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Author

Waallan Brown, Cecilie, Alford, Jennifer

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Critical literacy in the language classroom: Possibilities for intercultural learning through symbolic competence

CECILIE WAALLANN BROWN [a]

JENNIFER ALFORD [b]

[a] *University of Stavanger, NORWAY*
cecilie.w.brown@uis.no

[b] *Griffith University, AUSTRALIA*
j.alford@griffith.edu.au

Abstract

This article provides a theoretical exploration of the connections between critical literacy and symbolic competence with some pedagogical examples from an empirical study. More specifically, we argue that critical literacy can be utilised as an approach to develop symbolic competence, and, by extension, encourage intercultural learning. Our interest is in teasing this out through a synthesis of ways of approaching intercultural learning through critical literacy. Drawing on four major critical literacy models, the article attempts to show how critical literacy can provide a basis for addressing symbolic competence as an essential part of intercultural learning in increasingly complex and super-diverse societies. The article concludes with some specific pedagogical implications for using critical literacy in the language classroom to foster the type of intercultural learning which takes into account the diversity between and within cultures, and the role of meaning-making in the creation and re-creation of cultures.

Keywords: intercultural learning; symbolic competence; critical literacy; language learning; meaning making

Introduction

In the last two decades, understandings of intercultural learning and its role in language learning have taken a "critical turn" (Dasli & Diaz, 2017). This "critical turn" has been brought on by influences from anthropological ethnography, which sees culture not as a set of static entities but as continually negotiated between people, and critical pedagogy, which sees the construction of culture as intimately related to power relationships and ideologies. Taken together, the "critical turn" suggests that language education needs to address culture as intricately linked to meaning-making, and to understand meaning-making "as a process of selecting symbolic forms from a range of options and doing so

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purposefully to establish, negotiate or advance a perspective" (Kearney, 2016, p. 4). From this point of view, intercultural learning entails developing the ability to understand the affective and political connotations of semiotic choices and to purposefully employ meaning-making resources in a variety of cultural contexts, what Kramsch (2006b) refers to as symbolic competence. Given the ubiquity and complexity of textual environments today, the need for symbolic competence is crucial. In line with the critical turn, many scholars now emphasize the need to focus on reflexivity, power differentials and "going below the surface of discourse and appearances" (Dervin, 2016, pp. 103-106). They also provide certain guidelines for intercultural educators, such as encouraging reflection on "the nature of language, discourse, communication and mediation" (Kramsch, 2011, p. 360). In this paper, we will suggest that specific pedagogical frameworks for achieving these broader aims and guidelines can be found in critical literacy, an approach to literacy which emphasises the social and cultural context of text production and consumption.

While critical literacy has been increasingly researched in second or foreign language contexts over the last few decades, studies often focus on outcomes related to language learning and/or critical engagement (Bacon, 2017) rather than intercultural learning. The aim of the current paper is therefore to bridge these two fields, bringing to light what we see as strong synergies between the two. More specifically, we argue that critical literacy offers a way of operationalising the wider aims of intercultural learning, and that it can be utilised as an approach to fostering the kinds of critical intercultural learning which is essential for learners who are navigating increasingly complex and super-diverse environments (Vertovec, 2007), both physical and virtual. With some exceptions (e.g., Myers & Eberfors, 2010; Pegrum, 2008), few efforts have been made to conceptualise the links between the two fields so far.

In the following, we will first elaborate further on the critical turn in language and intercultural learning and symbolic competence as a concept. We then provide a review of some of the models of critical literacy with a focus on their attention to and potential for intercultural learning. Subsequent to this, we discuss how the two fields align by drawing on symbolic competence on the one hand and one model of critical literacy on the other. This part of the paper will draw on a recent study (see Brown, 2019, 2022a, 2022b) which aimed to explore the meaning-making processes learners engage in from the perspective of intercultural learning. Finally, we present pedagogical considerations and challenges based on these discussions.

The Critical Turn in Language and Intercultural Learning

As mentioned in the introduction, the "critical turn" in language and intercultural learning was, in part, brought on by influence of anthropological ethnographic views of culture which emphasize that culture is not static but rather continually constructed out of attempts to establish and negotiate shared meaning (see discussion in Dasli & Diaz, 2017). A consequence of this view is that it is not possible to draw clear boundaries between cultures; people do not "belong" to any one culture, but rather participate in several cultures at any one point in time (Hall, 2013). Similarly, people do not "inherit" a given culture which dictates behaviours and ways of interpreting the world. Rather, they actively participate in the constant negotiation of culture and, in principle at least, have agency to define and redefine the cultures they participate in. In the intercultural competence literature, such insights have contributed towards a move away from culture as a neatly bounded entity, amongst some scholars. This is reflected in some newer definitions of intercultural competence, where "culture" has been replaced with, for example, "diversity in a broad sense" (Borghetti, 2017, p. 2) or people with different ways of thinking and/or communication patterns than oneself (Dypedahl, 2020). Furthermore, scholars such as Dervin (2015) dispute the use of the concept of culture altogether, arguing that culture does not really exist as "[o]ne cannot meet a culture but people who (are made to) represent it—or rather represent imaginaries and representations of it" (p. 9).

