

Critical Literacy: Disseminating Power Relations

Rachida Labbas

Washington State University, WA, USA

Abstract

Research on literacy as the ability to read and write has mainly focused on how to decode, encode and comprehend printed alphabetic texts (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). This conceptual paper aims at exploring the development of sociocultural theory. It also aims at exploring the way critical literacy has led to the emergence of multiliteracies. Research on literacy was also grounded on psychological theory (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). With the challenges and the changes that are happening in the 21st century, the focus on learning in groups is what drives research on literacy. The main shift that has occurred in literacy is to approach learning from a sociocultural theory. Many theories have emerged under the umbrella of sociocultural theory. Among the many factors that have led to the sociocultural theory is the focus on power relations that are embedded in literacy. Disseminating power relations in literacy has also led the emergence of multiliteracies as a critique to the dominance of the print word over other forms of literacies (Kress, 2000). Within the frame of sociocultural theory and critical literacy, literacy as multiple is more and more acknowledged.

KeyWords: critical literacy, multiliteracies, power, sociocultural theory

Introduction

Prior to the 1970's, the word "literacy" scarcely featured in formal educational context. Research was focused on instruction, and how to decode, encode and comprehend printed alphabetic texts (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). Cognitive perspectives have long shaped literacy because the main concern of curriculum designers and policy makers was a focus on particular skills, such as phonemic awareness, fluency, and comprehension (Perry, 2012). The work of Vygotsky (1978) has caused a big shift in the field of literacy, as psychological perspectives have been associated to social ones. Learning is no longer isolated from the context where it occurs. The sociocultural theory has emerged as a theory that is focused on the way people learn in groups and the way culture shapes their practices. Most importantly, power relations are also disseminated within this frame (Perry, 2012). The most influential works on literacy from a sociocultural theory have been conducted outside school (Street, 1984; Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 2000) as the aim of research is to understand literacy practices and the way knowledge is constructed by, for, and between members (Gee, 2000). Most of sociocultural theories have emerged from a non-formal literacy context (school). However, the theories have had a great impact on education and classroom instruction (Tracey & Morrow, 2006).

Vygotsky (1978) asserts the child interacts with his environment, and the impact of the environment should not be ignored when addressing literacy practices. Research on literacy school from a sociocultural has emerged as an attempt to understand the inter-psychological (between people) and the intra-psychological (within the individual functioning).

The sociocultural theory concept is used as an umbrella term in this paper because there are several sub-theories, and they all are interrelated (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). Green (1997) posits there are three dimensions of learning from a sociocultural perspective: The operational, the cultural, and the critical. For the purpose of this paper, the critical dimension of literacy is going to be focused on. Within the frame of the sociocultural theory, literacy is not neutral and it is embedded into power relations. The critical theory (Freire, 1970) emerged as a field of study to disseminate the inequalities, and the power relations that shape literacy. Perry (2012) asserts the critical theory plays an important role in the sociocultural perspective as it may describe all the other theories that have emerged within the frame of sociocultural theories.

The purpose of this paper is to understand literacy practices within the critical theory framework. For the purpose of this paper, an overview of the development of the sociocultural theory and the causes of the emergence of this theory will be explored. Then, the critical theory will be explored to show the impact of this theory on literacy as well as the impact of the theory on other theories, such as multiliteracies.

Sociocultural Theory

The sociocultural theory has its roots in the work of Vygotsky (1978) as he shifted research on learning from a purely psychological perspective to a social one. Vygotsky's work focuses on human interactions which take place in cultural contexts and are mediated by language and other symbol systems, and can be best understood when investigated in their historical development (genetic epistemology). As mentioned in the introduction, addressing the impact of the interaction of several environment factors on the human development started with the work of

The sociocultural theory emerged from research, which was conducted outside school. Street's work (1985) focused on literacy practices that he defined as the "broader cultural conception of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts. Street (1985) points out the context shapes the literacy practice, and so it can be inferred as contexts differ, literacy practices are also different depending on the context. Street's work is also based on a critical perspective of the dominance of the print word over oral literacy, which has also led to the emergence of the concept "literacies" (written literacy, oral literacy etc.)

