Chapter 2

Language, Power and Pedagogies

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Overview

In one classroom concerned with language and power, you might see students redesigning a sexist advertisement, and in another one, constructing a linguistic profile of the class or figuring out how the word perhaps changes the meaning of a statement. Students might be calculating their own ecological footprints after watching Gore's An Inconvenient Truth or discussing how to address the problem of bullying in their grade. Underpinning the work in these different classrooms are different approaches towards teaching students the relationship between language and power; language, identity and difference; language and the differential access to social goods. This sociocultural approach to language education is referred to by different names: critical literacy (Freire, 1972a, 1972b), critical linguistics (Fowler & Kress, 1979), critical language awareness (Clark et al., 1987; Fairclough, 1992), and critical applied linguistics (Pennycook, 2001), New Literacy Studies (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Barton et al., 2000; Street, 1984), multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), or multimodal literacies (Kress, 2003). These moments embody the history of the field, with critical literacy being the most generic of the terms to describe it. Critical literacy resists definition because power manifests itself differently in different contexts and at different historical moments; it is affected by changing technologies and different conditions of possibility. What remain constant, however, is its social justice agenda and its commitment to social action, however small it be, that makes a difference.

Many teachers fear critical literacy because they think of it as too political. In thinking about power and politics, it is important to draw a distinction between Politics with a big P and politics with a small p. Politics with a capital P is the big stuff, worldly concerns. It is about government and world trade agreements and the United Nations peace-keeping forces; it is about ethnic or religious genocide and world tribunals; it is about apartheid and global capitalism, money laundering and linguistic imperialism.
It is about the inequities between the political North and the political South. (I use these terms to contest the terminology of ‘first world’ and ‘third world’, which ignores the colonial politics that produced disparities between countries in the northern and southern hemispheres). It is about oil, the ozone layer, genetic engineering and cloning. It is about the danger of global warming. It is about globalisation, the new work order (Gee et al., 1996) and sweatshops in Asia (Klein, 1999).

Little-p politics, on the other hand, is about the micro-politics of everyday life. It is about the minute-by-minute choices and decisions that make us who we are. It is about desire and fear; how we construct them and how they construct us. It is about the politics of identity and place; it is about small triumphs and defeats; it is about winners and losers, haves and have-nots, homophobes and their victims; it is about how we treat other people day by day; it is about whether or not we learn someone else’s language or act to save the planet by recycling our garbage. Little-p politics is about taking seriously the feminist perspective that the personal is the political. This is not to suggest that politics has nothing to do with Politics. On the contrary, the sociohistorical and economic contexts in which we live produce different conditions of possibility and constraints that we all have to negotiate as meaningfully as we can. While the social constructs who we are, so do we construct the social. This reciprocal relationship is fluid and dynamic, creating possibilities for social action and change. Working with the politics of the local enables us to effect small changes that make a difference in our everyday lives and those of the people around us.

Because it is tied to the politics of the local, critical literacy has to remain fluid, dynamic, responsive to change. This does not mean that the field is not constructed by its history. What this chapter will show is how the history of the field has created a ‘repertoire’ of practices (Comber, 2006: 54) that teachers can adapt to the ever changing circumstances in which they work. The next section considers the theoretical formation of critical literacy over time and the kinds of classroom work that the shifts in theory have made possible.

Research: A History of Theorised Practice

Critical literacy is more a set of theorised practices that constitute a pedagogy than an approach to research or a set of research methods. The theories that inform this approach see language and literacy as social practices that produce effects. This section will look at the theoretical work in the field as well as selected examples from research in classrooms that show the enactment of these theories. Most of this research is school- or classroom-based and uses qualitative research methods from
ethnography, action research, case-study research and classroom observation. For ease of discussion, I have divided the development of the field into four moments: critical literacy, critical linguistics, multiliteracies, literacy and space.

A History of Theory and Practice

Critical literacy: Reading the word and the world

Paulo Freire was the first to challenge our assumptions about literacy as simply teaching students the skills necessary for reading and he helps us to understand that reading the word cannot be separated from reading the world. His two seminal books, *Cultural Action for Freedom* (1972a) and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972b), show how in the process of learning how to read both the word and the world critically, adult literacy learners regain their sense of themselves as agents who can act to transform the social situations in which they find themselves. He used literacy as a means of breaking the ‘culture of silence’ of the poor and dispossessed. For Freire

To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to its namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Men are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection. ... It is in speaking their word that men transform the world by naming it, dialogue imposes itself as the way in which men achieve significance as men. (Freire, 1972b: 61, italics in the original)

Recognising that a situation is less than ideal and naming what is wrong as a problem are the first step in transformative social action. Freire’s approach to literacy as social action is based on neo-marxist views of power as relations of domination and oppression that are maintained by either coercion or consent (Gramsci, 1971).