An additional factor contributing to the "critical turn" relates to the influence of critical pedagogy (Dasli & Díaz, 2017), which originated with Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire who famously stated that *to read the word is to read the world* (Freire & Macedo, 2005). Drawing on the Frankfurt school of critical theory, critical pedagogy maintains that power relationships are maintained through ideologies but are disrupt-able through employing literacy education as a tool for

empowerment, liberation, and social transformation (Freire, 1970/1993). Scholars who have advocated for the implementation of critical pedagogy in the field of language studies, such as Pennycook (1990) and Guilherme (2002), argue that a consequence of this view is that language teaching should not only "aim to help students draw upon and investigate their own cultural resources and investigate other knowledge claims, but also […] aim to change the society itself and the possibilities it presents" (Pennycook, 1990, p. 311). Implied is a challenge of the idealistic notion that intercultural learning can lead to harmony and acceptance of differing viewpoints. Instead, it needs to be recognised that "discomfort, anger, and annoyance are part of the process" (Dervin, 2016, p. 96).

Taken together, the "critical turn" has had several implications for intercultural learning in language education, both in terms of how cultures are conceptualised and approached and what fostering intercultural learning entails. If cultures are negotiated through the process of meaning-making, then it follows that every culture "reflects and is constitutive of a multiplicity of voices reflecting a whole array of conflicting and competing discourses" (Crawford & McLaren, 2003, p. 131). Consequently, it is not possible to fully understand cultures through fixed cultural value scales such as those proposed by Hofstede (1980). Instead, language education should emphasise the intersection of "various identity markers and contexts, and [provide] tools to question "truths" by exploring beneath the surface of discourse" (Dervin, 2017, p. 69).

Simultaneously, if meaning making is seen as closely related to power relationships and ideologies, it is not sufficient to understand "others" ways of referring to the world and of construing and attributing significance to it" (Kearney, 2016, p. 4). Rather, it requires a critical understanding of the nature of meaning-making processes themselves; an understanding of how the choices made in meaning-making processes establish or advance certain perspectives over others (Kearney, 2016; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). As others also have noted (e.g., Fang & Elyas, 2021), the notion of criticality in intercultural learning is not new and can be seen for example in Byram's (1997) influential model of Intercultural Communicative Competence, which includes *savoir s'engager* as one of five *savoirs* necessary for an interculturally competent speaker. *Savoir s'engager*, which can be translated to critical cultural awareness/political education, comprises the ability to critically evaluate cultural practices, perspectives, and products of both one's own and others' cultures based on explicit criteria. Coming closest to addressing culture as meaning-making, and meaning-making as political, however, is perhaps Kramsch's concept of symbolic competence (Kramsch, 2006b, 2009, 2011; Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008). While Byram's (1997) model does not include the concept of symbolic competence, the revisited version of his book (Byram, 2021) does note the importance of this aspect, which emphasises the importance of engaging with symbolic competence in the present moment.

Symbolic competence

The concept of symbolic competence draws on a wide range of theoretical inspirations, including feminist and poststructuralist theories, critical linguistics, and the works of sociologists such as Bourdieu and Goffman (Kramsch, 2011). Building on social semiotics, symbolic competence is premised on the idea that communication happens through the use of semiotic resources, or meaning-making resources. The meanings of these resources are not static, but rather negotiated in social interactions and as such are "imbued with the meaning of the work of those who have made and remade the resources" (Kress, 2010, p. 14). It is from this view that intercultural learning can be understood as entailing the development of the ability to understand the affective and political connotations of linguistic choices and to purposefully employ meaning-making resources through which communication happens in a variety of cultural contexts. Rather than attempting to understand oneself and others through their respective national (and static) cultures, symbolic competence "involves becoming adept at recognizing, analysing, questioning and exploiting symbolic representations, actions and power" (Kearney, 2016, p. 48).

Symbolic competence includes the ability to understand meaning-making resources as carrying symbolic value (Kramsch, 2009, p. 201). In other words, it involves recognising that meaning-making resources do not simply communicate *a priori* meanings but produce meaning in themselves. For example, even a simple message such as "yes" can be communicated in various ways and through various modes, for example, by nodding, by saying "yes, please" or "sure, whatever," or by

typing "alright" or a thumbs-up emoji. These options, and numerous others, are resources people have available to communicate this simple message, but they are not precisely the same and carry slightly different meanings. Which resources a person, or author, ends up using to communicate their message will ultimately be driven by their interests, or what exactly they want to communicate and/or gain from that communication (Kress, 2010). As such, the *form* of the message - the combination of meaning-making resources employed to communicate it—also carries meaning. The intercultural learner should therefore aim to read a text—whether it be an image, verbal/oral text or otherwise - and recognize the symbolic value of the meaning-making resources used and reflecting on how different interests and perspectives are conveyed through the use of these different forms (Hoff & Habegger-Conti, 2023; Kramsch, 2011).

An additional element of importance when taking a critical perspective is that symbolic competence involves the ability to look beneath the surface of meaning-making resources to see how they "can be used to support conflicting and historically contingent truths" (Kramsch, 2006b, p. 251). When the choice of meaning-making resources is seen as bound with an author's interests, it follows that this process can never be neutral. Simultaneously, the meanings of the various meaning-making resources are not free for individuals to decide. Rather, if the author wants their message to be understood, they have to rely on the fact that the resources they use will be understood in similar ways (Hall, 2013). The resources available to the author will carry potential meanings within the social and cultural contexts they participate in, and they have acquired experience with these through participating in the same contexts (Kress, 2010). These meanings can be changed and negotiated over time, but never in isolation. Instead, it has to happen in social interactions between people and relies on things such as who has power to define and re-define meanings. As such, the intercultural learner recognises texts as socially and culturally situated and is able to interpret them in light of historical and subjective contexts with a focus on investigating whose interests are served (Kramsch, 2011; Liddicoat, 2019; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). By doing so, the intercultural learner can destabilise and contextualise established and taken-for-granted truths about categories such as nationalities, genders, ethnicities etc (Dervin, 2016; 2017).