Focus on literacy from a sociocultural perspective has engendered a growing emphasis on culture, activity, identity, and power into contexts (Perry, 2012). Reading and writing is now looked as how they occur into contexts and because of the diversity of contexts, the construct "New Literacy Studies" (NLS) was coined (Gee, 1991; street, 1985). Within this new frame, Brand and Hamilton (2000) have come up with the six features that enable us understand literacy from a sociocultural perspective, and they are:

- 1 Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts
- 2 There are different literacies associated with different domains of life
- 3 Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies become more dominant, visible and influential than others
- 4 Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices
- 5 Literacy is historically situated
- 6 Literacy practices change, and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making. (p.8)

Research on literacy from a sociocultural literacy may not explain the process of how to read and write, but it has described the way knowledge, culture, and relation powers are interrelated, and the way they influence literacy practices. Purcell-Gates, Perry & Briseno (2011) build up literacy model (Fig1) in which they explain that literacy is multiple as they state, "Literacy as multiple, and socially and culturally-situated, school literacy, or academic literacy,

is but one of many literacies. The forms and functions of academic literacy are shaped by the the social and cultural suppositions and beliefs of the academic community

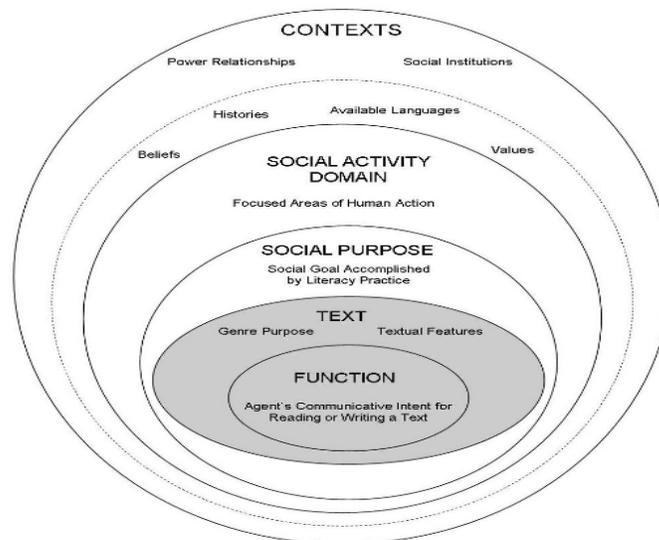


Figure 1: Model of Literacy Practice (Purcell-Gates, Perry & Briseno, 2011).

Literacy as multiple has emerged because of the several contexts and domains where literacy can be practiced. It is also important to note that the sociocultural theory has challenged the traditional definition of literacy as the ability to read and write because learning is now looked at social and the influence of culture and power relations are taken into consideration. Literacy is more than reading and writing as it is about meaning making into context. Besides, all these changes, there is also the emergence of multiliteracies which have integrated the multiplicity of communication channels and media (Cope & Kalanzis, 2005). Before exploring the development of multiliteracies theory, the following section will be devoted to critical literacy development and the way it is connected to sociocultural theories.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is based on disseminating power relations, inequalities, and injustices in texts. The term critical literacy was coined by Freire (1970) as a result of a critique to the education system, which does not allow students to think critically. Freire (1970) argues about school being as a bank in which students are filled with information and concepts only, and the power is exercised on students because they are regarded as people who do not know anything and “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (p.65). For Freire (1970), literacy is not only a cognitive skill, but it is about relating learners’ world to education so that they can think critically about their education. Freire’s contribution to literacy has resulted in a new definition that goes beyond the traditional definition as the ability to read and write. For Freire (2001), literacy is reading the word to read the world as he states

