A Reflective Turn in CDA Pedagogy: Applying a Sociocognitive Lens to Self-Reported Shifts in Critical Awareness

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Abstract

The qualitative research design explores the perceived effects of learning Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) on students' critical reading awareness at English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university. Dropping the research based on the intervention, it uses students' self-reports of changes in their attitudes towards texts after completing a CDA course. Data were gathered with the help of five undergraduate students in a two-stage process, i.e., a written before/after reflection task on a news article and a discussion during a focus group. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on van Dijk's sociocognitive framework, organized into three levels: semantic, cognitive, and social awareness. Results show a distinct self-reported process of transitioning between surface-level reading and critical literacy. The participants discussed shifting the emphasis from vocabulary and literal meaning to lexical bias and framing (semantic); the presence of textual authority in doubting its interpretation and situating meaning (cognitive); and the perception of texts as neutral, leading to the identification of underlying ideologies and power dynamics (social). The study finds that a short-term CDA training program with structured reflective practice can help foster long-term critical thinking. It suggests that incorporating reflective practice into CDA instruction is pedagogically important for making critical awareness visible and viable to students.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Sociocognitive Approach, Critical Literacy, EFL Learners, Reflective Practice, Self-Reported Change, Discourse Awareness

Introduction

In the media-overloaded environment of competing information and digital texts, discerning reading and critical questioning of the processes of meaning construction are now a necessity of literacy. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has the analytical and theoretical resources to challenge how language constitutes reality, shapes ideology, and reinforces power relations. But this is not to say that the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) traditionally based pedagogy is solely focused on grammatical competence and vocabulary learning, as it may leave learners ill-equipped to decode the more social and political nuances of discourse.

This loophole can only curtail their sensitivity to how authority, prejudice, and cultural hegemony can be hidden in texts. Much has been written in support of incorporating critical approaches into language education (Fairclough, 1992; Pennycook, 2001; Luke and Freebody, 1997). Following such an appeal, empirical research, such as that conducted by Hamdi (2022), indicates that guided CDA workshops may be employed to support EFL students in becoming active, questioning readers able to detect manipulation and ideological positioning of information in media texts. Although this type of research, which focuses on intervention effort, is important, it has not examined the

internal, perceptual change that learners recognize as having occurred after being exposed to the principles of CDA. What is the verbal description of students regarding the change in their reading patterns by the time they learn CDA? What do they feel are the most changed aspects of critical awareness?

The study fills this gap through a small-scale qualitative study of self-reported differences in critical reading awareness among university-level EFL students who took a CDA course. Rather than testing learning outcomes, it investigates perceived cognitive and attitudinal change by focusing on learners' own comparisons. Theoretically, the paper is based on van Dijk's sociocognitive approach, which holds that texts and readers' mental structures are linked to the larger social structures of power. The framework is especially well-suited for analyzing learners' internalized perceptions and interpretive frameworks.

This is a valuable study based on two key reasons. To begin with, it provides a reflective framework for exploring the role of CDA, especially in situations with limited resources for large-scale interventions. Second, it makes learners' voices central, shedding light on how theoretical knowledge in the academic field is applied to practical and intellectual change. Such critical readers are not only an academic ambition but also a social requirement in the age of pervasive misinformation. This paper will argue that systematic reflection on the principles of CDA can foster a sustainable critical attitude, enabling students to become co-investigators in the current dialogue among language, thought, and society.

The following structure of the paper is based on the following: the review of literature on CDA in education, the sociocognitive approach, a detailed description of the reflective methodology, the description of findings at the semantic, cognitive, and social levels, and a discussion of implications for pedagogical practice and directions of further research.

Literature Review

This review establishes the theoretical and empirical foundation for the study by examining three key areas: the core principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and its relevance to education, the specific utility of van Dijk's Sociocognitive Approach (SCA) as a pedagogical framework, and the role of reflection in consolidating critical awareness.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach that analyses language as a form of social practice, emphasizing how discourse reflects, reinforces, and challenges power structures and ideology (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1993; Wodak, 2001). Moving beyond descriptive linguistics, CDA is explicitly normative and seeks to uncover the often-hidden ways texts sustain social inequality. Within language education, scholars have long argued that teaching must transcend grammatical and communicative competence to foster critical language awareness (Pennycook, 2001; Norton, 2000; Fairclough, 1999). This aligns with Luke and Freebody's (1997) model of literacy, which positions learners as critical analysts and transformers of discourse. In EFL contexts, empirical studies corroborate the value of CDA. Research indicates that CDA-informed instruction enhances students' ability to detect bias, analyze argumentation, and deconstruct ideological positioning in texts (Dar, Shams, & Rahimi, 2010; Hashemi & Ghanizadeh, 2012).