Symbolic competence further includes the ability to produce and utilise complexity and diversity in order to "reframe ways of seeing familiar events" (Kramsch, 2009, p. 201). In the same way that both the creation of a text and texts themselves are socially and culturally situated, so is the process of interpretation. The interpreter will, in the meeting with a text, bring their own interests and understandings of the meaning-making resources employed, based on their own social and cultural experiences with them (Kress, 2010). There are always multiple possible interpretations of any one text, although one's own ways of making meaning in the world, which are developed through years of socialisation, often appear natural and "normal." By recognising the situatedness of meaning-making, including one's own, the intercultural learner will seek to explore alternative, diverse and more complex understandings, and, through this, be able to "create alternative realities and reframe the balance of symbolic power" (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008, p. 666).

In sum, symbolic competence involves abilities to:

1. focus on form as meaning;
2. produce and utilise complexity and diversity in order to reframe familiar ways of seeing the world;
3. interpret texts in light of their historical and subjective contexts with a focus on investigating whose interests are served;
4. create alternative realities where symbolic power is re-balanced.

The development of symbolic competence can thus be described as "increasingly diversified abilities to perceive and act in a semiotic environment and increased control over semiotic resources" (Kearney, 2016, p. 63). Importantly, the aim of this is to develop "the ability not only to approximate or appropriate for oneself someone else's language, but to shape the very context in which the language is learned and used" (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008, p. 664). As such, learners should not just become intercultural interpreters, but intercultural agents who can purposefully employ the meaning-making resources available to them in a variety of cultural contexts. From a peda-

gogical perspective, Kramsch (2011) suggests that language teachers should 1) encourage reflection on "the nature of language, discourse, communication and mediation" in communicative activities; 2) direct attention both to what is said and what remains unsaid; 3) aim to "show complexity and ambiguity"; and 4) engage learners' emotions (p. 364).

We argue that the need for symbolic competence is more urgent now than ever before given the very public, semiotic, product-oriented, and transitory nature of digital literacies today (Baker, 2021). It is for this reason that it is important to consider potential synergies between symbolic competence and critical literacy. Although Kramsch (2011) and Kearney (2012) draw links between symbolic competence and critical literacy, for example by suggesting that interculturally competent speakers will ask questions such as "Whose interests are being served by this text?" (Kramsch, 2011), there is a need to bring these two concepts into a closer relationship, both theoretically and pedagogically. In the following, we will attempt to address this by first discussing critical literacy as a concept, before elaborating on the potential for symbolic competence inherent in critical literacy models.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is an approach to literacy that places particular emphasis on the social and cultural contexts of text production and reception. Building on Freire's (1970/1993) work on critical pedagogy, critical literacy focuses specifically on the role of texts in maintaining or challenging dominant ideologies and views texts as a "principal means for representing and reshaping possible worlds" (Luke, 2013, p. 145). Importantly, texts are understood in the widest sense, including written and spoken verbal texts, but also images, body language, etc. In addition to critical pedagogy, the field has developed and drawn on multiple critical traditions, such as feminist, postcolonialist, and poststructuralist theories, cultural studies, and critical linguistics (Luke, 2014). As such, it shares many theoretical inspirations with the concept of symbolic competence. Critical literacy defies a unified and strict definition, and, in fact, several scholars warn against such a unification of the field, arguing that critical literacy practices should always be locally negotiated and use the learners' lived realities as a starting point for inquiry (e.g., Comber, 2016; Lau, 2015; Luke, 2014; Stevens & Bean, 2007).

As argued by Janks (2000), approaches to critical literacy share a focus on developing an understanding of the relationships between power and meaning making and abilities to manage these. Simultaneously, they differ "by foregrounding one or other of domination, access, diversity or design" (Janks, 2000, p. 23). Approaches that foreground domination, such as critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), place particular emphasis on the role of meaning-making resources in maintaining and reproducing inequitable social relations. Access is foregrounded in approaches that emphasise the importance of accessing the dominant forms of language and discourses, while a focus on diversity involves emphasising the inclusion of learners' diverse "ways with words" (Heath, 1983), highlighting the importance of involving a variety of modes and discourses in education. The latter orientation can be found in approaches such as The New Literacy Studies, which seeks to extend the understanding of literacy beyond print and include other modes such as digital tools (Gee, 2000; Kress, 2003; Street, 1994). Finally, approaches foregrounding design emphasise the importance of making change happen, to design alternative social futures (New London Group, 1996) by utilising "the multiplicity of semiotic systems across diverse cultural locations to challenge and change existing Discourses" (Janks, 2000, p. 177).

