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Promoting Students' Critical Literacy Through the use of Popular Culture Texts in the Formal Language Classroom

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Abstract

This study points out the need to integrate popular culture texts into formal language teaching and suggests some pedagogical applications based on various research findings. In particular, it discusses that the inauguration of the digital era, the important role that the mass media play in our contemporary lives, the emphasis on new kinds of literacies, Multiliteracies, attributing importance to the various semiotic modes of meaning making, have contributed to the emergence of texts, such as comics, texts coming from magazines, newspaper, television movies and series, advertisements, posters, and social media; these kinds of texts constitute an integral part of students' lives and tend to recycle the prevalent social ideologies. Allowing for the dynamic, semiotic and constantly changing social context, it is held that the school should develop students' critical literacy in terms of the dominant sociolinguistic representations that are constructed in the popular culture texts, acknowledging, though, that the implementation of critical literacy programmes at school is a complex and multidimensional process requiring the cultivation of an open and exploratory learning environment, teachers' and parents' education.

Keywords: Critical Literacy, Popular Culture Texts, Language Teaching Practices.

Introduction

The emphasis on the communicative approach to the language teaching has accentuated the need to associate formal teaching practices with students' social life in an attempt to bridge the gap between students' everyday informal speech and the formal one used in the classroom. This demand became more evident by the approaches put forward by the New Literacy Studies (e.g., Gee 2004; Street, 1993) focusing on the literacies that students use in their daily life and formulating the Home-School Mismatch Hypothesis (Luke, 2004).

In particular, the researchers of the New Literacies Studies attempted to understand how student use literacies in their daily lives, which are not usually promoted in the school context. They alleged that students' everyday literacy practices are often rich, complicated and equal to

those boosted in the school context, as they consist of different kinds of texts that combine a complex interplay of the various semiotic modes, such as the linguistic, the visual, the audio or spatial modes (Kress, Jewitt, Ogborn and Tsatsarelis, 2001; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). The inauguration of the digital era, the important role that the mass media play in our contemporary lives, the emphasis on new kinds of literacies, Multiliteracies, attributing importance to other modes of meaning making, such as the visual, the audio or spatial, have contributed to the emergence of texts, such as comics, texts coming from magazines, newspaper, television movies and series, advertisements, posters, and social media (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Kress et al. 2001); these kinds of texts are known as popular culture texts and tend to recycle the prevalent social ideologies (Fiske 2010; Storey 2006). In this way, students should become familiar with new text practices in terms of how to understand and produce meaning, as meaning-making in contemporary texts is an increasingly multimodal process (Cope and Kalantzis 2000; Kress et al. 2001). Therefore, in this dynamic, semiotic and constantly changing social context, the school should develop students' communicative and critical skills through a variety of text genres and communicative circumstances (Tsami, Fterniati and Archakis 2016).

The Importance of using Popular Culture in the Classroom

The New Literacy Studies focusing on the literacy practices that students use in their daily lives beyond the school context demonstrated their complex nature and highlighted the need to integrate them into the formal classroom, as it is not the students that should adapt to the school needs but it is the school that should recognize and incorporate them in the Curricula. After all, the popular culture has already been integrated into many Curricula on an international level, as it plays a prominent role in students' daily literacy practices (e.g., Alvermann, Moon and Hagood, 1999; Morrell 2002; Stevens 2001). The popular culture is also considered to be an association between teacher script and student script (Gutiérrez, Baquedano- Lopez and Tejeda 2000). Moreover, according to research using the popular culture into classroom helps students be more actively engaged in the learning process and boosts their creativity (Duff 2004). At the same time, it has been shown that the use of popular culture in the school context helps students develop early literacy skills, such as identifying letters and words, and narration skills (e.g., Linebarger and Piotrowski, 2009).

In addition, the major contribution of the use of popular culture in the school context is that it associates the literacies students use in their social life with the teaching practices used at school, which is important, especially for students coming from less privileged families. In particular, research has indicated that students stemming from a lower socio-economic and educational background are more familiar with these literacies, such as the popular culture, than those that come from more privileged families and are usually more familiar with the formal literacy practices (e.g., Koutsogiannis 2011; Livingstone and Bovill 1999; Marsh et al. 2005; Stamou, Maroniti and Schizas 2014; Tsami, Archakis, Fterniati, Papazachariou and Tsakona 2014). Simultaneously, according to research conducted in the context of the research project 'Thalis', it was found that the families that belonged to a higher socio-economic and educational background had greater access to literacies that are close to those emphasized at school, such as reading books and using computers, than the families that had a lower socio-economic and educational background (Stamou et al. 2014); on the contrary, it was revealed that less privileged families had greater access to practices that were more oriented to the popular culture, such as

increased use of television programmes and videogames) when compared to more privileged families, which also concurred with relevant research (Fterniati, Archakis, Papazachariou and Tsami 2013; Tsami et al., 2014).