Furthermore, CDA has been effectively used to analyze textbook content, revealing how teaching materials can perpetuate cultural hierarchies and unbalanced gender representations (Xiong & Qian, 2012; Setyono, 2018; Sulaimani & Elyas, 2017). Collectively, this body of work affirms that CDA can develop both analytical skills and a critical consciousness regarding the social functions of language.

Van Dijk's Sociocognitive Approach as a Pedagogical Framework

Among CDA frameworks, Teun A. van Dijk's Sociocognitive Approach (SCA) is particularly salient for educational settings. The SCA bridges the macro-level of social structure and the micro-level of text by positing that socially shared mental models serve as the mediating interface (van Dijk, 2015, 2016). It allows for analysis across three interconnected dimensions:

Semantic Structures: The choice of words, metaphors, and framing in a text.

Cognitive Structures: The beliefs, knowledge, and ideologies readers use to interpret texts.

Social Structures: The power relations and institutional contexts that discourse reproduces.

This tripartite model has proven to be a practical and accessible tool for learners. Hamdi's (2022) study is a direct precedent, demonstrating how SCA-based workshops enabled Saudi EFL students to critically dissect news reports, identify manipulative language, and recognize the propagation of misinformation. The current study adopts the same theoretical framework but shifts the focus from measuring performance in a training context to examining self-perceived cognitive changes among learners who have already completed a CDA course.

Reflection and the Internalization of Critical Awareness

The development of sustainable critical literacy requires more than the acquisition of analytical tools; it necessitates the internalization of a critical stance. Here, the role of reflection is paramount. Drawing on Dewey (1933)

and Schön (1983), reflection is understood as an active, deliberative process that turns experience into learning. In CDA pedagogy, reflective practice allows learners to connect abstract discourse theory to their personal interpretive habits, thereby fostering what Wallace (1992) terms critical language awareness. Studies suggest that incorporating reflective tasks, such as journals, comparative analyses, and discussion, deepens learners' engagement with CDA concepts and enhances their ability to articulate their own evolving awareness (Dar et al., 2010; Zinkgraf, 2003). This reflective turn aligns with the sociocognitive model, as it explicitly targets the cognitive dimension-the learner's mental models and beliefs. By asking students to compare their past and present reading strategies, reflection makes the often-tacit process of cognitive change visible.

Identifying the Research Gap

The existing literature firmly establishes CDA's pedagogical value and highlights the utility of the SCA and reflective practice. However, a discernible gap remains. While studies like Hamdi's (2022) effectively demonstrate the outcomes of CDA training, there is less research on learners' narratives of change after formal instruction concludes. Most research assesses competency through textual analysis tasks or tests, leaving the subjective, perceptual dimension of learning underexplored. This study seeks to fill that gap by using a reflective, SCA-informed methodology to investigate how EFL students themselves describe the impact of CDA on their critical reading awareness, thereby contributing a learner-centered perspective to the field of critical language pedagogy.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a small-scale, qualitative, and exploratory design to investigate EFL learners' self-perceived development of critical reading awareness following Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) instruction. Grounded in van Dijk's Sociocognitive Approach (SCA), the research prioritized understanding perceptional and cognitive change as narrated by the learners themselves, rather than measuring analytical performance. The design was inspired by Hamdi's (2022) sociocognitive framework but was adapted to a reflective, post-instruction context. It utilized a before-and-after reflection task and a focus group discussion to elicit rich, descriptive data on individual and shared perceptions.

Participants

Participants were selected via purposive sampling to ensure they possessed the specific experience central to the research question. The sample consisted of five undergraduate students (three female, two male, aged 21-23) from an English department at a public university. All had successfully completed a semester-long, theory-oriented CDA course within the previous academic year, achieving upper-intermediate to advanced English proficiency. This small, homogeneous sample was chosen to facilitate in-depth, detailed exploration of each participant's reflective account, aligning with qualitative research principles that value information-rich cases (Creswell, 2013). Participants volunteered after ethical procedures were explained.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Data collection occurred in two sequenced phases over one week, both centered on a shared stimulus text.

