

## DEVELOPING THE CRITICALLY LITERATE READER

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### ABSTRACT

This paper conceptualizes a *Critical Literacy Teaching Practices (CLTP)* model for teaching reading texts in Malaysian classrooms. The model in this paper is adapted from the works of critical literacy proponents Allan Luke and Peter Freebody (1990) who developed four major resources for critical literacy practices in classrooms. Using selected samples from transcribed lesson units collected during a qualitative study, the researcher first shows that current practices in teaching reading texts in Malaysian classrooms, that are contextualised within a skill based syllabus document, depict a narrow view of teaching and exploring reading texts. The presenter argues that current practices in teaching reading in these classrooms tend to marginalise reader participation and limit reader's thought processes and analytical ability to explore texts. Then a *Critical Literacy Teaching Practices* model is conceptualized as a platform to help teachers move beyond the narrow skill based practices towards critical literacy as a more contemporary teaching practice in reading. The model allows teachers and readers to find ways of exploring reading texts at a level that moves beyond the functions of only extraction, interpretation and regurgitation of information. In this new level meta- themes and issues are critically analysed. The model also allows teachers and readers to bridge different contexts of knowledge use and relate classroom reading to real world experiences when exploring texts. The researcher argues that there is a need to negotiate this CLTP model in reading classrooms in Malaysia as it helps readers experience the transformative power of reading through the development of a fuller self-autonomy, self-sufficiency and self-representation locally and globally within and outside texts, making readers major partners in the process of reading and meaning making.

Keywords: critical literacy, teaching practices, reading, self- autonomy, self-sufficiency, self-representation

## Introduction

Skill-based approaches to the teaching of reading have long been a dominant practice in reading classrooms in Malaysia (Pandian, 2006, 2007; Koo, 2008, 2007, 2004, 2003, 2002; Mukudan, 2003). The practice of skill based approaches stems mainly from a skills based ELT syllabus document used by Malaysian teachers. The document lists a number of skills in reading which teachers need to teach readers to master and use when processing information in texts. Skills based practices in teaching reading focus on the individual reader and how he/she works cognitively to process a text to extract its meaning. The skills based reading teacher tends to break down reading activities “into teachable elements such as phonics, grammar, textual structures and comprehension” (Wray, 2001, p. 13) and provides reading exercises that reinforce skills in reading such as “skimming, scanning, inferencing and predicting” (Mukudan, 2003, p. 231). The above teacher/reader roles tend to make the reading process a linear activity.

Although, the above practices have a place in explaining rigour, objectivity, clarity and intentionality in reading texts, these practices are seen to be passive as they are not reflective of the true nature of what readers experience when they read. In arguing what a reader experiences and does when reading, Williams (2004) writes that a reader does many other things than merely apply a set of skills to process information in a text. Gee (2000) argues that the reader’s mind is not a decontextualised construct that works in a linear manner. Human thinking, says Gee “is distributed across people, symbols, tool, objects, various technologies and experiences” (p. 198) and in reading the mind draws from all the above resources to make meanings. Gee further explains that the mind acts as a pattern recogniser that “tends to leak out of the text and into the world around it and is adept at finding patterns from the world” (p. 19), drawing them into the text when making meaning.

When applied to the act of reading, the above characteristics of the mind remind us that when readers read, they make particular kinds of inter-textual/ contextual connections, ask particular kinds of questions of a text, make not one but various interpretations of text content based on their worldly resources, read from a particular distance from a text and talk more about the meanings in the text than those listed. Consider, for instance, the following classroom discussion that took place after reading a text in a year four Malaysian classroom as recorded by the researcher.

### Example 1

Tt: Okay, jewel, what is a jewel?  
Readers : diamonds, gold... :  
Reader 1: Teacher then what is a jade?  
Tt: Jade is a gemstone. Usually Chinese ladies wear it. It is usually green.  
Reader 2: Teacher ..a jade temple  
Tt : Jade temple.. Where...which story...which movie?

