

In Defence of Critical Literacy Pedagogy: A Policy-Responsive Literacy Approach Addressing the Academic Needs of Immigrant Students in Canadian Schools

Wendy Moffatt, York University, Toronto, Canada

Abstract

This paper critically examines four major traditions of literacy pedagogy: didactic, authentic, functional, and critical, to evaluate their effectiveness in supporting the academic needs of immigrant students in Canadian schools. While didactic approaches emphasize the transmission of standardized knowledge, and authentic and functional models promote real-world relevance and skill application, these traditions do not sufficiently confront the systemic inequities that shape immigrant learners' experiences. In contrast, a critical literacy framework, informed by the works of Freire, Giroux, and other scholars, offers a more transformative orientation because it foregrounds power, identity, and social justice. Integrating perspectives from multiliteracies theory, the paper also argues that immigrant students' diverse linguistic and cultural repertoires expand what counts as literacy, challenging monolingual and deficit-based assumptions that often govern classroom practice. Drawing on culturally responsive pedagogy, the paper demonstrates how instructional approaches that value students' lived experiences and community knowledge foster agency, engagement, and academic success. Supported by existing research and reflective classroom insights, the analysis also acknowledges limitations inherent in reflective methodology. The paper concludes by outlining implications for classroom practice, policy development, and future research in increasingly diverse Canadian educational contexts.

Keywords: *critical literacy, immigrant students, multiliteracies, deficit theory, culturally responsive pedagogy*

Wendy Moffatt: Wendy Moffatt is a second-year PhD student in the Graduate Program in Education, specializing in Language, Culture, and Teaching. Their research interest explores the lived experiences of first-generation Caribbean-descent students in Toronto's post-secondary institutions, focusing on language, race, and academic success.

Introduction: Reawakening Our Connection to the Land

Canadian classrooms are among the most culturally and linguistically diverse educational spaces in the world, particularly in major urban centres such as Toronto. Students from immigrant backgrounds bring with them rich cultural knowledge, multilingual repertoires, and complex lived experiences that shape how they engage with schooling. Yet many educational practitioners continue to rely heavily on traditional didactic models. These approaches often fail to recognize the systemic barriers immigrant students encounter and they frequently interpret immigrant students' challenges through deficit-based assumptions (James, 2021; Schechter et al., 2014).

With globalization reshaping how information circulates and how students construct knowledge (Chinnammai, 2005), educators are increasingly called to adopt pedagogies that nurture critical inquiry rather than passive absorption. This shift is essential for immigrant learners who regularly navigate racial microaggressions, streaming practices, and Eurocentric curriculum frameworks that position their identities as peripheral or invisible (James, 2021).

The purpose of this paper is threefold:

1. To compare four literacy traditions: didactic, authentic, functional, and critical, within the context of immigrant student learning in Canadian schools.
2. To demonstrate, through theory and reflective classroom experience, why critical literacy is particularly well-suited to supporting immigrant learners.
3. To outline implications for educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking equitable literacy instruction in Canadian schools.

Guided by critical educational theory and critiques of deficit thinking, this paper argues that critical literacy pedagogy provides an inclusive, empowering, and academically rigorous framework that better aligns with the realities of immigrant students.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in three interconnected theoretical traditions: critical educational theory, deficit theory, and culturally relevant pedagogy, which are used to examine how immigrant students experience the Canadian public school system and how literacy pedagogy might more effectively support their academic success. Critical educational theory, shaped profoundly by Paulo Freire's work, positions education as a transformative and emancipatory practice. Rather than viewing learners as passive recipients of predetermined knowledge, it promotes dialogic, reflective pedagogies that enable students to interrogate dominant ideologies and uncover the systemic forces that structure their lives (Freire, 1970/2018). Freire's emphasis on the co-construction of knowledge invites educators to question whose perspectives are privileged in curricula and how power circulates within educational spaces. Building on these ideas, Giroux (2011) conceptualizes critical pedagogy as an active resistance to oppression, imagining classrooms as sites where marginalized voices are not only heard but centred. These principles closely align with critical literacy, which encourages students to read texts and social narratives through lenses of power, identity, and culture (Janks, 2010), making it especially beneficial for immigrant learners navigating multiple cultural worlds.