Elsewhere, Alford (2021) has noted that key models of critical literacy (e.g., Freebody & Luke, 1990; Lewison et al., 2002; Janks, 2010; Lau, 2013; Lewison et al., 2014; Anwaruddin, 2015) share common features that provide rich opportunities for engaging learners in critique. As long as fifteen years ago, work by Australian scholars drew connections between intercultural learning and critical literacy (Australian Government, 2007) although their focus was not specifically on the power of symbolic competence to accomplish this. However, what is notable is a less explicitly defined focus within these models on "culture", now understood as something that is continually negotiated between people; that is fluid and evolving and encompassing texts and how we make meaning from them. In fact, there is a real danger of reinforcing the idea of culture as monolithic - in a holding pattern -

Table 1. *Potential for symbolic competence in four critical literacy models*

Critical Literacy Model	Related Symbolic Competence element	Example
The Four Roles of Literate Practice (The Four Resources Model) Freebody & Luke, 1990	meaning-maker/ text analyst roles	Explore how meaning-making resources carry symbolic value reflecting different interests and perspectives through various forms; Direct attention both to what is said and what remains unsaid; presence and absence.
The Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy Lewison et al., 2002	focus on seeing the everyday (e.g., cultural norms and practices) through new lenses.	Reframe ways of seeing familiar events; Explore the socially constructed nature of texts in the routines of life such as mealtimes, and classroom interaction patterns.
The Synthesis Model of Critical Literacy Janks, 2010	emphasis on diversity and redesign	Explore how interpreters of messages bring their own understandings of the meaning-making resources employed; Redesigning meaning-making to produce alternative perspectives thereby shifting the locus of power (e.g., redesigning advertisements or memes).
An Integrated Critical Literacy Instructional Model Lau, 2013	focus on the personal dimension	Recognise the situatedness of meaning-making and interpretation, including one's own based in personal experience.

unless overtly challenged. As such, how critical literacy educators can address the challenges posed by the "superdiversity in populations, languages, religions, genders, and cultures" (Alford et al., 2022, p. 130) remains a challenge. We argue that one way of approaching this is to draw on the potentials for symbolic competence inherent in critical literacy models.

Potential for symbolic competence in four influential critical literacy models

Delving deeper in to four influential critical literacy models, (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Lewison et al., 2002; Janks, 2010; Lau, 2013), it is clear that they all provide underutilised gateways for a focus on developing symbolic competence as a much-needed element for contemporary intercultural learning within language teaching. In teasing this out, we argue that critical literacy can probe representations of culture more deeply from a dynamic view. Table 1 presents some potentials for exploring symbolic competence through each critical literacy model.

Each of these four models suggest the potential for teachers to overtly focus on symbolic competence, for example, Lau's (2013) focus on the personal clearly foregrounds the personal which can generate a potential for developing symbolic competence. Similarly, Janks' (2010) understanding of diversity, based on her extensive work in multicultural, multilingual South Africa, provides fertile ground for this kind of work. Returning to the models with a fresh lens through the notion of symbolic competence can assist teachers and learners to engage more deeply with notions of interculturality in complex, super-diverse times (Vertovec, 2007).

Critical Literacy for Intercultural Learning

So far, we have outlined some aspects of the fields of intercultural learning and critical literacy respectively and have identified some overlapping foci. In the following, we will attempt to make the synergies between the two fields more explicit by drawing connections between symbolic competence on the one hand, and Lewison et al.'s (2002) model of critical social practices on the other. We chose Lewison et al.'s model because it is widely used in second and foreign language settings and

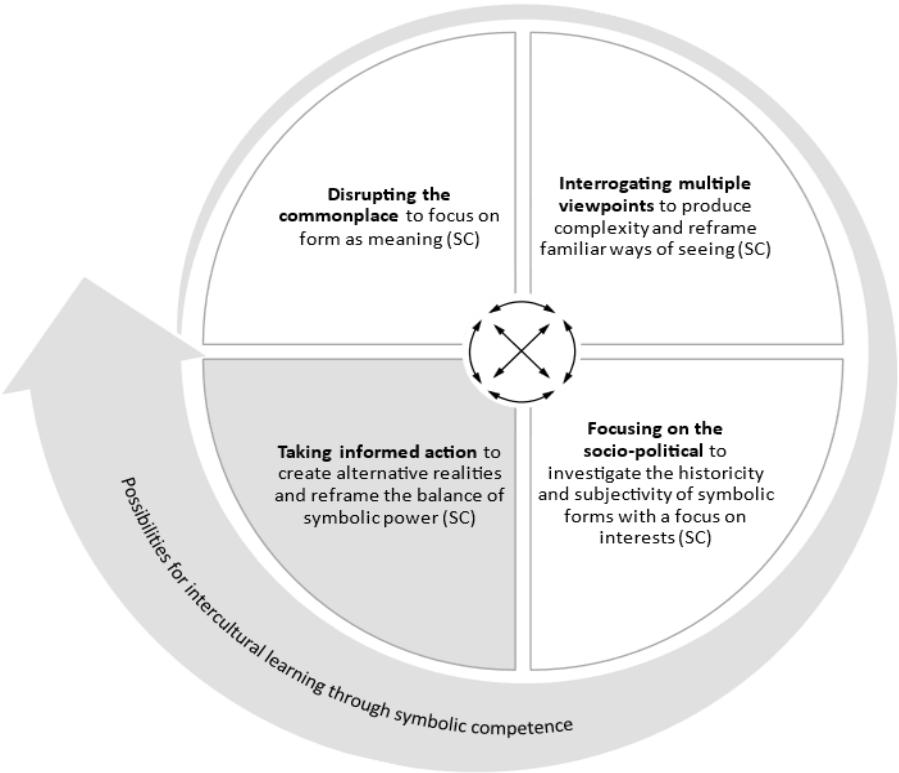

Figure 1 *The possibilities for intercultural learning as conceptualised through the relationship between four dimensions of CL practices (Lewison et al., 2002) (in bold) and symbolic competence (SC) (Kramsch, 2006b, 2009, 2011; Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008)*

because it is based in social justice towards which we see symbolic competence also contributing. In addition, Lewison's model provides neat pedagogical tools to manifest Critical Framing, a key concept of Multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996). The model was also central in the research study from which the theoretical conceptualisations presented in the current paper originated. The research project was a qualitative case study aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning-making processes upper secondary EFL learners in Norway engage in when reading images from the perspective of intercultural learning (see Brown, 2021 for full details of the study). As part of the study, 83 upper-secondary EFL learners in Norway participated in a 16-week intervention focusing on critical visual literacy practices, and data was collected from pre- and post-intervention focus group interviews as well as student artefacts produced during the intervention.