Many teachers in North America such as Elsa Auerbach, Linda Christenson, Carole Edelsky, Brian Morgan and Jerome Harste have built their critical literacy practices on the work of Freire. Vivian Vasquez shows with great clarity how it is possible to create a critical literacy curriculum out of the issues and problems that emerge spontaneously in classrooms (Vasquez, 2004). Vasquez’s skill is in taking her students’ everyday concerns seriously and helping them to ‘name’ them as problems in order to imagine possible courses of enquiry and action. She also has the ability to stay with a topic and to explore it from a number of different angles, following the suggestions made by the students. For example, when her students expressed concern that Anthony, one of their classmates, was unable to eat the hot dogs and burgers at the school barbecue because he is a vegetarian, Vasquez used this as an opportunity to problematise exclusionary
practices. They began by reading the flyer announcing the barbecue with a critical eye. 'Join us for our Annual School Barbeque' is the first line of the flyer. Melanie, one of the students, says:

The invitation says our but doesn't really mean Anthony so it's yours and mine (pointing to the other children who are not vegetarian and herself) but not his (pointing to Anthony) and that's not fair. (Vasquez, 2004: 104)

She was able to do this because Vasquez had spent time in previous lessons discussing with the students how pronouns can work to include and exclude people. The students agreed that one of the girls would write a letter to the chair of the barbecue committee, which she did after consulting with other children on the wording. They chose to use the pronoun 'we' and imperatives like 'have to' to state their case strongly: that in future there should be food that vegetarians can eat. When they received no reply, they re-read their letter to see if they should change the wording in a more polite follow-up letter. This time the chair replied and invited them to come and talk to her about the matter.

The students decided to read up about vegetarianism in order to prepare for the meeting, only to discover that there were no books about vegetarians in the library. Undaunted they wrote to the librarian to say that all children should be able to find books about people like them in the library. By allowing the problem to run its course, Vasquez teaches her students to follow an issue to its resolution. When they finally received assurances that their school would cater to the dietary needs of vegetarians at future functions, one child wondered if other schools could benefit from their experience. This led the students to conduct a survey to see if neighbouring schools catered to the needs of their vegetarian students.

Notice how much purposeful reading and writing, initiated by the students themselves, are taking place. Notice how students learn to pay attention to words and to deal with setbacks. Notice how Vasquez constructs her students as agents of change on a bigger platform than the specific needs of Anthony. This is not difficult for teachers to do. After all, Vasquez did it with a class of 4-year-olds and she is not alone.

This kind of close attention to language is also evident when Helen Grant (1999) works with students who are newly arrived immigrants in Australia, learning English for the first time. She teaches English as an additional language to Grades 1 through 7 at an elementary school and also withdraws groups for more focused interventions. Her success in using critical language awareness with these students shows that children whose main language is not English can work with and question the use of language and the concepts language signifies. One telling example is the students' response to working with Janks' notion of 'top dogs' and 'underdogs' in the Critical Language Awareness Series (Janks, 1993a).
In Janks' workbook activity (Janks, 1993b: 12) children are asked the following questions.

1) Given that you have many different identities, in which of your identities do you feel like a top dog?
2) In which identities do you feel like an underdog?
3) Who is top dog in your family in most situations?
4) Name a situation in which someone else is top dog?
5) Among your friends, is there competition to be top dog?
6) In your school, how do students become top dogs?
7) In your school, how do teachers become top dogs?
8) How do the top dogs you know treat the underdogs?
9) How do the top dogs you know talk to the underdogs?

Grant found that this activity helped students to think about power relations in their own lives but was particularly taken by some of the children's arguments that they were neither top dogs nor underdogs. Together the class developed the notion of 'middle dogs'. What these young children are successfully able to do is challenge the false binary set up in this activity and to question the authority of both the teacher and the classroom materials.

Another example of Freirean social action can be seen in the classroom of Marg Wells, also a teacher in Australia. Wells encouraged her students to do a survey of the trees in the neighbourhood of the school, after they noticed that poorer suburbs seemed to have fewer parks and trees. Recognising trees as a marker of social class is perhaps not remarkable, except when the researchers are in Grade 2/3 (Comber et al., 2001). Wells' students reported their findings to the local authorities, who agreed to plant more trees in these suburbs. She and her students later went on to make suggestions as to what kind of park the local developers should build, contributing design ideas and their own art works.