In the interaction above the teacher, stopped while reading a text with students and asked her readers for the meaning of the word jewel from the text. Students defined jewel as “diamonds and gold”. However, for one of the students (Reader 1) the ‘image of jade’ was evoked when the word jewel was read. Reader 1 then immediately put his hand up and asked the following question, “Teacher then what is jade?” To this question the teacher made an out of text (inter-contextual) connection and replied that jade was a gemstone usually worn by Chinese ladies and was green in colour. Listening to the teacher’s response, another student (Reader 2), formed still another image of the word jade contextualising it as a “jade temple”. At this point the reader’s mind was no longer only attached to text content in a cognitive manner, but was already moving beyond the text. The text being read was no longer a site for only comprehension or extraction of knowledge using selected skills but acted as the meeting place for various inter-intra reader resources and experiences that were mediating text content and affecting the kind of meanings being made by different readers.

Koo (2008) defines the above external resources mediating text content as readers’ multiple memberships in various communities, cultures and experiences which readers do not leave at the classroom door but instead bring into the classroom. Koo further explains how these resources do permeate readers’ thought processes when reading and offer readers the possibility “of creating new knowledges and new ways of interacting within texts, thus ‘affording towards a fuller participation’” (p. 11) in texts being read by both teachers and readers.

Although in the example above, readers were actively participating in the reading of the text with their worldly experiences, the mediation of readers’ worlds into text context were disengaged by the teacher. This disengagement did not allow readers to express the creation and recreation of multiple meanings and knowledge bases which were developing in their minds. The teacher was merely taking for granted or even homogenising readers’ responses “under broad generalisations or collapsing them into deterministic reproductions” (Bloome,

Carter, Christian, Otto, & ShuartFaris, 2005, p.xvi) which did not encourage critical thought on the part of the readers. Vethamani (2007) reminds teachers that they should be concerned not only about learners discovering literal meaning of words in the text, but also with their personal and critical response to the text as “it is the interaction between student and text that should be of concern to teachers” (p.21) as this is where true meanings in reading are developed.

The responses by readers in the above example need to be negotiated in a more detailed manner to allow for the development of multi perspectives in reading from which every reader may be able to learn and understand more rather than regurgitate and extract information. The example reminds teachers that many times knowledge within texts is not an objective entity to be absorbed but a site for continual change and flux as it is generated by readers’ reflective reactions. This means that in exploring reading texts, the goal of teaching reading should not only be to make objective interpretations of text but also:

- a. to allow readers to generate and question identities and discourses in texts
- b. to help readers experience the transformative power of developing worldly understanding from their reading experiences in the classroom.
- c. to raise critical awareness in readers through which they will be able to reflect upon text knowledge in relation to their own worlds and consequently understand their own worlds, views, values and also ways of being of others around them , thus helping improve their behaviour and role in the world they live in.

A teacher practicing the skills approach would be unable to develop the above described goals of reading or satisfy readers’ differing perspectives, experiences and inquiries that are invoked when reading. The skills based view has very little interest in how reader resources affect meaning production other than engaging readers with texts in a cognitive space. This may lead to the silencing of the readers’ voice (Koo, 2004) while elevating the voice of the author, and further lead to reading becoming an unauthentic activity. The content of reading becomes lifeless and the reader a “necrophilous reader” (Freire, 1970) who is mechanical and static. The readers’ mind becomes an isolated cognitive construct that does not have the ability to think and grow beyond the text context. The prevalence of the above described skills practices will not allow our readers to become truly human, because “human existence and, by extension, the human mind and human thinking cannot be silent as they are built in words, actions and reflections. True knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention: restless, impatient, continuing and hopeful inquiry of the mind” (Freire, 1970, p.58). For these very reasons, there is a need for teachers to expand their practices beyond skills approaches to include critical literacy teaching perspectives in their teaching practices in reading. The following

section conceptualized Critical Literacy Teaching Practices Model (CLTP) that will be able to help teachers develop critical literacy teaching perspectives in their teaching practice for reading.