Complementing this perspective is deficit theory, which critiques the tendency of schools to interpret immigrant students' challenges as personal or cultural shortcomings rather than as consequences of structural inequality. Deficit-based reasoning often attributes underachievement

to limited English proficiency, socio-economic hardship, or perceived gaps in parental involvement while overlooking issues such as racialized streaming, biased assessments, and exclusionary curricula (Valencia, 2010; James, 2021). Such interpretations not only misrepresent immigrant learners' capabilities but also obscure the systemic barriers that constrain their academic opportunities.

To strengthen this analysis, this paper also contrasts critical literacy with culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). While both approaches affirm students' cultural identities, CRP emphasizes academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness as interdependent goals (Ladson-Billings, 1995). CRP foregrounds students' cultural and community knowledge as foundational to learning, whereas critical literacy focuses more explicitly on analyzing power, ideology, and representation in texts and society. Bringing these frameworks into dialogue reveals a powerful intersection, where critical literacy deepens CRP's emphasis on identity and cultural relevance by equipping students with the analytical tools needed to challenge dominant narratives, while CRP broadens critical literacy by anchoring critical inquiry in students' lived cultural realities.

Together, critical educational theory, deficit theory, and culturally relevant pedagogy provide a robust foundation for reimagining literacy instruction. This integrated framework supports a vision of pedagogy that not only resists deficit-based interpretations of immigrant learners but also actively centers their linguistic, cultural, and experiential knowledge as essential resources for learning and empowerment, (Freire, 1970/2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Valencia, 2010).

Literature Review

Didactic Literacy Pedagogy

Didactic literacy pedagogy reflects traditional, teacher-centered models in which educators transmit predetermined knowledge, and students assume largely passive roles. This model emphasizes memorization, accuracy, and conformity to standardized norms, positioning the teacher as the primary authority (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). For immigrant students, who often bring rich linguistic and cultural repertoires, didactic environments can marginalize their experiences by privileging dominant language practices and suppressing opportunities for identity expression. This mismatch between rigid instructional norms and students' lived realities often results in disengagement and inequitable academic outcomes.

Authentic Literacy Pedagogy

Emerging from progressive educational movements influenced by scholars such as John Dewey and Maria Montessori, authentic literacy pedagogy prioritizes experiential learning, inquiry, and relevance to students' real-life contexts (Dewey, 1938; Kalantzis & Cope, 2012; Montessori, 1967). Students co-construct knowledge through hands-on exploration and reflection, increasing motivation and agency. For immigrant learners, this approach can create meaningful entry points by acknowledging their cultural backgrounds and personal experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge. However, without explicit attention to power and representation, authentic learning may still fall short of addressing how immigrant students' knowledge is valued in relation to dominant cultural norms.

Functional Literacy Pedagogy

Functional literacy pedagogy blends structure with flexibility, emphasizing genre-based instruction and the explicit teaching of language skills for academic and social purposes. Scaffolding is central, as teachers guide students' understanding of textual forms and gradually release responsibility as learners gain independence (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). While functional pedagogy equips students with practical tools for navigating academic tasks, it can inadvertently reinforce dominant linguistic standards if not coupled with pedagogies that recognize multilingualism as an asset. For immigrant students, functional approaches may improve linguistic proficiency but do not necessarily challenge the systemic barriers that shape their educational pathways.

Critical Literacy Pedagogy

Critical literacy moves beyond skill acquisition to interrogate how texts reflect and reproduce social power. Grounded in Freire's (1970/2018) conception of education as emancipatory, critical literacy encourages students to analyze texts through the lenses of identity, ideology, and equity (Janks, 2010; Kincheloe, 2008). Learners are invited to question whose voices are centered and whose are silenced. For immigrant students, this approach affirms their sociocultural experiences and provides tools for challenging deficit narratives and discriminatory structures in schooling. Critical literacy not only promotes academic growth but also cultivates agency and resistance, particularly for students negotiating racialized and linguistic hierarchies in Canadian schools.

Multiliteracies and Immigrant Learners

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The multiliteracies framework, developed by the New London Group and expanded by Cope and Kalantzis (2009), recognizes that literacy now encompasses diverse languages, modes, and cultural practices. This perspective directly challenges monolingual and monocultural assumptions embedded in traditional literacy models. For immigrant students, multiliteracies validate the linguistic diversity and multimodal communication strategies they regularly employ within their families and communities. By acknowledging these assets, educators can design instruction that reflects globalized communication patterns rather than privileging a single dominant literacy. Multiliteracies thereby complements critical literacy by expanding what counts as legitimate knowledge and expression.