In all these examples of literacy as social action, we see students reading texts to see how they are positioned and positioning, naming their world, writing letters, taking care to establish their authority and to use words so as to position the reader to respond favourably, conducting surveys, and working with developers to put their own stamp on a local park. All these literacy practices contribute to solving a problem that the students identified and preparing them for socially responsible active citizenship.

Linguistic approaches to critical literacy: Critical linguistics, critical discourse analysis, critical language awareness and critical applied linguistics

What the approaches to the field discussed in this section share is a profound understanding of and respect for the power of words. 'Power' is
signalled by the use of the word *critical*. *Critical linguistics* focuses on linguistic choices in speech and writing and their effects; *critical discourse analysis* focuses on how these choices are affected by the processes and the social conditions in which texts are received and produced; *critical language awareness* is a classroom application of these theories to teaching and *critical applied linguistics* questions the normative assumptions of the whole applied field of linguistics as well as the consequences of these assumptions. Each of these approaches is discussed in more detail in what follows.

Rooted in an understanding of grammar and lexis, these approaches have been developed by linguists. The old adage that ‘sticks and stones may break our bones, but words can never harm us’ is simply not true. Halliday (1985) sees grammar and words as ‘meaning potential’. In selecting from the range of possible options when we speak or write, we realise that potential for good or ill. Although Saussure argues that the (linguistic) sign is arbitrary (Saussure, 1972: 67), which sign we select is always motivated. According to the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, which investigated crimes against humanity during the time of apartheid and the liberation struggle,

> Language . . . does things: it constructs social categories, it gives orders, it persuades us, it justifies, explains, gives reasons, excuses. It constructs reality. It moves people against other people. (TRC, 1998: 7, 124, 294)

This is another way of describing the power of naming. In calling themselves *pro-life*, the anti-abortion lobby constructs people who support abortion as pro-death; in naming our enemies as *the axis of evil*, we assume the moral high ground; in calling foreign Africans *Makwerekwere,* as is the case in South Africa, we foment xenophobia; in calling genocide, *ethnic cleansing*, we name killing as hygiene. In all these cases language is being used to create divisive social categories by naming them in particular ways.

When people use language to speak or write, they constantly have to make choices. Not only do they have to decide what words to use, they have to decide whether to be definite or tentative, approving or disapproving, inclusive or exclusive. They have to choose between the present, the past and the future tense; between quoted and reported speech; between active or passive voice. Multilingual speakers have to decide which of their languages to use, when and with whom. For example, the choice of the present continuous tense in ‘Rising temperatures are causing climate change’ is more authoritative than ‘Temperatures may be rising and may be causing climate change’ because the modals ‘can’ and ‘may’ introduce uncertainty. In addition, the choice of the continuous tense suggests that the process is ongoing. The choice of active voice requires that we
show who is doing the action as in 'Soldiers tortured prisoners'. The passive voice allows us to hide who is responsible for the action as in 'Prisoners were tortured'.

All spoken and written texts are assembled by an ongoing process of selection from a range of lexical, grammatical and sequencing options. Because texts are put together, they can be taken apart. This unmaking of the text increases our awareness of the choices that the writer or speaker has made. Every choice foregrounds what was selected and hides or backgrounds what was not selected. Awareness of these choices enables us to ask critical questions: Why did the writer or speaker make these choices? How do these choices work to position the readers or listeners? Whose interests do they serve? Who benefits? Who is disadvantaged? Critical linguists pay attention to the way in which reality is mediated by language; to the ways in which speakers and writers use language to construct the texts that represent their versions of reality. Choices do not, however, produce meaning divorced from context and our choices are shaped by the ways of speaking, writing, believing, doing and valuing of the communities we live in (Gee, 1990: 142). These ways with language are called discourses and critical discourse analysis requires that we analyse texts in relation to their processes and conditions of production and reception (Fairclough, 1989). In other words, critical discourse analysts are interested in how texts are affected by what meanings are possible for their writers and readers, in particular places, at particular times.

The writers of the Critical Language Awareness Series (Janks, 1993a) use a critical linguistic approach for reading against texts. Their use of call-outs, otherwise known as speech bubbles, helps to zoom in on particular linguistic choices. This can be illustrated with questions on an article taken from SL magazine’s tongue-in-cheek guide to cars for students (see Figure 2.1). SL stands for student life, and it is important that this refers to student life in South Africa. The ability to answer the questions on this text depends on cultural knowledge that learners in other contexts may not have.

