

## **Practical steps for A Balanced Approach to Critical Literacy**

Nizar K. Ibrahim and Tatiana Fadlallah

Upon encountering the term “critical literacy”, most teachers would probably react:

“Yes, this is what we need.” Truly, critical literacy has always been a must since the early existence of mankind, not only in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Ibrahim, 2022). However, educators should develop a visionary, balanced pedagogy that incorporates critical literacy instruction, keeping insight the students’ needs (language, functional, academic, etc.).

This paper helps teachers develop such a pedagogy, termed the critical approach to language teaching (CALT), by specifying what criticality encompasses without using unnecessary jargon and by presenting some practical illustrations.

### **Practice and Some Theory**

The theoretical underpinnings of critical language education are varied and complex, encompassing 3 major orientations: The Freirean, the poststructuralist, and the text analytic (Ibrahim, 2022). All these theories spring from the social nature of education in general and of language in particular. Although in this article we will not explain these theories, we will capitalize on their commonalities in helping teachers develop an informed CALT. We will also help them make the necessary adaptations that suit their conditions because CALT is sensitive to contextual variation.

Additionally, educators who want to design critical literacy lessons should be clear about what critical literacy is. The term “critical” has been used in many different ways in

education, which leads to some confusion. For example, in language teaching, teachers confuse critical literacy with critical thinking. These are distinct concepts both theoretically and pedagogically. We will clarify what differentiates the two terms pedagogically, based on the work of Freire and Macedo (1987), Ibrahim (2022), Norton and Morgan (2021), Pennycook (1999) and Shor (2009).

The pedagogical differences between critical thinking and critical literacy lie in what students do when engaged in any of the two modes. To clarify this distinction, we cite the following excerpt from Ibrahim (2022, p. 70):

...critical pedagogues should give students every possibility and resource to question the discourses that impact our lives and to interrogate the world for its injustices. This view of criticality goes beyond the traditional concept of critical thinking which refers to the skill of problem-solving, of evaluating the credibility of any argument, and of making intelligent choices. "Critical thinking is used to describe a way of bringing more rigorous analysis to problem solving or textual understanding; a way of developing more critical distance as it is sometimes called" (Pennycook, 1999, p. 51).

We illustrate this differentiation between critical literacy and critical thinking with exemplary tasks under the two categories around two texts. The first is "Jacky's Gold" which is about an Athlete named Jackie who had a serious knee injury while competing in the heptathlon at the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games.

Despite the pain which caused her some setbacks, Jackie continued with determination and managed to win the gold medal.

A critical thinking task on this text may require students to explain what they would do if they were Jacky. Would they continue the game? Would they abstain from playing until they heal? Compare this with the critical literacy ones which have been carried out by grade 6 students in two Lebanese public schools during a study done by Fadlallah in 2022.

Students read “Jacky’s Gold” and documented in a table the names of the different characters, the number of times each character is mentioned, and the occasions on which each character is mentioned. Groups of students then discussed why the author represents the different characters in this unbalanced manner. They presented the results of their discussion to the class. The teacher took notes and guided students at the end of reporting to explore the issue deeper through questions like:

- Is this difference fair? Why?
- How would the other two characters feel when they read this text?
- What should the writer do in order to represent all the characters differently?

Based on the discussion, students wrote an analysis in response to the following prompt: You have observed significant differences in how the text represents the three characters. In a 250-word-essay, analyze the reasons and the consequences of the author’s emphasis on Jacky versus the other two characters. Questions that may help you include:

- How does overemphasizing Jacky’s story make the readers view her versus how they view the other two characters?
- How does it affect sports players who do not win the gold medal and those who lose the game all together?
- How does the text influence how people think about winning and losing?

The second illustrative set of tasks centers around a blog about the controversial Lebanese rent law. The blog argues strongly in favor of the law. One critical thinking question may be as follows: Explain whether the author presents convincing arguments by analyzing the evidence, the kind of reasoning, and the emotional appeal used in the blog. Compare this critical thinking task to the CALT ones that grade 11 students actually did in a Lebanese public-school during a one-year study on critical literacy, done by Ibrahim (see Ibrahim, 2018/2022 for a detailed report).

After reading the blog and doing some vocabulary activities, students worked in groups, each of whom was assigned one of the following roles: house owners, tenants, government representatives, and representatives of human rights (NGOs). They carried out a simulated talk show about the fairness of the law and they took notes of the discussion. They used their notes when writing a four-paragraph critique of the text’s claims that the new law is fair to everyone, that the new law will lead to lower rents and lower house prices, and that the new law will boost the economy. Students could either support or oppose the claims of the text, taking into consideration the points of view of those whom the text marginalizes.