To acquire Literacy is more than to psychologically and mechanically dominate reading and writing techniques. It is to determine these techniques in terms of consciousness; to understand what one reads and write what one understands; it is to communicate graphically. Acquiring does not involve memorizing sentences, words, or syllables-lifeless objects unconnected to an existential universe- but rather an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one's context (p.86)

According to Freire's definition of literacy is central to the relation of students with knowledge, and the way they read texts. Students should not be considered as ignorant as they already know a lot of things they have learned from their own context. They come to classroom from a context where they have had their own experiences, and if students are just filled by concepts without connecting their experiences, the concepts will be just objects without life. From Freire's perspective; the bank concept education inhibits students from investing in the world, as they will remain just passive receivers of a privileged knowledge. Freire's work is focused mainly on the print word. However, his work has had a great influence on the emergence of multi-literacies. Before exploring the way multiliteracies are connected to critical literacy, the following section will be devoted to exploring the definition of multiliteracies.

Multiliteracies

The dominance of print word over other forms of literacy is the premise of multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). The construct has been coined by the New London Group (1996). For the researchers of the group, education has the purpose "to ensure that all students benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate fully in public, community, and economic life" (New London Group, 1996, p. 9). The researchers of the group are challenging the ways the students get education, and here lies the concern of multiliteracies theory. The theory is built on a critical perspective to challenge the traditional classroom, which is usually built on teacher talk. According to this theory, mainly with the rapid and deictic changes that technology development is causing, students have to be given more choices in their learning. Not only students should be exposed to more choices, but they should also be collaborators, and so teachers have to be as knowledge collaborators and creators instead of technicians (New London Group, 1996). Multiliteracies theory argues that contemporary literacy pedagogy needs to take into consideration the multilayered learners' identities and engage them to experience transformation in their capacities (New London Group, 1996). For the purpose of creating such pedagogy, the New London Group researchers (1996) coined the 'multimodal construct', and which gives a new picture of how teaching/learning can be through different modes (Fig2). Multiliteracies theory defines literacy as meaning making into a social context, but most importantly, the theory seeks to establish multimodal teaching/learning in pedagogy because the impact of new communication technologies (Cloonan, 2010).