Why, one might ask, should one spend time with students looking at this text critically? It is after all an informative, playful, everyday text. It is precisely because seemingly innocuous, every-day texts work to produce us as particular kinds of human subjects, that we need to examine their underlying values and assumptions. Claiming that we are what we drive is itself a questionable assumption. Moreover, the Palio text naturalises consumerism, materialism and ostentation. In conjunction, the description of the Tazz undermines ‘being sensible’ by portraying it as boring. By suggesting that long-term relationships, which one can expect with a reliable Tazz, are ‘not such a bad thing’, it damns them with faint praise.

Writers of the Chalkface Press workbooks (Mellor & Patterson, 1996; Mellor et al., 1991) use a feminist post-structuralist approach to critical analysis and they work mainly with literary texts. They also hone in on the
Figure 2.1 Asking critical questions using call-outs

ways in which verbal meaning is communicated. The activities help students to unpack the social construction of difference in relation to race, gender and class. Teachers in the United States working with Vivian Vasquez have developed strategies for reading children’s literature critically (Vasquez et al., 2003). Martino (1997) and Kenworthy and Kenworthy (1997) have used post-colonial theory to deconstruct the construction of aboriginal Australians and ‘white fella’ new Australians. Particularly important is Wallace’s (2003) account of teaching critical reading, which addresses the question of what it means to be a critical reader in an additional language.

Pennycook’s (2001) work, Critical Applied Linguistics, problematises the field of Applied Linguistics itself by examining its truth effects. In doing so, he reminds us that the global spread of English began as an imposition on local populations through the political and military dominance of Britain and the United States. He sees it historically as a colonising language that diminishes the power of national and local languages and others their speakers. Focusing on the cultural politics of English as an international language, Pennycook invites us to think of how this might translate into different approaches to teaching English as an additional
language. In South Africa, we use the terminology of 'additional language' precisely to refuse the othering discourse implied in TESOL, teaching English to speakers of othered languages. His work demonstrates Foucault's contention that

'Truth' is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. [It] is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. (Foucault, 1980: 133)

According to Bourdieu (1991), the education system is the key means for the privileging of a particular language (or variety) and for legitimating its dominance. He draws attention to the fact that while the education system fails to provide students from subordinated classes with knowledge of and access to the legitimate language, it succeeds in teaching them recognition of (misrecognition of) its legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1991: 62, my emphasis). What is needed, in the teaching of a powerful language like English, is classroom pedagogy that reverses this – that gives mastery of English, together with a critical view of its status. Education needs to produce students who understand why linguistic diversity is a resource for creativity and cognition, who value all the languages that they speak and who recognise the paucity of English only. In addition, 'ESL' teachers have to take the identity issues that inform decisions about the teaching of pronunciation and appropriateness seriously. Is it our job as English teachers to turn learners into cultural clones, or should we encourage them to use their own cultural norms for turn-taking, politeness, formality? Whose norms should prevail in cross-cultural communication? These questions ask us to rethink communicative competence and the communicative approach to language teaching.

Janet Orlek put the question of the unequal status of different languages and different varieties of the same language at the heart of her workbook in the Critical Language Awareness Series (Orlek, 1993). She begins with activities that establish multilingualism as the norm followed by an exploration of the relationship between language and identity. She goes on to explore the spread of English in the world and the relationship between English and languages in the learners' own country, in this instance South Africa. Her activity on world Englishes works to de-stabilise both a unitary and a normative view of English. Finally, she invites students to find out about their country's language policy and language-in-education policy and to interrogate them.

The first activity on multilingualism asks students to talk to one another about their own names. Immediately, this surfaces cross-cultural naming practices and shows students how their names relate to their family's history and values. Having names in more than one language speaks of
communities that have been dispossessed or displaced and of parents who have therefore given their children names to remind them of who they are and where they come from as well as a name in whatever happens to be the language of power at the time. This multilingual naming practice literally entitles these children to hybrid identities. The relationship between naming practices and power has been evident in South Africa in the decade since the advent of democracy. In the past, many African parents gave their children English and African names. Most of my university students chose to use their English names. Now, after liberation, the students use their African names and place the onus on English speakers to pronounce them correctly. Another example can be found in the poignant poem, School Visit, by Michael Rosen (1992). He tells the story of a young student named Patricia Kaufpisch (Selpiss) and his own distress at the names given to Jews in Nazi Germany. Jews who could not afford to buy a pretty name like Rosenthal (Valley-of-the-roses) were given names such as 'Ochsenschwantz, Eselkkopf, Saumagen and Hinkedigger: Oxprick, Asshead, Pigbelly and Cripple' (p. 21). He wonders whether or not Patricia Kaufpisch knows what her name means and he concludes the poem by saying

... if I could talk to her on her own, I could tell her

But she is saying, Goodbye thank you for talking to us,

Mr Rosen.