Stimulus Text: A single 180-word news article was adapted from an online outlet. It was selected for its relevance, accessibility, and subtle ideological framing, evaluative language, and lexical choices suitable for CDA-based reflection (e.g., labeling, emotive adjectives, contextual omission).

Phase 1: Written Before-After Reflection Task.

Each participant received the article and responded in writing to two prompts:

"How would you have read or understood this text before studying CDA?"

"How do you interpret this text now, after studying CDA?"

Participants were encouraged to write freely. Responses (150-300 words each) provided a baseline of individual, retrospective self-assessment and current interpretive awareness.

Phase 2: Focus Group Discussion.

A 30-minute audio-recorded discussion was held with all five participants two days after the written task. Guided by the researcher, the discussion expanded on the written reflections with questions such as: "What do you notice in texts now that you didn't before?" and "How do you identify bias or hidden meanings?" This phase aimed to generate collective dialogue, allowing participants to elaborate, compare views, and co-construct an understanding of CDA's influence, adding a layer of interactive triangulation to the individual written data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and was explicitly structured by van Dijk's SCA. The process was iterative:

Familiarization: All written reflections and the transcribed discussion were read repeatedly.

Initial Coding: Text segments were coded according to the three sociocognitive dimensions:

Semantic: Comments on word choice, tone, framing.

Cognitive: Statements about interpretation, author intent, skepticism.

Social: Recognition of ideology, power, representation.

Theme Development:

Codes were clustered into broader themes (e.g., "From Literal to Analytical Reading," "Awareness of Manipulation") that captured the perceived shift between 'before' and 'after' stances.

Interpretation and Triangulation: Emerging themes were interpreted to articulate the nature of the perceived change. Credibility was enhanced by comparing and contrasting findings from the written reflections and the focus group to identify convergent perceptions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant departmental committee. Participants provided informed consent, which detailed their rights to anonymity, voluntary participation, and withdrawal at any time. All identifiers were replaced with pseudonyms. Data was stored securely and used solely for research purposes. As the study involved reflection rather than assessment, no grades or evaluations were linked to participation, ensuring an open and supportive environment.

Findings: Self-Reported Shifts in Critical Awareness

This chapter presents the analysis of participants' written reflections and focus group discussions, organized around the three sociocognitive dimensions of van Dijk's framework: semantic, cognitive, and social awareness. The findings illustrate a consistent self-reported shift from a focus on surface-level comprehension to a critical, analytical, and socially conscious mode of reading.

Thematic Overview

Analysis revealed that all five participants described perceptible changes in their approach to texts after studying CDA. Their reflections naturally coalesced around the three pre-defined dimensions of the SCA. The prevalence of each dimension in the data is summarized in Table 4.1, which counts the number of participants whose reflections contained clear evidence of a shift in that specific area.

Table 4.1: Prevalence of Self-Reported Awareness Shifts Across Sociocognitive Dimension

Sociocognitive Dimension	Participants Reporting a Shift (n=5)	Illustrative Focus of Change
Semantic Awareness	5	Noticing word choice, evaluative language, and framing.
Cognitive Awareness	5	Questioning author intent, purpose, and textual authority.
Social Awareness	5	Recognizing ideology, power relations, and bias in representation.

Note: All participants reported developments across all three dimensions, highlighting the interconnected nature of the perceived change.

Semantic Awareness: From Vocabulary to Framing

Prior to CDA, participants uniformly described a focus on basic comprehension: understanding vocabulary, following the narrative, and extracting the main idea. After CDA, their attention shifted decisively to how language constructs meaning.

Before CDA (Typical Statement): "I would just look for the new words and try to understand the story." (P2)

After CDA (Typical Statement): "Now I stop at words like 'claimed' or 'demanded.' Why didn't the writer use 'said'? It sets a different tone, like someone is being less believable or aggressive." (P1)

This shift represents a move from decoding to deconstructing text. Participants reported new sensitivity to persuasive language, emotional tone, and the subtle implications of lexical choice, demonstrating an internalization of CDA's focus on discourse as a constructed reality.