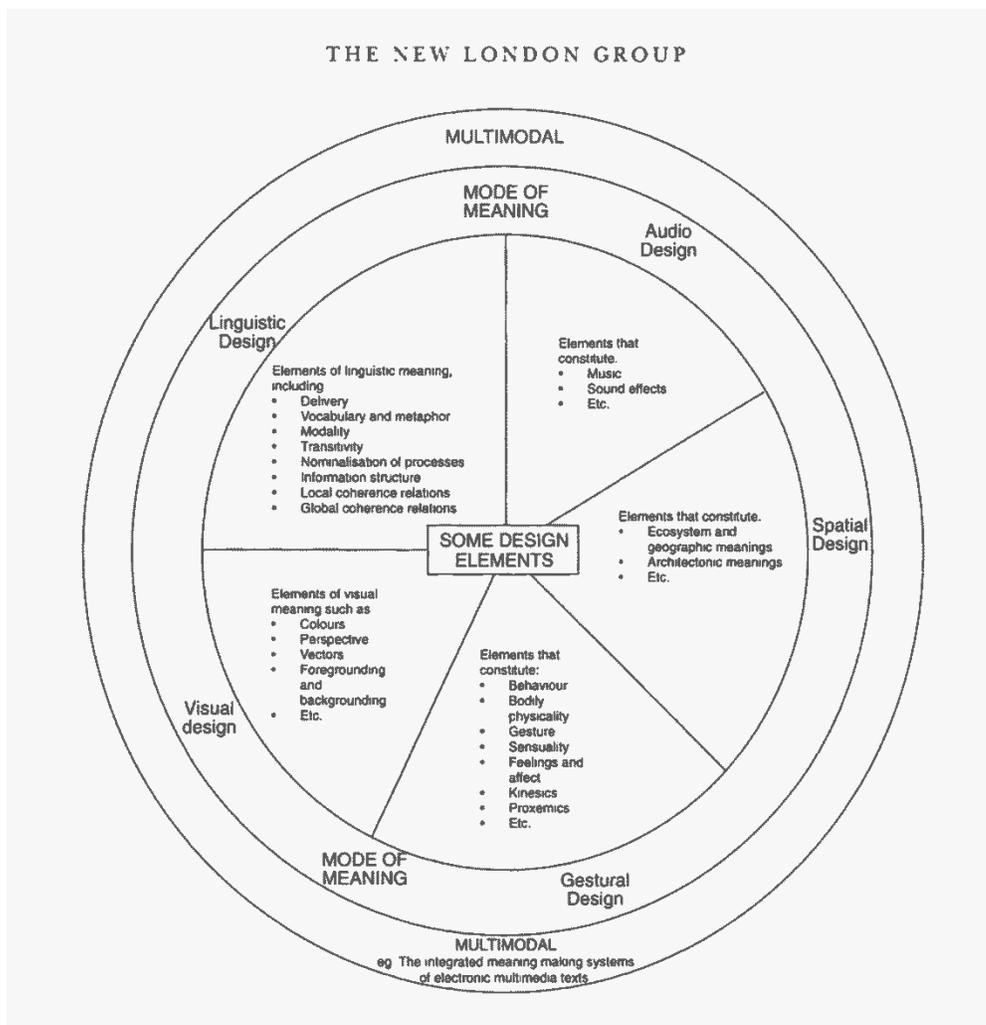


Figure 2: Multimodal Teaching (New London Group, 1996)

Within the theory of multiliteracies, teachers have been found resistant to multimodal teaching as they believe “multimedia and digital literacies are rivals to conventional print text” (Cloonan, 2010, p.16). In terms of multimodality, researchers (New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Kress, 2005; Baker, 2010) actively criticize those who focus on print literacies only. Baker (2010) asserts “becoming multiliterate was conceived as students developing proficiency in a range of meaning-making modes: linguistic, visual, audio, general, gestural, spatial, and multimodal designs, with multimodal being a combination of the modes.” (p.66), so literacy being considered as writing and reading has been criticized. Multiliteracies theory views literacy as including multiple modes of visual (moving image, sculpture, craft etc.), gestural (body language), spatial (proximity, spacing, landscape etc.), oral (live or recorded speech etc.), audio (music, sounds. etc.), writing (print, screened.), and other forms.

The critical stance in multiliteracies theory lies in the fact that the theory gives great emphasis on the mode of learning and teaching; that is to say the theory acknowledges the multiple modes of knowledge production with taking into consideration the context.

Multiliteracies and Power

From a Freiran perspective, critical literacy focuses on the print word, and the power relations that are embedded in the text. According to Perry (2012), the focus of critical literacy on power is to “determine which literacy practices are available to a given community, which are dominant and privileged, and which are marginalized” (p.64). Based on Freiran critical literacy model, Kress (2000) discusses power relations, which the print word has over other forms of literacy. Making students critical thinkers enables them to read the world and the word. In this case, educators have to understand their students’ world. Within the 21st century frame, the world of the students is more virtual than physical (Prensky, 2001). Moreover, students do not read from a single text, but several texts; texts being as print word, videos, hypertexts, audio etc. Their learning has become multimodal, and their world is totally different from their educators’. The world is now totally a new one from the world 30 years ago (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). In the students’ world, teachers might not feel comfortable, and might even feel as immigrants (Prensky, 2005). 21st century students learn using different modes, and the teachers have to provide integrate multimodal teaching to enhance their students’ learning. However, some teachers stick to traditional pedagogy because they feel safe (Rosen, 2010). In this situation, pedagogy practices are embedded into power relations. Integrating multimodal teaching/ learning (multiliteracies) might a way of addressing the conflicting situation, Both teachers and students will be learners. Thus, teachers will transfer power to students, and if students are empowered they will be more critical thinkers (Prensky, 2001). The critical stance in multiliteracies theory lies in the fact that it enhances students to be active agents in education as they bring their world, which is totally different or new to teachers, and collaborate, share, and construct knowledge. Students are given the power to design their own model of education, which enhances their creativity.