Lewison et al.'s (2002) model suggests that critical practices consist of four interrelated dimensions; disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on the socio-political and taking informed action. Figure 1 shows how we conceptualise the relationship between this model and symbolic competence, where each of the dimensions (in bold) is seen as an approach to developing a specific aspect of symbolic competence (SC). The grey arrow surrounding the model symbolises the expanding scope for intercultural learning *through* symbolic competence that is created by working within the four dimensions. As such, the dimensions do not necessarily occur in a linear fashion, but their interrelatedness is created through each dimension informing the others in an ongoing and iterative manner. For example, work within the dimension of focusing on the socio-political might be used as a starting point for reframing familiar ways of seeing, or vice versa. One exception to this might be the fourth dimension, where *informed* action presupposes a certain level of understanding of meaning-making processes in light of social and cultural contexts, gained through working within the other three dimensions. However, to facilitate learners' development as intercultural agents who can shape the contexts they participate in (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008), it is important not to delay engagement with this dimension unnecessarily.

In the following, we discuss each of the four dimensions and their relationship to symbolic competence in some depth, situating critical literacy practices in language teaching contexts. Excerpts from the focus-group interviews conducted in relation to the aforementioned study will be included to exemplify how engagement in each dimension might look in practice. Furthermore, our discussions will draw on all four models presented in Table 1, reflecting a view that a synthesis approach is vital to address the challenges language educators and learners face today.

Disrupting the commonplace to focus on form as meaning

As stated previously, the intercultural learner should be able to recognise how forms produce meaning and how the choice of different meaning-making resources contribute to advancing certain interests and perspectives (Kramsch 2009; 2011). In line with this, the critical literacy practice of disrupting the commonplace engages learners in interpreting not just what the text is trying to communicate (such as commonplace stereotypes of people), but also interrogating the choices which went into the making of the text and the possible effects on them as readers. This is done through asking questions such as "How is the text trying to position me?" (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 383; Luke & Freebody, 1997). To exemplify how asking such questions can facilitate a focus on form as meaning in itself, we introduce an excerpt from a focus group interview conducted as part of the study mentioned previously. This semi-structured focus group interview was conducted with six upper-secondary EFL learners (aged roughly 16) in Norway following the 16-week intervention focusing on critical visual literacy practices. In this excerpt, learners are discussing a photograph depicting a group of Mexicans attempting to cross the US border. The discussion is prompted by the question "Can you say something about what kind of impression you think this photograph gives of Mexican people?" to which the learners quickly respond "negative" and "it doesn't look good". The interviewer subsequently attempts to draw the learners' attention to the form of the text, the *how*, asking "What are the things in this photograph that make you say it's negative?," after which the dialogue in Table 2 ensues.

Andreas' (all names are pseudonyms) response to this question brings attention to several meaning-making resources as elements of the form, such as the lighting, positioning of participants, and (lack of) eye contact (vectors) which contribute to the overall assessment of the photograph as "very negative." The interviewer further prompts Andreas to say more about the effect of the fact that "no one is looking at the camera", to which Andreas is able to articulate that this particular meaning-making resource relates to sympathy and relatability. Following another, more open, question, Lars

Table 2 *Excerpt from interview with group 1, post-intervention. Excerpt first published in Brown (2022a)*

1	Andreas:	Looks like ehh… it's darker and they are all grouped together and… you know, so… not much light, or like the light is very awkward and.. You know, no one is looking at the camera. It's very negative.
2	Interviewer	No one is looking at the camera? [...] what does that do?
3	Andreas:	Yeah, it looks like they're… you know… it's easier to sympathise with someone if they are looking at you and it's like more relatable, I don't know. And if they.. It's more distant-ish.
4	Interviewer:	More distant-ish?
5	Andreas:	Yeah.
6	Interviewer:	Yeah? Anything else about the photograph?
7	Lars:	If you place the camera here for example [points at a spot in the middle of the photograph], it would be a whole other story.
8	Interviewer:	Mhm?
9	Lars:	Like, we see down [gestures with his hand to illustrate] and see what they are doing, what's wrong, but if you're seeing from their perspective, it would be a whole other story.

further suggests that the placement of the camera is also an important meaning-making resource, as "if you're seeing from their perspective, it would be a whole other story." What this excerpt shows is that through asking these types of critical questions, the learners' attention can be drawn not just to the particular perspectives conveyed through the text (in this case, that Mexicans are unrelatable), but also the ways in which the different meaning-making resources, the form of the text, contributes to producing that perspective.

As pointed out by Lewison et al. (2002), this type of deconstruction requires the development of a "language of critique." That is, it is necessary to name the resources in order to critique them. The learners participating in the above discussion had, as part of the 16-week intervention focusing on critical visual literacy practices, been introduced to Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) grammar of visual design. However, resources for building a metalanguage are also available within critical literacy orientations such as critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). As such, critical literacy as an approach to texts can offer language learners a way to read and produce texts with a focus on form as meaning, reflecting on how different perspectives are conveyed through the use of different meaning-making resources (Kramsch, 2011), indicative of intercultural learning.