Cognitive Awareness: From Acceptance to Interrogation

The most pronounced and frequently elaborated shift occurred in cognitive stance. Participants reported moving from a position of relative acceptance of textual authority to one of active interrogation and contextual reasoning.

Before CDA (Typical Statement): "I used to read it and believe it, especially if it was from a news website. My goal was just to get the information." (P4)

After CDA (Typical Statement): "My first question now is 'Why was this written?' I think about who benefits from this story being told this way. I connect it to what I know about the topic from other sources." (P3)

This development reflects the growth of epistemic vigilance. Learners no longer positioned themselves as passive recipients but as active analysts, employing CDA as a lens to question intent, evaluate credibility, and situate texts within broader contexts.

Social Awareness: From Neutrality to Critical Citizenship

The most profound qualitative change, as expressed in the depth of participants' comments, was in social awareness. Pre-CDA, texts were largely seen as neutral vessels of information. Post-CDA, participants consistently identified discourse as a site of ideology and power.

Before CDA (Typical Statement): "I didn't think about society or politics when reading news. It was just facts about an event." (P5)

After CDA (Typical Statement): "Now I see how the language makes one group seem like the victim and another like the problem. It's not just reporting; it's shaping how we see different people in society. It can reinforce stereotypes." (P2)

This awakening to the social function of discourse marks the transition toward critical literacy. Participants articulated a sense of responsibility as readers, aware that uncritical consumption can perpetuate dominant narratives and inequalities.

Synthesis: The Integrated Trajectory of Change

While separated for analysis, participants' reflections revealed that these three dimensions are deeply interconnected. A heightened sensitivity to wording (semantic) led to questions about purpose (cognitive), which in turn unveiled concerns about social impact (social). The trajectory described was consistently from comprehension to critique.

The focus group discussion reinforced these individual reflections, with participants building on each other's insights. One participant's observation about a "biased adjective" (semantic) would spark a group conversation about media representation (social), demonstrating how the sociocognitive framework operates as an integrated, lived analytical practice for these learners.

In summary, the data present a coherent narrative of transformation. Students perceive that CDA instruction has equipped them not merely with a new analytical technique, but with a fundamentally different orientation toward text, one characterized by suspicion of surface meaning, inquiry into construction, and awareness of social consequence.

Discussion

This study sought to understand how EFL learners perceive the impact of CDA instruction on their critical reading awareness. Guided by van Dijk's sociocognitive framework, the analysis of reflective data revealed a consistent, self-reported trajectory of growth across semantic, cognitive, and social dimensions. This discussion interprets these findings, aligns them with existing literature, and elucidates their theoretical and pedagogical significance.

Semantic Growth: Internalizing Language as a Constructive Tool

Participants' reported shift from reading for vocabulary and plot to analyzing lexical choice and framing strongly supports Fairclough's (1995) conception of language as a social practice. Where they once decoded sentences, they now deconstruct persuasive strategies, noticing how evaluative adjectives, agent-patient structures, and metaphorical framing position the reader. This aligns with findings by Cots (2006) and Rahimi & Sharififar (2015), who noted that CDA fosters a "textual skepticism" in learners.

Our participants' specific comments on words like "claimed" versus "said" exemplify the emergence of what Wallace (1992) termed critical language awareness-an understanding that linguistic forms are never neutral but are inherently ideological. This semantic shift marks the foundational layer of critical literacy, in which the text itself becomes an object of scrutiny rather than a transparent medium.

Cognitive Transformation: The Development of Epistemic Vigilance

The most salient finding was the comprehensive change in cognitive stance: from acceptance of textual authority to active interrogation of authorial intent and purpose. This mirrors the core of van Dijk's (2015) sociocognitive model, in which cognition serves as the mediator between text and society. Participants' descriptions of now asking, "Why was this written?" and "Who benefits?" indicate a restructuring of their mental models for processing discourse.

They no longer process information passively but engage in a critical, inferential dialogue with the text.This development of epistemic vigilance-a guarded approach to knowledge claims-resonates with research by Dar et al. (2010) and Hashemi & Ghanizadeh (2012), which links CDA to enhanced analytical reasoning. Crucially, our study shows that this vigilant stance is not merely a classroom performance but a self-sustaining interpretive habit that learners consciously adopt post-instruction.