Conclusion

Disseminating power relations that are embedded in literacy has highly influenced pedagogy. Critical literacy (Freire, 1970) has urged educators, and policy makers to be aware about the importance of connecting the world of the students to classroom practices. Literacy has become more complex as many other forms of literacies have emerged. Thus, multiliteracies theory has developed as a way of integrating more modes of learning and teaching as these modes are more and more needed in a world that has totally changed (Kress, 2000). Critical literacy is connected to multiliteracies in the fact that it enhances multimodal education. The sociocultural theory does not focus on the learning strategies, but it has impacted literacy because literacy is now considered from multiple contexts, and learning is now approached as social and more collaborative Perry (2012). Within the sociocultural theory, literacy has become

more difficult to understand. However, it has become less difficult to accept differences in literacy practices among people (Brand & Hamilton 2000).

About the Author:

The author is a Fulbright scholar and a PhD candidate in education at Washington State University (WSU), WA. Her program is Language, Literacy, and Technology. She taught English in high school and university in Algeria. She is currently an ESL teacher at WSU, WA, USA. Her research interests are: technology use in language teaching, multiliteracies, ESL writing, and Teachers' epistemic beliefs.

References

- Barton, D. & Hamilton, M. (2000). Literacy practices. In D. Barton, M. Hamilton, & R. Ivanic (Eds.), *Situated Literacies: Reading and writing in context* (pp. 7-15). London: Routledge
- Baker, E.A. (2010). *The new literacies: multiple perspectives on research and practice*. New York: Guilford.
- Cloonan, A. (2010). *Multiliteracies, multimodality and teacher professional learning*. Common Ground.
- Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (2000). *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures*. London: Routledge.
- Freire, P. (1970). *The pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York/London: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (2001). *The Paulo Freire reader* (A. Freire & D. Macedo, Eds.). New York: Continuum.
- Gee, J. (2000). Discourse and sociocultural studies in reading. In M.L.Kamil, P.B.Mosenthal, P.D.Pearson, & R.Barr (Eds.), *Handbook on reading research, volume III* (pp. 195-208)
- Green, B. (1997). Literacy, information and the learning society. Keynote address at the Joint Conference of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English, the Australian Literacy Educators' association, and the Australian School Library Association, Darwin: Darwin High School, Northern Territory, Australia, 8-11 July 1997.
- Kress, G. (2000). Multimodality. In B.Cope & M. Kalantzis (Eds.), *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures* (pp. 182-202). London: Routledge.
- Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2011). *New Literacies: Everyday practices and classroom learning, 3rd Ed*. London: Open University press.
- New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designating social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1), 60-92
- Perry. H.K. (2012). What is Literacy? A critical overview of sociocultural perspectives. *Journal of Language and literacy education*, 8 (1), 50-70
- Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants. *On the Horizon* 9(5). Retrieved Jan., 29, 2011, from <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20%20Digital%20Natives.%20Digital%20immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf>

- Purcell-Gates, V., Perry, K.H., & Briseño, A. (2011). Analyzing literacy practice: Grounded theory to model. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 45(4), 439-458.
- Rosen, L. (2010). *Rewired: Understanding the iGeneration and the Way They Learn*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan
- Street, B.V. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tracey, D.H. & Morrow, L.M. (2006). *Lenses on reading: An introduction to theories and models*. New York: Guilford.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes* (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds). Cambridge: Harvard University Press