Rosen? It means roses.

So? I was one of the lucky ones.

(Rosen, 1992: 21)

Another activity requires students to work out the linguistic repertoire of their class and to discuss the relative positions of the class' languages in hierarchies of power. Orleks activities on English in the world contest the notion of a pure language and argue that the spread of English has led to the growth of many Englishes, which compete for power with standard British or American English in different contexts. Students are given guidance on how to investigate the history of English in their own country and how to interrogate existing language policies and the practices that arise from them.

**Multimodal critical literacy**

While a critical applied linguistics approach to critical literacy questions the discursive practices of applied linguistics itself, the multiliteracies
(Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) approach to literacy asks us to re-examine meaning-making in an age of the visual sign. Kress’ work on multimodality (Kress, 2003) argues that the verbal is just one of many modalities for making meaning and that it has been privileged in the teaching of literacy. New digital technologies have changed the processes of text production; desktop computers have made it easy to include images, movement, sound, spatiality, gesture. To be literate now requires us to read across a range of modes and to understand the effects of their interplay when they work in concert. Multimodality presents a difficult challenge for critical work as different modes have different ways of naturalising their representations. Photography, for example, is a realistic medium and we have to remind ourselves that cameras do lie, particularly in an age of digital morphing. The work of Kress and van Leeuwen (1990, 2001) has led the way in providing strategies for reading images critically.

One’s ability to read texts produced with new digital technologies is easier if one has hands-on experience with these technologies. In Australia, Helen Grant uses film-making as a means of teaching English and multimodal literacies to recently arrived immigrant and refugee children (Comber, 2006). Decisions about what stories to tell in their films, and how to construct these stories semiotically, led students to explore the politics of representation. Like Moll (1992), Grant encourages her students to draw on their linguistic and cultural funds of knowledge. Her aim is to counteract negative representations of immigrants in the media; in the process her students acquire the kind of critical multimodal literacy that enables them to read against media texts and to construct alternative discourses.

Not all teachers have the know-how or the equipment to make videos with students. Fortunately, a great deal can be done just with printed images and they can be found everywhere. Students can bring images from newspapers and magazines to class. They can use disposable cameras and photograph visual texts on the street. They can collect and analyse food packaging. There are many activities that help students to de-construct visual texts. One can literally cut them up to show the effects of cropping (see Figure 2.2); one can juxtapose them to see how their meaning changes when they are placed alongside other texts; one can remove either the background or the foreground to see the effect this has on meaning (see Figure 2.2); one can compare visuals for the identical product marketed to different audiences; one can ask students to compare their own homes or bedrooms with those depicted in décor magazines; one can study the images in advertisements to pinpoint how they create desire in readers; one can compare images of sportsmen and sports women; one can compare representations historically by looking at representations of a single product, for example Coca Cola, over time.
In Figure 2.2, the effect of cropping is startling. Figure 2.2a was what I saw first because Oscar Pistorius' legs were hidden by the fold in the newspaper that can be seen in Figure 2.2b. In Figure 2.3, the unexpected context is key to the message. Figure 2.3b is an image used to advertise Cell C, a mobile phone service provider. The accompanying text, 'Surprise someone with a song (but make sure you send it to the right address)' makes it clear that this image is a visual metaphor for what happens if you send the song to the wrong address.

In using these examples with a class, one would present Figure 2.3a for discussion before Figure 2.3b. A more complex example of staging the presentation of a single text is given in Figure 2.4. Here you literally take the image apart and feed it bit by bit to the students so that they come to understand how the bits mean something different from the whole.

One's reading of the meaning changes as one sees more and more of the text. Initially one interprets the word 'nigger' in isolation as signalling a
racist text. Only later is one able to understand that the word has been chosen to oppose racist assumptions. The journalists are deliberately writing back to old discourses and giving them new meaning. In this context ‘trouble’ for the insurance industry is good for ‘the economy, policyholders and companies’ according to the subheading of the article, which welcomes the shake-up instigated by Vuyani Ngalwana (Financial Mail, 5 August 2005, Johannesburg).