Interrogating multiple viewpoints to produce complexity and reframe familiar ways of seeing

Another aspect of symbolic competence is to produce complexity and reframe familiar ways of seeing the world (Kramsch, 2009). When working within the dimension of interrogating multiple viewpoints, learners use multiple voices to interrogate texts (Lewison et al., 2002), which involves stepping back from their own familiar "ways of seeing" and consciously exploring multiple perspectives. This can be done through asking questions such as "Whose voices are heard in this text?" and "Whose are absent?" (Luke & Freebody, 1997), but also through exploring other relevant historical, social, or subjective contexts - that is, how specific real or imagined people might view the text

Table 3 *Excerpt from interview with group 2, pre-intervention*

1	Interviewer:	Well, the next question is what do you think that Native Americans think about these kinds of images?
2	Christina:	Maybe they… don't like it as much and I think it's… probably more stereotypical and what we see in the movies and… cartoons and stuff.
3	Interviewer:	Mhm. So you think that they might not like it so much?
4	Christina:	Yeah.
5	Thomas:	It's actually really rude, to be honest. What the… the Americans do.
6	Interviewer:	Mhm. Why… what makes you say that?
7	Thomas:	They base ehh… entire sports teams ehh… around stereotypically… ehm, stereotypes actually, that's… I think that's quite repulsing.
8	Interviewer:	Mhm. Do you think the Native Americans think that's repulsing?
9	Thomas:	I think they find it rude, to be honest.
10	Interviewer:	Mhm. Does anyone think that they are not offended by these kinds of images?
11		[Silence]
12	Interviewer:	What do you think, Olivia?
13	Olivia:	I think that some of them might be proud of… their culture and country and… ehh, their history. And it shows well… So yeah, I think someone would be proud and… actually approve of it.

depending on their socially and culturally situated understanding of meaning-making resources. Through doing this, learners can gain a more complex understanding of texts and issues represented in texts, which in itself combats essentialism, as well as an increased understanding of the social and cultural situatedness of one's own and others' meaning making.

However, when working with contexts that are not familiar, as is often the case in the language classroom, there is a risk of reinforcing the idea of culture as monolithic, in a holding pattern, much like ideologies. To illustrate this, we will use an excerpt from a different focus group interview in which six upper secondary school pupils in Norway were discussing four images depicting sports team logos and sports crowds. All the images included representations associated with various groups of First Nations North Americans (henceforth: Native Americans), for example, the Cleveland Indians sports team logo.[1] The interview was conducted prior to the intervention, and the learners thus had little to no experience of critical literacy practices prior to the ensuing discussion (Table 3).

The interviewer here asks a question which could typically be used when working with interrogating multiple viewpoints (Lewison et al., 2002). The question in itself encourages a view of Native Americans as a homogenous group and is also reflecting, rather than disrupting, general discourses about cultural groups (Brown, 2022a). Christina displays a slight discomfort in response to this question, as shown by the number of hedges/modifiers in her first response (*maybe, I think, probably*), which could have led to a more nuanced discussion highlighting the dynamic nature of cultures. However, Thomas' comment in turn 5 that "It's actually really rude, to be honest. What the… the Americans do," extends the static view of culture introduced in the question, this time applied to "the Americans," further enhanced by the lack of modifiers. It is only after the interviewer asks whether anyone thinks that Native Americans "are not offended by these kinds of images," and further poses a direct question to one of the participants, Olivia, that a more dynamic nature of culture is made apparent in the dialogue (turns 10-13). In this dialogue, the learners are navigating the continuum from the "simple" to the "complex" in their understandings of the cultural groups in question, what Dervin (2016) refers to as "simplexity."

While the critical social practice of interrogating multiple viewpoints provides opportunities for intercultural learning by reframing familiar ways of seeing, it is important to keep diversity and complexity in mind at all times. That is, not just diversity of perspectives between different social and cultural groups, but also within them. As pointed out by Janks (2000), "Diversity provides the means, the ideas, the alternative perspectives for deconstruction and transformation" (p. 178). Without this, engaging with interrogating multiple viewpoints risks just perpetuating the learners' existing imaginaries about cultural groups. As such, while full complexity in one's understandings of all subject-positions is an unachievable goal, one should aim to "navigate, like Sisyphus rolling his boulder up a hill, between the 'simple' and the 'complex'" (Dervin, 2016, p. 81).

Focusing on socio-political issues to investigate the historicity and subjectivity of symbolic forms with a focus on interests

As discussed earlier, symbolic competence further involves interpreting texts in light of historical and subjective contexts with a focus on investigating whose interests are served (Kramsch, 2011). In line with this, focusing on socio-political issues entails stepping "outside of the personal to interrogate how socio-political systems and power relationships shape perceptions, responses, and actions" (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 383). It entails uncovering the interests at play in the text, that is, the effects the text can have in the world and in the relevant different social and cultural contexts through asking questions such as "who benefits from this way of representing the world?" and "who is disadvantaged?" (Luke & Freebody, 1997). The excerpt in Table 4 demonstrates how asking such questions can prompt learners to discuss the historicity and subjectivity of different forms.