Undoubtedly, the above research findings are indicative of the primary role that the family plays in students' school success or failure. According to Bernstein (1971), students coming from a lower social status had a restricted language code, which significantly differed from that used at school, which is more elaborated. In this way, the relevant research on the students' literacy practices beyond the school context shed light on students' socially differentiated school progress highlighting that it existed not only because of the different language code but also because of the various literacy practices that students were exposed to within the first place of their socialization, that is the family.

Taking all the above into consideration, the use of popular culture at school can be seen as a possible way to bridge the gap between the social inequalities in the field of education, as it was shown that students coming from a lower social status were more familiar with it. Despite some skepticism that has been exerted in terms of whether the use of popular culture at school could be an obstacle for migrant students, as they may not have been familiar with it because of their different socio-cultural background (Duff 2004), research conducted in Greece has indicated that migrant students did not differ in their television and music preferences from their native peers (Griva and Stamou 2014; Fterniati et al. 2013; Tsami et al. 2014); concurrently, it is worth mentioning that some migrant parents stated that watching Greek television constituted a strategy to help their children socially integrate into the Greek way of living (Griva and Stamou 2014).

Critical Literacy

The concept of critical literacy has started to be used in a systematic way since the 1990s, though it has already been spotted in the pedagogy of Freire since the 1960s (Stamou, Archakis and Politis 2016). Critical literacy constituted a pedagogical philosophy (Tendolouris and Chatzisavvidis 2014) in which different approaches co-existed. Curdt-Christensen(2010, as cited in Tsakona, 2014, 21) defined the term critical literacy as the ability to study, examine and understand a text posing different questions, such as: what the purpose of the text is, why it has been created, the different ways a text could be created as well as the different functions that a text could have (Baynham 2002, as cited in Archakis and Tsakona, 2011, 202-3). According to Koutsogiannis (2014), instead of using the term critical literacy, it is preferable to use the term critical literacies, which significantly differ. In particular, critical literacies held that developing literacy through text interaction not only aims at students' effective function as future citizens in the various communicative circumstances (functional literacy) but also at developing their critical skills (Stamou et al. 2016). In this context, texts are not regarded as neutral semantic entities but ideological constructs that promote a specific perspective of the world.

Attempting to summarize the taxonomy according to which critical literacies have been applied in the teaching process, we could mention four (4) basic ones: the pedagogical, the linguistic, the sociopolitical and the ethnographic (see also Tendolouris and Chatzisavvidis 2014). To be more specific, the pedagogical tradition has been associated with the field of Freire's, Giroux's, and McLaren's critical pedagogy according to which critical literacy is seen as a means of social awakening and empowering aiming at the transformation of society through education

and emphasizing active learning and critical skills (Stamou et al. 2016). In addition, the linguistic tradition, which has its roots in the Critical Linguistics (Fowler, Hodge, Kress and Trew 1979) and Halliday's (1994) Systemic Functional Grammar, highlights the role of language in the meaning-making process. In this context, critical literacy emphasizing critical analysis of texts is viewed as a way to help students understand the latent ideological messages of texts that they are exposed to. Critical language awareness (Fairclough 1992; Janks 1999), Genre-based pedagogies (Hyland 2003, 2004) as well as Multiliteracies (New London Group 1996) belong to the linguistic tradition of critical literacies. Moreover, the sociopolitical tradition has been associated with researchers, such as Luke and Freebody (1997), who developed the Four Resources Model, a teaching model of critical reading, and focused on texts regarding them as a means to depict social reality and the language used in the mass media; namely, it emphasizes the content of texts and the representations of the world that they promote rather than the language means through which the text meanings are constructed. Last but not least, the ethnographic tradition, which has its roots in Hymes ethnography of communication, views literacy as a situated social practice; it aims at understanding how literacy practices are associated with social ones and how reality is constructed through literacy practices. In this way, it focuses on the literacy practices used beyond the school content where students are asked to select texts and figure out the ways text meaning is perceived and produced (Stamou et al., 2016).

Therefore, it can be concluded that these traditions mentioned above can approach critical literacy from different ideologies and perspectives indicating various language teaching practices without regarding them as opposite versions of critical literacy (Tendolouris and Chatzisavvidis 2014); on the contrary, they can be seen as different faces of the same coin, as each of them sheds light on different perspectives of the multi-dimensional practice of critical literacy, which cannot function independently but in combination with each other allowing for the teaching conditions (e.g., students' traits) and the broader socio-cultural context.