Pippa Stein’s (2008) Multimodal Pedagogies in Diverse Classrooms provides countless examples of classroom practice. In her story-telling project in Spruitview with students aged 12–16, Stein demonstrates the power of harnessing students’ semiotic resources across a range of languages and a range of modalities. Students tell their stories to the class in their home language, they write them and translate them into English, and they draw them. Stein’s presentation of the stories and her analysis of them give her readers a clear understanding of the power of this approach to teaching

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Figure 2.4 The staging of text
literacy. Lungile is a 13-year-old girl from a Zulu-speaking family in a Spruitview primary school, which draws children from nearby African townships. In her analysis of Lungile’s performance of her story, Stein demonstrates how Lungile draws on ‘resources of spoken language, space, gesture, narrative and vocalization … ways of saying, doing and being that she has learnt in her community’ (Stein, 2008: 58). Stein’s analysis constantly returns to the question of power and how identities are constituted in these practices. She shows how Lungile is ‘doing gender in her performance as she behaves in accordance with cultural norms of femaleness’ (Stein, 2008: 60). Stein’s account of the Olifantsvlei Fresh Stories Project in which she explores the practices of eight children in making fertility dolls, playing with them and writing about them, is no less compelling.

Pahl and Rowsell’s (2006) Travel Notes from the New Literacy Studies sits at the interface between New Literacy Studies (Barton et al., 2000; Gee, 1990; Street, 1984) and multimodality. It includes studies of young children’s digital literacy practices at home, an adolescent’s email correspondence on the subject of rap, Wiccan websites, weblogs, alphabet books produced by children in different contexts, de Bono’s ‘thinking hats’ as represented on the internet and in classrooms. Here we see the importance of and the challenge for critical literacy in a digital world, where students who are connected can enter new spaces and use their literacies to communicate with real audiences in an entirely new landscape of local, global and virtual communities.

Space and place in critical literacy

The content of Travel Notes in the New Literacy Studies resulted in the inclusion of 10 references to space in the previous paragraph, not least of which is the travel metaphor in the title of the book:

... literacy practices at home ... Wiccan websites ... produced by children in different contexts ... on the internet ... and in classrooms. Here ... in a digital world, where students ... can enter new spaces ... in an entirely new landscape ... of local, global and virtual communities.

Lefebvre (1991a, 1991b) asks us to recognise that just as everything occurs in time, everything also occurs in space and that this is a vital part of our lived experience. Sociality occurs in space (Lefebvre, 1991a). Where many cultural geographers use the word ‘place’, Lefebvre captures the concreteness, the immediacy and the cultural attachments to place in his combined use of ‘everyday life’ and ‘lived space’ (Soja, 1996: 40). Views of literacy as a social practice have to pay attention to both time and space.

This is exemplified in Dixon’s (2007) examination of the relationship between literacy, power and the embodied learner in early schooling. Dixon’s focus on the body led to a careful examination of how children’s
bodies are managed by literacy routines and their organisation in time and space. The study, which builds on the work of Leander and Sheehy (2004) on literacy and space, is situated in five literacy classrooms: Grade 00 and Grades 1–3. It tracks the way learners’ bodies are increasingly regulated as they move into and through the early years of schooling. In the pre-school (Grade 00), children have greater freedom to choose the activities they wish to engage in and to move across the spaces of the classroom—shared work tables, the book corner and the carpet. Opportunities are created for exploratory and pleasurable reading and writing, both communal and individual. This shifts in the early years of a typical South African elementary school (Grades 1–3) where young learners are expected to be individual, silent, on-task readers, confined to their desks and regulated by the bells that control school time. As Dixon’s analysis shows, the classroom is only one kind of confining space within schools where space and time are deployed as disciplinary technologies for the containment and regulation of children and their bodies.

An outstanding example of classroom practice that works critically with spatial literacies, ‘ways of thinking about and representing the production of space’ (Comber et al., 2006: 228), is the collaborative project Urban renewal from the inside out. Staff and students in the fields of literacy education, architecture, communication and journalism at the University of South Australia worked with Marg Wells, a Grade 3/4 teacher, and a Grade 5/6 teacher, Ruth Trimboli, to provide students with the conceptual resources and skills needed to redesign an unused, uncared for, and unnamed space in the school grounds. Building on Wells’ work on neighbourhood action, discussed earlier, this project asked students to create ‘a belonging space’ based on their own re-visioning of lived school space.

In their discussion of this dynamic and multi-layered school project, Comber et al. locate their work in all of the approaches to critical literacy discussed: Freirean reading of the world; access to new discourses; the acquisition of the linguistic vocabularies and design discourses necessary for the critical analysis of designs and for participation in design decisions; an ability to work with a wide range of semiotic resources for designing and redesigning space. The students needed to assemble a range of resources in order to participate in the production, not just the consumption, of their lived space.