While the traditional concept of critical thinking can be realized in many teaching practices beyond the scope of this article, the two illustrative tasks given above involve students in problem-solving and in examining the credibility of an argument. However, the CALT tasks included in the paper enable students to do some of the following:

- Examine the hidden assumptions of texts/discourses, the reasons and implications for emphasizing certain views and marginalizing others, the interests that texts/discourses serve and at whose expense, and the interested representations of “truths” they depict;
- Read the word and the world”, i.e., examine whether or not texts and discourses serve a better, more just life for all;
- Examine how the ways language is used shape and are shaped by the dominant sociopolitical and socioeconomic views and values;
- Identify the purposes of texts/discourses and examine whether or not these purposes serve the common interests of people fairly;
- Imagine possibilities for a more just world;
- Express an informed, just opinion of local and global issues;
- Empathize with those who suffer injustices regardless of their ethnicities, religions, nationalities, abilities, etc.;

- Analyze ideas, situations, descriptions, dialogues, symbols, or events to gain a deep understanding of their impact on our lives and to contribute to their reconstruction so that they become more just; and
- Analyze the root causes of our social, economic, and political problems.

### **Principles of CALT**

In this section, we delineate the essential principles that underlie CALT, so that teachers not only adopt this approach, but also become capable of adapting it to their own contexts. These most essential principles are problem-posing and reflective dialogue.

#### **Problem-posing**

Problem-posing education has been developed by Freire (1970/1993) who hypothesizes that the unjust living circumstances of people are normalized through language. Thus, they should be questioned and problematized. Poststructuralist scholars (e.g. Norton & Morgan, 2021) add that the normalized ways of talking, writing, and behaving are partial and reflect the assumptions, beliefs, values, and interests of their powerful producers. They thus mostly shape the human condition in unjust, unbalanced ways and inhibit the realization of our full humanity, as Freire (1993) asserts. From a critical perspective, problematizing the human condition and the factors that shape it helps students examine reasons for the injustices in the globe. It also stimulates them to imagine better alternatives. For instance, the soaring housing expenses in many parts of the world are

normalized through the market discourse, like the blog about the Lebanese rent law. Also, competition is made normal through texts like “Jacky’s Gold”. Questioning the assumptions of such discourses, i.e. problematizing their hidden views, interests and intentions engages students in critically analyzing whether or not they reflect the common interests of people and whether or not they serve justice.

### **Reflective dialogue**

Challenging what is normalized initiates a constructive dialogue process. In this dialogue, people deconstruct and reconstruct what is under scrutiny. This, at some point, leads to confusion which becomes clarified through continuing the constructive dialogue on the basis of what is more just. For example, examining the fairness of highlighting the story of Jacky and marginalizing those of the other two characters in “Jacky’s Gold” involves students in rethinking their views of the winners and losers in a certain game. This rethinking of what is socially valued creates some confusion. Further talk about and rethinking the matter helps in developing a clear social vision of what is more appropriate for a cooperative society.

### **Planning a Balanced CALT Lesson**

Several models have been proposed in the literature to guide CALT instruction. One of them is Ibrahim’s (2022) CALT model, composed of five phases. It is beyond the scope of the paper to provide a detailed explanation of the model. Basically, the model provides a framework for balanced instruction that addresses all student needs, including critical ones. It is important to remember that CALT does not follow a specific template and that teachers should adapt any model they use to their contexts. To assist in this process,

this section provides an illustrative lesson that was implemented in 2022 in Fadlallah's study.

*Water for the Emir's Palace: A CALT Lesson*

Grade 6

Emir Bashir wanted to build a new palace in Beit Eddine, but he faced the challenge of bringing water to it. He sought the help of Hasan, the fool of Shanai. Hasan proposed that every man living in the area digs part of an aqueduct from AL Safa spring to Beit Eddine without any compensation. Thus, Emir Bashir succeeded in building a magnificent palace adorned with intricate woodwork, marble floors, and colorful glass windows.

**Instructional objective:** Students will rewrite the story from a critical perspective.

**Task I:** Students read the text at home and replaced the italicized words and phrases in the selections below with more appropriate descriptions. These alternative descriptions should represent the students' opinions about the reality of the situation that the story portrays. For example, in the sentence (Emir Bashir was a very strong-willed man and did not let small problems stop him from doing what he wanted), the word "selfish" may replace "strong-willed", and the phrase "insisted on getting things at any cost" may replace the phrase "did not let small problems stop him...").

**The Sentences are:**

1. "Today, you will call upon all the *able men* of the nearby villages to help me," he announced.