### **Theoretical perspectives in the CLTP model**

Theoretically the perspectives in the CLTP model are governed by critical literacy, a conceptual framework grounded in post structuralist, Freirean and critical social language and literacy traditions. All these traditions broaden the view of teaching practices in reading and broaden the traditional notion of what it means to be critical in reading.

Traditionally, being critical in reading means exploring texts through “higher order comprehension and a sophisticated personal response” (Luke, 2002, p.1) gained through “sense making, deducing and the rational analysis of text content” (Cervetti, Pandales, & Damino, 2001, p. 4). However, informed by the post structuralist, Freirean and critical social language and literacy traditions, the CLTP model redefines the traditional view of criticality to mean developing a critical stance that allows readers to use texts to permeate various aspects of life through their reading in order to form an understanding of the world they live in and to then to be able to participate in society’s decision making process in an empowering way.

In order to illustrate the meaning of criticality in reading as projected in the CLTP model, an example is taken from Cadeiro Kaplan (2002) a researcher who investigated Segura Mora, a teacher in a kindergarten class in Los Angeles during a reading lesson. Segura used critical literacy perspectives to explore two textstitled *Nona Bonita* and *The Ugly Duckling* with his students. In both the texts Segura explored the issue of appearance, which was the underlining theme in the stories. For example, Segura asked his readers what they thought about the drawing of the girl on the cover of *Nona Bonita* and the main character of the *Ugly Duckling*. It was reported that many of the students in Segura’s classroom did not find both the girl on the cover of *Nona Bonita* and the duckling beautiful because they were dark. This led to a discussion of colour and representation in the classroom and came to a point where a student in the class said “I don’t like my skin colour. My mom gives me pills to turn me white”. Cadiero wrote of how Segura was saddened by this comment and said “I think your colour is beautiful and you are beautiful too” (Cadiero Kaplan, 2002, p.379)

In the example above criticality was first dealt with by exploring an issue from the text site that permeated the lives of readers which was the issue of colour. Empowerment came from discussing how the little students in the class felt

about the issue and awareness was raised after arriving at the decision that colour did not matter. What mattered was the behaviour of a person.

The critical literacy perspectives projected in the CLTP model re-orientate the objectives of teaching reading and treatment of text content as illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1 : Objectives of CLTP

Objective	Description of reading
Purpose of reading	Critique, juxtapose, restructure, diversify knowledge
Focus of reading	Reveal beliefs, assumptions, values, representations, implications, and gap silences behind text contexts
Aim of reading	Develop reflection, action, transformation and change through reading
Knowledge in text	Always changing, partial, dynamic and context dependent

The above reoriented teaching perspectives in the CLTP model define the use of reading texts in a more challenging way. Within the classroom all the objectives of the model are achieved through four major types of competences which teachers of reading should explore in readers. These competencies are described in Table 2.

Table 2 : Critical Literacy Competencies

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Practices and competencies	
Text decoding Decoding competence Decode words, phrases and sentences within texts. Recognize and use alphabet sounds, words, spelling and other structural practices	Text participation Semantic competence Understanding and interpreting text meanings
Platform to do language practice	Platform to do skills practice
Text using Pragmatic competence Develop text content, explore layers of meanings and respond to text in a plural manner, develop inter-textuality/contextuality, (juxtapose and develop text knowledge)	Text analyzing Critical literacy competence Develop critical awareness, transform through their reading and discussions of issues and think about what can and should be done differently
Platform for reader resources to mediate text reading, reading as a social practice	Platform for readers to become agents of change and experience the transformative power of reading

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(Adapted from Temple, 2005; Rush, 2004; Leland et al., 2005)

a. Text decoding

In text decoding practices, teachers get their readers to decode the text. As text decoders readers are taught to deal with decoding words and structures in text. This allows teachers to work on elements such as vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, and structure to show coding competence and provides the Malaysian ELT teacher with a platform to carry out language and structural practice. In Malaysian classrooms where English language is learnt as a second language, practice in language is seen as necessary by many teachers to help improve students' mastery of the language through vocabulary, pronunciation and spelling exercises to show decoding competence.