Deficit Theory and Immigrant Students

Deficit theory critiques the tendency of schools to attribute immigrant students' educational challenges to perceived personal or cultural shortcomings, such as limited English proficiency or perceived limitations in parental involvement, while ignoring systemic inequities (James, 2021; Valencia, 2010). These assumptions lead to practices such as disproportionate streaming into ESL or remedial tracks, biased assessments, and low academic expectations. Scholars argue that such narratives obscure structural issues including racism, inequitable resource distribution, and exclusionary curricula (Gorski, 2011). For immigrant learners, deficit thinking is particularly harmful, as it erases their linguistic and cultural strengths and restricts their academic opportunities.

Culturally Relevant and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), articulated by Ladson-Billings (1995), offers a strength-based alternative to deficit thinking. CRP emphasizes three central goals: academic

success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. These principles align strongly with the needs of immigrant learners, whose cultural identities are often underrepresented in school curricula. Culturally sustaining pedagogy further extends CRP by advocating not only for the recognition but also for the active maintenance of students' linguistic and cultural practices (Paris & Alim, 2017). When paired with critical literacy, CRP enables learners to see their identities reflected in classroom texts while gaining tools to analyze and challenge inequity.

Toward a Transformative Pedagogy

Synthesizing these frameworks highlights the need for a transformative literacy pedagogy that moves beyond superficial inclusion. Didactic, authentic, and functional approaches offer partial benefits that do not adequately address the complex sociopolitical realities immigrant students face. Integrating critical literacy, multiliteracies, and culturally relevant pedagogy provides a holistic, justice-oriented framework that recognizes students' cultural and linguistic assets while challenging deficit narratives and structural inequities. Such an approach supports immigrant learners in developing strong academic skills, critical awareness, and empowered identities, ultimately promoting more equitable outcomes in Canadian schools.

Methodology

This paper adopts a reflective, theoretical methodology that integrates scholarly research with lived teaching experience in Toronto's multicultural educational context. Reflective inquiry, widely used in critical and interpretive educational research, allows practitioners to examine how their assumptions, instructional decisions, and interactions shape student learning (Schön, 1983; Brookfield, 2017). By weaving together academic literature and classroom-based insights, this

approach provides a nuanced exploration of how different literacy pedagogies influence the experiences of immigrant learners.

However, this methodology also has important limitations. Because it relies on personal reflection rather than empirical data collection, the findings cannot be generalized across all educational contexts or immigrant student populations. The interpretations presented are shaped by the author's professional positioning, specific classroom contexts, and subjective meaning-making. While reflective analysis offers depth, immediacy, and practitioner-relevant insight, it cannot capture the full complexity or variability of immigrant students' experiences at a systemic level. Acknowledging these constraints clarifies that the paper's contribution lies not in broad generalizability but in illustrating how theoretical frameworks, particularly critical literacy, can be meaningfully applied in diverse Canadian classrooms.

Discussion & Findings

A critical comparison of didactic, authentic, functional, and critical literacy pedagogies reveals that critical literacy offers the most transformative and equitable framework for supporting immigrant students in Canadian schools. Although each model contributes valuable elements, structure, relevance, or skill development, none fully address the intersectional realities immigrant learners navigate, including linguistic diversity, racialization, cultural adjustment, and systemic marginalization.

Critical literacy distinguishes itself through its explicit focus on power, identity, and social inequities. It moves beyond engagement to invite students to interrogate dominant narratives and examine how institutions shape their lived experiences (Freire, 1970/2018; Janks, 2010). For

immigrant learners whose perspectives are often sidelined, this pedagogy validates their identities and positions their stories as central to the learning process. In contrast, didactic pedagogy reinforces hierarchy, authentic pedagogy risks being apolitical, and functional literacy can become skills-focused without challenging inequity. Critical literacy uniquely combines academic rigor with social analysis, offering a holistic and justice-oriented approach (Giroux, 2011).

Personal Experience

My classroom experiences in Toronto further illustrate the power of critical literacy. When one student, Vonn (pseudonym) was repeatedly labeled “disruptive,” a one-on-one conversation revealed that he felt disconnected from materials that failed to reflect his cultural background. Inviting him to write in his home dialect resulted in a compelling narrative about migration and belonging, sparking rich class discussions about identity and cultural pride. This aligns with Cumming-Potvin’s (2007) argument that students’ linguistic and cultural resources must be treated as assets, not obstacles.