2. When Hasan arrived at the palace, people *laughed* at his *strange* clothes and his *old donkey*. Hasan did not pay any attention to them, but laughed in a *strange and hysterical* way.
3. This was a *very clever* idea because, this way, the Emir *did not have to spend* any money on the aqueduct.
4. The villagers had *to help* the Emir whenever needed because he was their *leader* and *controlled* all the lands in his area.
5. “My *friend*, indeed it is!” exclaimed the Emir. “This is surely the most beautiful palace in the land, and I *must thank you*, Hasan, for making it possible.”

**Task II:** Students shared their answers in task I. The teacher guided them to choose words and phrases that represent critical perspectives.

**Task III:** The teacher read a dialogue aloud in which Sit Shams raised objections to building a new palace. Then, students assumed that they were relatives of the Emir’s wife. One student was the Emir. The relatives tried their best to convince the Emir of the wife’s opinion.

**Task IV:** The teacher wrote the new words and phrases suggested in tasks I, II, and III and helped the students memorize them through games.

**Task V:** Students discussed with their teacher the following questions:

- Do you believe that the Emir wanted a new palace because his older one was small? Why or why not?

- What were some experiences of the men who dug the aqueduct?
- What did Hassan, the Emir's advisors and the villagers think of the Ameer's desires and personality?

**Task VI:** Students rewrote the story from one of the following perspectives:

- the men who dug the aqueduct,
- Hassan,
- the advisors,
- the villagers.

Some teachers may wonder: "It is not clear whether the lesson is a reading, a speaking, or a writing one." Socially, reading, writing, listening, watching, and speaking are interconnected. People use all or some of them interactively to realize their transactional, academic, linguistic, aesthetic, exploratory, and representational purposes. This, however, does not mean that we lump the various language skills together, unguided by clear goals and objectives. Thus, instructional objectives help teachers determine the skill, subskills and/or language that should be the focus of instruction. In the lesson above, rewriting the text from a critical perspective constituted the objective. The lesson was the last one in a unit of instruction which lasted for two months, and the teacher decided to focus also on vocabulary in this lesson. Both reading and writing were needed to realize the objective, but the focus was the critical reconstruction of the text. Thus, the first 3 tasks in the lesson gradually engaged

students in examining the text critically. The rewriting task aimed to assess the students' performance at the end of the unit. Teachers who would like to use this lesson may have other conditions, goals and objectives. For instance, they may be doing this kind of lesson for the first time. In this case, they may use the first two tasks only. If their objective is speaking, they may want to use the third task. Teachers may also want to teach grammar in the context of the lesson besides vocabulary. They might want to do some traditional reading exercises before any critical exploration. Thus, CALT does not follow a fixed template, but it rather incorporates a range of purposes and situations in a balanced language curriculum, taking into account the students' prioritized needs, the instructional duration, the curricular demands, class dynamics, etc.

### **Important Considerations**

Like anything new, teachers may be faced with some resistance by the administration or by students when implementing some CALT tasks. Some tips will be adapted from Ibrahim (2022) to help teachers use CALT smoothly. For a detailed discussion, see chapter 6 of the book on <https://ul.academia.edu/NizarIbrahim>.

1. Make sure that you do not introduce significant instructional changes before you gain membership in the school-community.
2. Introduce challenging topics gradually; you may start with the less sensitive ones and increasingly move towards more challenging topics; this can be based on your own estimation of what topics may or may not lead to early closure in discussion.

3. Stop implementing a new idea if you feel that it will cause significant opposition which may not be handled successfully, but continue implementing a successful idea if the opposition it incurs is not harmful.
4. When a certain change becomes accepted in the school community, gradually introduce other ones.
5. Take into consideration the knowledge and skills that students are required to demonstrate in official exams or in large scale tests, even if they are useless in real life.
6. When any member in the class, including you, reaches an emotional tension during discussion, change the class dynamics by asking students to write about what has led to this point, by moving the discussion away from the contentious aspect to a more analytical one, by asking students to move to a reading activity related to the point under discussion, etc.
7. Guide the discussion so that students voice their opinions without appropriating them to your position.
8. Always ask students to address the whole class when they express a point of view, and to respond to the point itself and not to the person who expresses it.

### **Conclusion**

Although challenging, CALT tasks are enriching and transformative linguistically, socially and intellectually, as made clear in the following selections from N. Ibrahim(2016).

Nijmeh (a grade 11 teacher) said: “When students started responding favorably to the tasks, she started feeling “happy with that because ... (students became) more involved ...” (and deeper readers and writers) (p. 340). Tatiana (another teacher) felt “... very, very proud about (using CALT)” (p. 330). Nijmeh explained: “This is real teaching. (Students noticed that) there is something exciting about what we are doing because in other classes, all what teachers do is ask them to read aloud in turn and ask them about the tone and the theme” (p. 341). These testimonies confirm that when implemented appropriately, CALT leads to very interesting, meaningful learning.

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