Applying Critical Literacy in the School Context

In terms of critical literacy implementation at school, various teaching practices have been put forward, some of which can be summarized below (Kontovroukh and Iwannidou 2013):

- Using texts that are closely associated with students' interests and experiences deriving from their everyday lives
- Text analyses that correlate the language elements of texts with the broader social practices, identities and relationships
- Acquiring reading and writing skills while exploring social issues
- Contrastive analysis of various texts with the aim of comparing and contrasting different perspectives of the world that are depicted in the texts
- Multiple readings of the same text aiming at shedding light on the reader's various interpretations of the text itself

In Greece, particularly, a lot of research has been conducted in the context of the research project 'Thalis' on the way students perceive the mass media representations of language variation when applied at school putting forward various teaching practices. Relevant studies have indicated that not only the fifth and sixth graders of primary school (e.g., Fterniati et al. 2013; Tsami et al. 2014), but also pre-school students (Stamou, Maroniti and Griva 2015) and first graders (Stamou et al. 2015) were aware of the language variation, as they were

able to distinguish between language variations that the different fictional characters used, without having developed their critical literacy, as they tended to readily accept the various messages promoted by the producers of the popular-culture texts.

More specifically, Maronith, Stamou, Griva and Dinas (2016) implemented a program of critical literacy to first and second graders of primary school aiming at developing students' critical awareness of language variation in terms of geographical and social dialects identified in television fictional texts, such as advertisements, cartoons, and television series. The results of the study indicated that students' sociolinguistics awareness was improved, as they were able to perceive that the language variation which the fictional characters used often created misunderstandings and that there was a considerable divergence between the fictional characters' speech watched on TV and their sociolinguistic experience; however, some difficulties were noticed, when students were asked to critically transfer the newly-acquired knowledge to a different communicative context. Similarly, Τσάμη κ.ά.(thalis) aimed at developing fifth and sixth graders' critical literacy through the use of popular-culture texts, such as television advertisements and comic series, representing language variations based on region and teaching practices emphasizing the role of humor in the critical teaching of language variation.

Simultaneously, Kefalidou's study(2016) reconsidered the teaching of narration, as it is delineated in the current curriculum of the language and the pertinent teaching materials in the secondary education, exerting criticism on the dominance of the narration in literature and suggested the teaching of narration, as it is used in the mass media, which views narration as a means of constructing identities and ideologies. Namely, it studies the use of narration, as it is used in the television news, including news coming from the police bulletin, natural disasters etc and taking advantage of the visual semiotic mode (e.g., videos, photos, graphs), which indicates that the meaning making process in the narration can be the outcome of the interplay of various semiotic modes. In addition, Douka, Fterniati and Archakis (2016) proposed teaching practices for the language classroom in the high school, as they analysed the speech used in the mass media, particularly in articles coming from newspapers, aiming at showing the ideologies that permeate reporters' language options in these kinds of texts as well as rendering students critically literate in terms of perceiving the ideologies that lie behind the news released in the mass media. Moreover, Lee (2016) studied the type of language deployed by secondary school students on facebook, the most popular means of social media, to identify the divergence between children's everyday language use and that used in the school classroom and proposed teaching practices that would make students highly aware of the language variation of modern communication as occurred in social media; it was found that the language deployed on facebook was a combination of both the oral and written speech, which, for example, included an excessive use of diminutive adjectives to help students denote feelings, such as tenderness, affection, approval, as well as a positive predisposition that constitutes a prerequisite for the smooth communication among teenager peers. Vazou (2016) also focused on the use of internet sites of tourist organizations as a way to promote multiliteracies in the secondary education, which attempt to promote tourism through a promotional language use and the visual mode; in this context, the integration of such a site into the language classroom can boost the studying of

multimodal types of speech used on the internet, the organization, the ideology and the appropriate strategies that lie behind it to attract Greek and foreign visitors.

Concluding Remarks

Overall, the above research findings highlight the need for the development of students' critical literacy in terms of the dominant sociolinguistic representations that are constructed in the popular culture texts. However, there is no doubt that the implementation of critical literacy programmes at school is a complex and multidimensional process, as it presupposes the cultivation of an open and exploratory learning environment, teachers' (Chairistanidhs 2014; Kontovroukh and Iwannidou 2013; Marwnith and Stamou 2014) and parents' education (Stamou et al. 2014) in terms of critical literacy and the use of popular culture texts in the classroom to support similar teaching practices.

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