In this excerpt, which is a discussion of the same photograph as in Table 2, although with a different group of learners, Benjamin first suggests that Trump can benefit from representing Mexicans in a negative light. The reason for this, he argues, is because he wants to stop migration from Mexico by building a wall. At the time of this interview, Donald Trump was still president in the US and the

Table 4 *Excerpt from interview with group 5, post-intervention*

1	Interviewer:	Could anyone gain something from representing Mexicans in this way? And who could that be?
2	Benjamin:	Trump… because he wants to build this wall to stop the immigration from Mexico.
3	Peter:	Problem is they just climb over. … well, over the wall that he has built until now.
4	Interviewer:	Mhm. So how could Trump gain anything from this photograph?
5	Peter:	Well… most Americans do maybe view it as a problem and by trying to get rid of it, Trump does appear very heroic and does gain more… powers… more power and more supporters and…
6	Interviewer:	Mhm.
7	Peter:	Yeah.
8	Benjamin:	The… it's a… it's a problem in America with jobs nowadays and I don't think this picture makes the… problem easier when… Trump says that the Mexican… Mexicans come and take their jobs and yeah…
9	Jessica:	Mhm.

Mexican wall was a hot topic in the news and social media, nationally and internationally. Peter adds to the discussion by stating that the wall does not really work, as people are climbing over it. When the interviewer asks how Trump could gain anything from the photograph, Peter ensues by discussing the symbolic power Trump gains from such an act because he "does appear very heroic." He also alludes to the specific social and cultural context in which this symbolic power can be gained when he states that "most Americans do maybe view it as a problem". Benjamin's contribution in line 8 further explores the issue of symbolic power, more specifically related to discourses surrounding unemployment rates in the US and the role of Mexicans in this discourse. Again, this learner is also reflecting on the specific social and cultural context, that is, the problem "with jobs nowadays" in America, as well as the symbolic power yielded by Trump in this context, bringing Mexican migrants into the discourse of unemployment rates. Whether or not Mexicans cause higher unemployment rates among American citizens is not the issue, but rather the ways in which discourses, including those the learners themselves participate in, can be constructed and used to exert power and create meaning in certain social and cultural contexts, and in whose interests (Kramsch, 2011).

Taking informed action to create alternative realities and reframe the balance of symbolic power

Both critical literacy and symbolic competence ultimately aim to empower learners with agency in the world. That is, by increasing their understanding of meaning-making processes and by producing complexity in their understandings, learners are empowered to make informed choices in the meeting with and creation of texts. Moreover, critical literacy and symbolic competence also aim for learners to use this increased control of semiotic resources (Kearney, 2016) in order to "remake the world" (Janks, 2010, p. 156). Taking action can take many forms both internally, for example acknowledging and challenging one's own compliance in maintaining status quo (Vasquez et al., 2013), and externally, for example making a difference in the world. For example, Lars' suggestion that "if you're seeing from their perspective, it would be a whole other story" from the excerpt in Table 2 can be seen as a starting point for taking informed action, although at this point the action remains at the conceptual level. Similar suggestions for alternative versions of the world can be found in an excerpt from the same group during the same task prior to the intervention (Table 5), demonstrating how work with this dimension does not presuppose extensive prior experience with critical literacy practices. Importantly, however, the learners had been encouraged to engage with the photograph through the other dimensions before the excerpt below by being asked questions such as "What is your impression of the people in the photograph?" "Is there anything about the way the photograph has been taken that influences your impression?" and "Do you think anyone could gain anything from giving

Table 5 *Excerpt from interview with group 1, pre-intervention*

1	Anne:	From behind maybe.
2	Roger:	Maybe a picture from their perspective, maybe.
3	Interviewer:	Yeah, so seeing from their perspective? What they are looking at?
4	Lars:	Or seeing what they are running away from.
5	Interviewer:	Mhm. So what do you think… You said from behind?
6	Anne:	Yeah, because when you see someone with bags… like running, you can… maybe you can think it's like prisoners, I don't know. […]
7	Interviewer:	How would you as a viewer think about them then? […]
8	Anne:	I don't know, I don't think I would like come to conclusions.
9	Nora:	If it's taken from behind maybe you can see what they strive… what they are going for. Where they…
10	Lars:	Mhm. Like if they get… if it is a picture with either what they are looking for or what they are getting away from… like to show a… goal.
11	Nora:	Setting.
12	Lars:	It would be a lot… more positive against… for the people. Because in this picture you can only see the people, you… like you can't be able to tell what they are doing, it's really hard to see… so… if they have a goal or something they are running away from I'll think it's a lot… it would be more positive.

this type of impression of Mexican immigrants?" The excerpt begins after the interviewer asks whether the learners can think of any other ways of taking the photograph.

As can be seen in the excerpt, even without much prior experience of critical literacy practices, this type of question can prompt learners to consider alternative versions of reality. In this case, they suggest that adding some context (i.e., where the people in the photograph are migrating too and/or what they are migrating from) to the relatively decontextualised photograph used as a prompt. When the interviewer in turn 7 asks about the effects of this alternative photograph on the viewer, Lars builds on the contributions by both Anne and Nora and suggest that "it would be more positive." Although not clearly articulated, one interpretation of this statement could be that the symbolic power could be re-balanced in favour of the depicted Mexicans.