### b. Text Participation

In text participation practices teachers get their readers to comprehend, infer or interpret text meanings. Readers apply skills in reading such as skimming, scanning, predicting, and inferencing to comprehend textual meanings and show semantic competence. In Malaysian classrooms such activities define the aims of the while and post reading stage of the lesson where readers are expected to have achieved full comprehension of text. What are silenced in this practice are the various reader resources mediating reading experiences. Readers remain marginalised or passive as they work intra-personally to understand and decipher meanings illustrated by the author. The reader/text relationship is described as involving a narrating subject, that is the text, and the passive object, that is the reader. There is no space to consider the contradictions readers may feel about the realities mentioned within text. The reader has no space to comment critique or develop analytical thinking from text. If this continues then teachers are only instilling in readers “a habit of privileging text (author) beliefs while devaluing their own reactions and opinions in texts” (Koo, 2004, 27). This, according to Koo (2004), may in the long run lead to readers animating ideas in texts and developing an inability to use texts to produce more knowledge. This may render readers to be lacking voice, creativity and innovative capacity. Readers will only form narrow conceptualisation of realities from texts.

The limitations within text participating practices remind teachers that they need to move on to more analytical examinations of texts that can help readers broaden their views and conceptualisation of realities invoked in texts and not stop when readers have achieved comprehension. Comprehension as argued by Molden (2007) should be the point to begin critical and deeper discussions of texts. This can be achieved by applying text using and text analysing practices as proposed in the CLTP model.

### c. Text using

In text using practices teachers get their readers to relate text knowledge to multiple contexts. Here readers explore the layers of silenced meanings, gaps and voices behind texts. Readers are encouraged to respond to texts by developing inter-textuality/contextuality and show pragmatic competence. This resource provides the platform for teachers to address readers mediating resources that are affecting their meaning making process and making them create multiple perspectives and develop multiple stances towards text knowledge. Berhman (2006) identified six different stances that readers can take towards text content and these include personal, historical, technological, ethical, cultural and critical stances. The stances which readers take are affected by readers’ schemas from in and outside the classroom. Using these individual stances readers make comparisons and judgments about text knowledge and their



worldly knowledge and form multiple understandings from texts. In terms of reading difficulty this practice addresses the evaluative level of reading.

#### d. Text analysis

The fourth practice in the model is text analysis. This practice addresses the highest level of difficulty in reading, appreciation. In appreciation readers develop emotional and aesthetic reaction towards their reading. These emotional and aesthetic reactions are invoked as readers explore meta- themes from texts being discussed. Through these discussions readers develop reflections. Reflections raise readers' awareness of realities within and outside texts and help readers experience the transformative power of reading which defines critical literacy competence. .

The CLTP model can be used with any sort of text for any subject. It is not a linear model where teachers are required to pass through one stage of practice to reach the next stage, but one that combines all practices interactively. In the next section the conceptualized CLTP model is illustrated using an example of a text from a moral lesson. The aim of the activity below is to show teachers how the CLTP model can be applied in a reading text.

#### **Applying the CLTP Model**

In this section the researcher illustrates how the CLTP model can be applied to the reading of a moral text. The text used is titled "The Pond of Tolerance". In the animated text the elephants and the deer argue over who has the right to drink water from the pond first. A wise owl appears and asks the animals the reason for their argument. The elephants speaks first saying that they had the right to drink water from the pond first as they were bigger. The deer then replied that since they were smaller it was better if they drank the water first. Listening to their argument the wise owl suggests that both the elephants and the deer drink the water together. The elephants could drink from the right side of the pond while the deer drink from the left side. Below is a sample of how the four practices within the CLTP are applied to text.