I also witnessed academically capable immigrant students being placed in ESL programs due to accent bias and low expectations, practices that echo Darder’s (2012) critique of assimilationist schooling. Such experiences reinforced how traditional pedagogies can inadvertently marginalize students, while critical literacy creates space for them to reclaim voice and agency.

Challenges Facing Immigrant Learners

Many immigrant students in Canada face layered challenges, including language differences, racism, socio-economic pressures, and cultural responsibilities such as translating for

family members. Despite Canada's multicultural ideals, schooling often reflects Eurocentric norms (James, 2021). Immigrant learners are disproportionately streamed into non-academic tracks, a practice rooted in deficit-based assumptions that overlook their cultural and intellectual strengths. As Kincheloe (2006) reminds us, equitable education requires centering the experiences of marginalized learners rather than viewing them as deviations from dominant norms.

Improving Success Through Critical Literacy

Critical literacy offers a practical pathway for addressing these inequities. It compels educators to reflect on their assumptions, co-construct knowledge with students, and foster classrooms where inquiry, dialogue, and equity guide instruction. When implemented thoughtfully, critical literacy enhances engagement, strengthens critical thinking, and supports identity affirmation. In my classroom, immigrant students demonstrated increased confidence, deeper participation, and a clearer sense of belonging when given opportunities to connect curriculum with their lived realities.

Ultimately, supporting immigrant learners requires more than token multicultural activities. Schools must embed critical inquiry and cultural recognition throughout their practices. By doing so, classrooms become spaces where immigrant students not only understand the world but are empowered to transform it.

Conclusion

Critical literacy pedagogy offers a culturally responsive, inclusive, and empowering framework capable of addressing the complex academic and identity needs of immigrant students in Canadian schools. While culturally relevant pedagogy emphasizes the validation of students'

cultural identities and the use of cultural knowledge to promote academic success, critical literacy extends this work by explicitly engaging learners in the analysis of power, ideology, and inequity as they operate through language and schooling. By validating students' lived experiences, drawing on their linguistic and cultural assets, and encouraging them to interrogate inequitable social structures, critical literacy challenges traditional models that have historically upheld assimilation and marginalization (Freire, 1970/2018; Cummins, 2000). Grounded in critical theory and critiques of deficit discourse (Valencia, 2010), this approach repositions students as active co-constructors of knowledge rather than passive recipients.

My classroom experiences affirm the transformative potential of critical literacy in ways that extend beyond cultural inclusion alone. When students recognize themselves and their realities in the curriculum, their engagement deepens, and their sense of identity strengthens, when they are additionally invited to question whose knowledge is privileged and whose voices are silenced, learning becomes a site of critical consciousness and agency. These moments demonstrate that immigrant learners thrive not through conformity to dominant norms, but through pedagogies that honour their multiplicity and cultivate their capacity to critique and reshape the world around them.

Canadian education is at a pivotal moment. As classrooms become increasingly diverse, traditional didactic and standardized pedagogies continue to fall short in addressing the intersecting realities of race, language, migration, and socio-economic status (Darder, 2012; Dei, 2008). Although culturally responsive approaches have improved representation and engagement, critical literacy is essential for confronting the structural conditions that continue to reproduce educational inequities. By fostering inquiry, dialogue, and transformation, critical literacy supports

not only access to curriculum but also the development of critical citizenship within a multicultural democracy.

However, embracing this pedagogy requires more than ideological agreement. It demands structural and practical change. For educators, next steps include sustained professional learning that moves beyond cultural responsiveness toward critical examination of power, deliberate integration of students' cultural and linguistic knowledge, as sites of analysis, and reflective practices that challenge personal and institutional biases. At the policy level, school boards and ministries must prioritize anti-racist curriculum frameworks, allocate resources for teacher training, and develop assessment practices that honour linguistic diversity rather than penalize it. For researchers, further empirical studies are needed to examine how critical literacy operates across grade levels, linguistic groups, and school contexts, as well as its long-term academic and socio-emotional impacts on immigrant learners. Ultimately, adopting critical literacy is not only a pedagogical choice but an ethical commitment. To build an equitable education system, Canadian schools must embrace approaches that both affirm cultural identity and equip students to critically engage with, and transform, the social realities they inhabit.

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