Critical literacy orientations focusing on design can provide more specific guidance for how to encourage action in the classroom setting. Janks (2010), for example, offers an applicable and structured approach to taking action through the redesign cycle model (p. 183). This model shows how the act of redesigning starts with an original design, which can be a single meaning-making resource or a combination of these as used in a particular text. By deconstructing the original design, using the tools described in the previous three dimensions, the learners can then create a new design which is more in line with their current worldview. This re-design can in itself constitute a new design, which can and should be subjected to further deconstruction and re-design in a continuous cycle. Approaching texts in this way in language teaching can offer opportunities for learners to create alternative realities in which power is redistributed (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008).

Pedagogical Considerations and Challenges

So far, we have attempted to show how engaging in critical literacy practices, operationalised through Lewison et al.'s (2002) four dimensions of critical social practices model, can be theoretical-

ly linked to developing symbolic competence. We have also exemplified how these social practices might be operationalised in classroom dialogues through the excerpts from the focus group discussions in the study, although it is not within the scope of the current theoretical paper to elaborate on this further. Given the increasingly complex and super-diverse world, we have further argued that the development of symbolic competence can be seen as critical to, if not synonymous with, intercultural learning. Simultaneously, our discussions have pointed to several challenges, particularly taking into account the diversity between and within social and cultural groups and the role of meaning-making in the creation and re-creation of "cultures."[2] In the following, we will discuss these challenges and, drawing on the four models of critical literacy presented in Table 1, suggest some specific pedagogical implications for language educators.

Firstly, the type of deconstruction implied by the dimension of disrupting the commonplace risks depersonalisation, treating the process of deconstruction as an academic exercise which is not connected to the learners themselves. This is perhaps particularly acute in second and foreign language contexts, as the texts and issues represented in the texts are often "physically, temporally, linguistically and psychologically removed" from the learners' own lives (Kearney, 2012, p. 59). In this regard, Lau (2013) reminds us of the power of the personal dimension; to ask questions which encourage "meaningful connections between the text and real life of learners" (Abednia, 2015, p. 83), and to access why we understand the meaning-making resources in the ways we do. As such, while engaging in the role of text analyst (Freebody & Luke, 1990), exploring the different interests and perspectives conveyed through meaning-making resources, teachers should encourage learners to also consider their own personal experiences and its influence on their meaning-making (Lau, 2013). Drawing on Lewison et al.'s (2002) idea of seeing the everyday through new lenses, explorations of the socially constructed nature of texts in the learners' immediate and everyday lives could work as a powerful starting point for bringing in the personal dimension in deconstruction.

Related to this is the challenge of exploring multiplicity while ensuring that learners' existing imaginaries about cultural groups are not just reinforced. Addressing these imaginaries by bringing them out in the open, following Lau's (2013) Personal dimension, could therefore be considered a critical factor of working within the dimension of interrogating multiple viewpoints. Likewise, explorations of multiple viewpoints should always aim to produce complexity and focus on individuality and intersectionality of various identity markers (Dervin, 2016). As Janks (2000) reminds us, domination, access, diversity and design are all interdependent, and an orientation to diversity brings with it possibilities of tension, change and transformation necessary for intercultural learning.

In relation to explorations of historicity and subjectivity, one challenge is a lack of knowledge of socio-political issues. As Mantei and Kervin (2016) point out, this type of engagement with texts requires the learners "to activate their knowledge of the world more broadly" (p. 95). However, learners' knowledge about socio-political issues might be quite limited due their age and life experience. In the excerpt related in Table 4, for example, the learners were able to draw on their knowledge about Trump and the employment situation in the US, most likely acquired through reading/watching news and/or social media. However, this knowledge was limited to current events. Thus, historical knowledge about the relationship between Mexico and the US, as well as more knowledge about the situation in Mexico, could have strengthened the learners' explorations further. Critical literacy practices should therefore not be treated as "stand-alone" events, but rather be integrated into the teaching in such a way that the learners can support their critique and text-creation with historical, contextual information and knowledge. This aspect is essential to intercultural learning in particular, but the knowledge aspect is perhaps also under-communicated in the critical literacy field more widely.

Conclusions

In this article we have argued that intercultural learning cannot and should not entail knowing everything about "a culture"—which is impossible in a diverse world experiencing much cultural change—but about having the ongoing awareness that meaning-making within any given culture occurs in complex, dynamic processes. By understanding more of how these meaning-making processes occur, learners can expand their knowledge both of themselves and of various others. We have

attempted to show how critical literacy helps us to do this, by drawing together symbolic competence as a crucial aspect of intercultural learning and critical literacy. However, we also caution that applying critical literacy as a pedagogical framework for developing symbolic competence in language learning settings is not without challenges. In particular, we have singled out challenges related to the understandings of cultures as complex and multifaceted and, based in four influential critical literacy models, suggested that the intercultural learner should aim to 1) deconstruct their own ways of viewing as much as others," 2) construct diversity in their understanding of others and the world, and 3) seek historically and contextually relevant information and knowledge. Finally, as Janks (2000) reminds us, "[t]he deconstruction of dominance, without reconstruction or design, removes human agency" (p. 178); thus, the intercultural learner should also recognise their own power in maintaining or challenging dominant ideologies and seek to create more complex understandings of cultures and social phenomena through their own text-creation.

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[1] It should be noted that in 2021, which is after the time in which this interview was held, Cleveland Indians changed their name to Cleveland Guardians and now sport a different logo with no associations to any Native American groups.

[2] The models of critical literacy we are focusing on developed in the 1990s and early 2000s did not necessarily have to grapple with the pressing effects of cultural diversity we now see in many countries, especially in migrant destination countries such as Australia, and increasingly Norway, where we reside.