Research Findings

This survey of both the theoretical literature that underpins critical approaches to literacy and the research on critical literacy as practised in classrooms shows that the history of the field provides an ever-growing repertoire for practice. Although theory is a contested site, and new theories challenge and even displace earlier ones, yet the ongoing addition of
new dimensions to literacy, new understandings of power, new semiotic grammars, and new forms of analysis serve to increase the possibilities for critical literacy work. In relation to pedagogy, the history of ideas continues into the present, offering a number of ways of enabling students to become critically literate.

In developing her notion of a critical repertoire for teachers, Comber documents the work of practising teachers, including Helen Grant, who she argues have a ‘critical habitus’ (2006: 51). According to Bourdieu, habitus is our ingrained, unconscious, embodied ways of being. This concept was popularised by Gee (1990: 142) in his definition of discourse as ‘speaking(writing)–doing–being–valuing–believing combinations’. The discourses we inhabit produce us as particular kinds of human subjects and they are profoundly tied up with our identities. This is as true for students as it is for teachers. Taking on new literacies, new ways of doing, valuing and believing, in essence new ways of naming the world, often threatens our identity investments. It also constitutes a challenge to taken-for-granted social relations, practices and institutions that work to maintain existing relations of power. In this way, education can work to disrupt the micro politics of everyday life that serve the interests of those who are powerful.

Janks (2000) has argued that a critical literacy education has to take seriously the ways in which meaning systems are implicated in reproducing relations of power and it has to provide access to dominant languages and literacies while simultaneously using diversity as a productive resource for redesigning social futures and for changing the ‘horizon of possibility’ (Simon, 1992). This includes both changing dominant discourses as well as changing which discourses are dominant. Any one of power, diversity, access or design/redesign without the others creates a problematic imbalance. Views of language acquisition that negate creativity work to bolster the variety of native speakers; deconstruction without reconstruction or redesign reduces human agency; diversity without access ghettoises students. Without difference and diversity we lose the alternative points of view that rupture the taken-for-granted and enable us to challenge the status quo. The need for change motivates redesign. Each redesign is a renaming of the world and this brings us back full circle to the work of Paulo Freire (see Figure 2.5).

**Relevance for Classroom Practice**

In describing the critical literacy teachers whose work in classrooms she admires, Comber (2006) suggests that they have both a ‘critical habitus’ and a ‘critical repertoire’. The repertoire is given its critical edge when it is put to work to produce a more just society. Critical literacy educators teach their students both how to engage with the ways in which meaning is produced and how to resist meanings that benefit some at the expense
Figure 2.5 The redesign cycle

of others. In their classrooms, reading, writing and designing are put to work to make a difference by being linked to ways of being, doing and valuing that serve the interests of all.

Conclusion

This chapter has suggested ways of working critically with both the consumption and the production of meaning by tracing the evolution of pedagogies that enable students to understand the little-\( p \), big-\( P \), politics of meaning. As an example of little-\( p \) politics, Figure 2.6 provides some of the linguistic options from which we can choose when asking someone to do the household chores. Differences in power, between a speaker and the person spoken to, affect decisions on how direct or indirect to be. When we speak to people with more power, we tend to be more hesitant, more indirect, less sure.

1. You don’t seem to have cleaned the kitchen yet.
2. When do you plan to clean the kitchen?
3. You must clean the kitchen.
4. This place is really dirty.
5. Why haven’t you cleaned the kitchen?
6. How many times must I remind you to clean the kitchen?
7. Can you grab a dust rag and just clean around?
8. You should have time to clean before you go.
9. I’m sure you wouldn’t mind cleaning around the kitchen.
10. Please will you clean the kitchen.
11. Isn’t it your turn to clean?
12. Is it your turn to clean?
13. Didn’t you ask me to remind you to clean the kitchen?
14. You’re supposed to help me to keep this place clean.
15. It’s your turn to clean.

Figure 2.6 Indirect requests (adapted from Janks, 1993a: 14)
The choice of mode (statement, question or command), the choice of speech act (suggestion, request, hint, instruction), the choice of tense or modality (seemed, supposed, I'm sure), as well as the choice of positive and negative constructions (Is it your turn? Isn't it your turn?), are all tied to the amount of authority one can command in any situation. What is interesting is that we make all these choices in the blink of an eye without even consciously thinking about them based on our reading of the social situation. Often our choices are based on our raced, classed or gendered positions and they naturalise normative expectations for behaviour in the communities we inhabit. By becoming aware of the positions we take up unconsciously, we can choose to construct more empowered positions from which to speak in order to challenge these norms. In everyday life, in the realm of little-\(p\) politics, the language choices we make matter. They matter practically in that strategic choices can help us to get things done (like getting the kitchen cleaned); they matter psychologically in that the positions we do and do not take up ultimately construct our sense of self and of others. The same principle is at work in the larger realm of big-\(P\) Politics.

