The Look and the Book

Jeanette Hannaford develops a simple model to help critical literacy among younger students

There needs to be more conversation in international schools, as there is elsewhere, about introducing critical literacy into the ongoing culture of classrooms, especially with younger students. Critical literacy has been described as ‘the ability to read texts in an active, reflective manner in order to better understand power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships’.

Critical literacy pedagogy provides a way for children to identify the ways in which different elements in a text work together to create certain values or ideologies, to think about who benefits and who loses from the position texts advance, and to reflect on the ways in which readers are invited to take on these values by the text, and whether or not they do.

Over a five-year period, I took a number of measures to implement critical literacy pedagogies into my school's classroom practice. These actions included a staff seminar, peer-mentoring teachers, and a team project to write critical literacy question-sheets for our classroom book-sets.

As a part of this work, I developed a simple model to assist students in my own classroom to begin to critically decode language. ‘The Look and the Book’ is a broad and adaptable model, suitable for students throughout the primary years, which helps children distinguish between two aspects of a text. (A ‘text’ is broadly defined here as anything that can be ‘read’ ie the printed word, images, moving images etc.) Simply, the model utilizes short, memorable word cues to denote two different ways of reading a text.

The first part of the model is the Look. When asked to describe it, the student describes the textual signifier (what they see) as precisely as possible, purely according to their visual perception, and with no consideration of the text's meaning and purpose. For example, ‘tell me about the Look’ can be used at a word level as a directive for sounding out letters or syllables when new vocabulary is stumbled over.

The Book, on the other hand, refers to the implied meanings, ie what the text is signifying or what it means which, in this example of new vocabulary, would be a cue for a discussion of the word's meaning in situ. The explicit separation of these two elements simplifies and assists in the teaching and understanding of texts, and paves the way for more complex, analytical approaches to come.

The model can be applied to a range of texts, and in a number of ways. In the first unit of the year with my Grade 3 class, we decided to take street signs as our texts. Almost all of the children quickly understood that different kinds of description were required by the two terms. Over the course of the year with repeated use of the Look and the Book model in a number of different learning situations and with different kinds of texts, students came to understand that there are a range of readings possible for any text. As the children's language skills and intellectual maturity developed, the class's capacity to approach texts analytically increased remarkably.

The Look and Book model was a simple starting tool that the children easily understood. It was regularly re-used to assist children to undertake textual analysis at increasing levels of complexity. When established, follow-on conversations extending the Look and the Book into more critical and analytical avenues can begin to be undertaken from the ‘typical’ critical literacy angle of exploring why the writer/designer/illustrator/artist has made their choices.

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References