Table 3: Sample lesson using the four practices in the CLTP model

Practices within the CLTP model	Classroom activities	Reading difficulty level and sample questions
Text decoding	Students are given the text to read. They read silently to decode the words and structures within text. Teacher then discusses vocabulary and pronunciation of difficult words. Teacher also works on grammatical and other language structures.	Literal comprehension: Decode and identify Sample questions : Pronounce the following words correctly. Based on the text write the meanings of the following words. List down the synonyms and antonyms of the words discussed in no 2.
Text participating	Students comprehend text by recalling the story in the text and by doing some sequencing and comprehension activities. They summarize that the text is about some animals who are arguing over who should drink the water from the pond first. They also infer the role of the wise owl and predict what would have happened if the owl had not arrived at the right moment.	Reorganization/ inferencing Recalling, sequencing, summarize, inferring, predicting Sample questions : Recall: Name the animals in the text. Sequence: Describe in the correct sequence what happened in the story. Summarize: Tell the story in your own words. Infer: Why was it necessary for the wise owl to interrupt the argument between the animals? Predict: What would have happened if the owl had not made its suggestion?
Text using	Readers develop multiple perspectives towards the content in the text. Teacher trains	Evaluating, Making judgments, relating multiple

readers to think beyond the text and apply textual knowledge to their real living contexts. Teacher may ask readers to recall a time when they had got into a heated argument with their friends, parents and siblings and how they found solutions. Students can be asked to reflect upon what caused the argument and the role they played in its solution. Readers relate descriptions and narrative they have experienced.

perspectives/contexts  
Sample questions:  
Comparing: Which character do you like/dislike in the story and why? Did you like the story ending?  
Relating to multiple perspectives: In the story the animals came to an agreement. Can you remember a time in your life when you have had an argument? What did you do to solve the argument?

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Text  
analyzing

Students discuss moral/ethical dimensions learnt from text. They invoke and discuss the issues of fairness, justice, equality raised from text in their everyday lives. They reflect on instances where they may have been unjust or victims of unfairness. Readers also reflect on and discuss criteria for effective problem solving. This raises critical awareness of readers' behaviour towards the issue being discussed and also prepares them for more just and equitable behaviour in future problem solving instances where they hope that their decisions will not victimize one party over another.

Appreciation, emotional and aesthetic development, reflection and transformation.  
Sample questions:  
a. Some of the themes that can be raised from this text are justice, fairness and equality when making decisions. Can you describe times when you saw or heard of injustice, inequality or unfairness being meted out to someone?  
b. How can we solve problems effectively?  
c. What can we do to help such people?  
At this stage readers are experiencing the transformative power from their reading and are ready to act as agents of change.

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As noticed, the above model draws on levels of difficulty in text analysis grounding them in the difficulty levels in cognitive development used by Bloom/Barret.

The reading practices within the CLTP model not only inform readers through text knowledge but also teach readers to speak up in polite and assertive ways and learn from issues in texts to improve ways of living and understanding the world. This is much needed in today's globalized stage where voice and representation are the hallmark of autonomy and power. A similar approach to reading was also suggested by Pillai (2007) about possible ways of guiding readers to take individual stances on texts read using multi-literary theories. The practices within the CLTP model also acknowledge multi-literary stances such as feminism and post-structuralism as a way in which readers relate to different perspectives that are idiosyncratic to them. The practices in the model reshape reading education from taking precedence of only knowledge for informational and occupational purposes to making reading a social practice that connects the reading of the word to the world (Freire, 1970).

Promoting the social practice of education was emphasized by former Education Minister of Malaysia Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein in the Star Education section dated 19 August 2007. The minister mentioned that the ministry intended to review its curriculum for subjects in pre and primary schools to ensure that Malaysian children are nurtured with good values that promote self-worth, tolerance, respect and patriotism from an early age besides learning for academic excellence. According to the minister "after 50 years of independence" learners should have also learned to become good Malaysians besides acquiring the 3R skills in reading, writing and arithmetic (The Star Education, 2007, p. 23). He said that having a degree or a diploma meant nothing if the country and its people were not stable. In light of the above aspirations of our Minister, the present model holds great significance. It is hoped that teachers and educators would adopt more critical literacy perspectives into their teaching of reading.

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