Lakoff (2004), a politically progressive linguist and cognitive scientist, shows how the way we frame our world affects our ways of doing, believing and valuing. For example, George W. Bush’s White House chose to frame ‘tax cuts’ as ‘tax relief’.

Think of the framing for relief. For there to be relief there must be an affliction, an afflicted party, and a reliever who removes the affliction and is therefore a hero. And if people try to stop the hero, those people are villains for trying to prevent relief. (Lakoff, 2004: 3)

Lakoff explains that

Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as good or bad outcomes of our actions. In politics our frames shape our social policies. To change our frames is to change all of this. … Reframing is changing the way the public sees the world. It is changing what counts as common sense. Because language activates frames, new language is required for new frames. Thinking differently requires speaking differently. (xv)

In his book, The Audacity of Hope, this is exactly what Barack Obama (2006) did. He provided a new frame of ‘hope’ that invited his fellow Americans into a different worldview: one of cooperation rather than competition; a view of the United States as not red or blue, but as united; a world in which one can disagree without being disagreeable; of a country where ordinary people, not just wealthy people, can make change happen; a world in which diplomacy, rather than war, is the preferred
solution to conflict. This new framing is tied, as Lakoff suggests, to new social policies and to a different way of doing Politics, with a capital P.

In a globally connected world, frames travel. Adegoke’s (1999) research demonstrates how negative ways of talking about Africa in the world media become the norm. In so doing, they provide journalists with unconscious resources to draw on when they write about Africa, so that even the South Africa press reproduces these frames. This is the way in which discourses shape what and how we think. We pick them up unconsciously and they speak through us. Bigelow and Peterson (2002) raise many of the issues for teaching justice in an unjust (globalised) world as does Klein (1999, 2007).

Underlying all of this work is the need to produce fully literate human subjects who can manipulate symbols, read critically and think for themselves. The new brain research makes it clear that reading is not innate.

Reading can only be learned because of the brain’s plastic design, and when reading takes place, that individual brain is changed forever, both physiologically and intellectually. (Wolf, 2007: 5)

In learning to read, the brain’s plasticity enables new neural pathways to establish themselves. These pathways have to be developed to the point where processing text is so fast that readers have enough time to reflect on what they are reading while they are reading. The sustained reading of a book is different from the ways in which readers scroll through and read digital texts. Because, as yet, we do not know what new pathways for reading these new practices will develop, Wolf (2007) argues that we should not allow the new reading pathways to replace the existing pathways for reading; rather they need to be established in addition to the old pathways. Her book, subtitled The Story and Science of the Reading Brain, helps us to understand that in teaching our brains to read we changed the intellectual evolution of our species. New developments in cognitive neuro-science should not be ignored by social practice theories of literacy. Similarly, reading occurs in social contexts and has social effects. Science alone is not enough.

Notes
1. I am indebted to Barbara Kamler for this distinction, which emerged in a conversation in which we were playfully applying Gee’s (1990: 142) notion of little d discourse and big D discourse to the ways in which critical literacy works with the politics of the everyday.
2. Makwerekwere is an insulting word for foreign Africans. It is derived from the unfamiliar sounds of their languages; kwerekwere refers to the sounds that people, who do not speak these languages, hear.
3. SL is short for student life.
4. I am grateful to my colleague Ana Ferreira for her permission to use this example of teaching students to read verbal–visual texts critically.
Suggestions for further reading

Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children by Vivian Vasquez is an award-winning account of building a critical curriculum around young children's concerns.

Multimodal Pedagogies in Diverse Classrooms by Pippa Stein is a moving account of how harnessing multiple literacies can give marginalised children the resources to claim their place in a democratic society.

Critical Reading in Language Education by Catherine Wallace explores different strategies for teaching critical reading to learners for whom English is an additional language.

Travel Notes from the New Literacy Studies edited by Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell combines work in New Literacy Studies and multimodality with examples of practice from around the world.

Negotiating Critical Literacies in Classrooms edited by Barbara Comber and Anne Simpson includes articles by critical literacy teachers working at all levels of education in a range of different contexts each of which has different conditions of possibility.

References


