theoretical perspectives of critical literacies and current research and practice of critical literacies, teachers will better understand how comprehension instruction can play a role in helping students become global citizens in the 21st century (Yoon & Sharif, in press). Given that teachers have traditionally taught reading in a top-down manner, forcing students to be passive consumers of knowledge, it is time to invite the new theoretical and pedagogical ideas of critical literacies into the classroom to develop our students' critical consciousness and transform our society.

INTEGRATE, INVESTIGATE, AND INITIATE: QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

There are three questions that the reader of this chapter might consider when practicing critical literacies for reading comprehension in the classroom. I hope teachers think about these questions and conduct studies in their own classrooms with research questions that expand or confirm the existing research body on comprehension instruction.

1. How can critical literacies practices be integrated across the curriculum in the classroom?
2. What happens to students' participation and engagement in texts when critical literacies practices are integrated for reading comprehension?
3. How do participation and engagement through critical literacies practices link to students' becoming citizens of the world?

As stated by Freire (1970), "Human activity consists of action and reflection: it is *praxis*, it is a transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it" (p. 125). I invite teachers to involve with the praxis process to examine their own identities to build the possible world that they imagine. Transformation of the world is only possible when teachers work with students as partners, not over them, through a genuine dialogic process in the classroom. Like Freire (1998), who examined his critical literacy theory's strengths and limits, I hope we as literacy educators continue to question our own theory and practice for our students' successful learning and reading.

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