Social Awakening: From Reader to Critically Aware Citizen

The most profound self-reported change was in social awareness. The progression from viewing texts as neutral reports to recognizing them as vehicles for ideology and power relations marks the culmination of the critical literacy journey. Participants articulated an understanding of how discourse can reinforce stereotypes, legitimize certain groups while marginalizing others, and shape public perception.

This finding directly confirms Fairclough's (1999) argument that CDA education should foster critical citizenship, and it echoes Pennycook's (2001) call for pedagogy that addresses social inequality.

The participants' sense of newfound responsibility-their awareness that uncritical reading has social consequences-aligns with the transformative goals of critical pedagogy outlined by Luke and Freebody (1997). This social awakening demonstrates that CDA's impact extends beyond academic skill development to encompass ethical and civic engagement.

Pedagogical Implications: The Centrality of Structured Reflection

The study's reflective design is not merely methodological but central to its pedagogical contribution. The act of explicitly comparing "before" and "after" reading selves prompted a metacognitive articulation of change, likely reinforcing the learning itself. This supports Sch√∂n's (1983) theory of reflective practice as a mechanism for turning experience into knowledge. For educators, this suggests that CDA instruction should be explicitly coupled with structured reflective tasks, journals, guided comparisons, and discussion forums to help learners consolidate abstract theory into personal cognitive frameworks.

Furthermore, the use of a single, carefully chosen authentic text proved effective for eliciting deep reflection, affirming Martínez's (2014) advocacy for using real-world materials to bridge theory and practice.

Limitations and Future Research

The study's limitations provide directions for future inquiry. The small, homogeneous sample and reliance on self-reported data, while appropriate for this exploratory depth, mean findings are not generalizable. Future research could combine reflective narratives with performance-based CDA tasks to triangulate perception with ability. Longitudinal studies could track how this self-reported awareness evolves or translates into critical reading practices outside academic settings. Finally, replicating this reflective design with different text genres (e.g., social media, advertisements) and in diverse cultural contexts would test the transferability of this reflective CDA model.

This study has demonstrated that learners who have studied CDA can vividly articulate a significant transformation in their critical reading awareness. Through the lens of van Dijk's sociocognitive framework, we see this transformation as an integrated development: sharpened attention to linguistic form (semantic) enables questioning of textual authority (cognitive), which, in turn, unlocks awareness of discourse's role in society (social). The findings affirm that even limited, course-based exposure to CDA, when processed through structured reflection, can catalyze a durable critical mindset. By centering the learners' voices, this research underscores that CDA's ultimate value may lie not just in producing skilled text analysts but in fostering discerning, responsible individuals equipped to navigate a complex discursive world.

Social Awakening: Reader To Critically Aware Citizen.

Social awareness was the change that was most self-reported. The final stage in the development of critical literacy is the shift from texts as neutral reports to texts as carriers of ideology and power relations. Participants expressed knowledge of how discourse reinforced stereotypes, justified some groups of people, put others in the background, and shaped popular opinion. This result directly affirms Fairclough's (1999) position that CDA education should produce critical citizens, and it resonates with Pennycook's (2001) recommendation: a pedagogy that should address social inequality. The new responsibility participants feel, and their realization that they will have social effects due to uncritical reading, can be considered in keeping with the transformative aims of critical pedagogy that Luke and Freebody (1997) lay out. This social awakening shows that CDA's influence can be applied to the development of academic skills as well as to ethical and civic involvement.

Pedagogical Implications: The Key Importance of Structured Reflection.

The design of the study provides a reflection that is not an ordinary approach but is the main pedagogical input of the research. Explicitly comparing before and after reading selves necessitated a metacognitive utterance of change, which likely strengthened the learning process. This helps validate the theory of reflective practice as an experience translated into knowledge, developed by Schön (1983). This can be interpreted to mean that, as a teacher, CDA teaching must be actively accompanied by planned reflective exercises, such as journals, guided comparisons, discussion groups, etc., so that students can integrate abstract theory into individual cognitive patterns. Moreover, the application of a well-selected original text was successful in prompting profound reflection, which supports the purpose of providing real-life materials to connect theory and practice (Martinez, 2014).

The constraints and Future Research.

The limitations of the study give future research directions. The limited sample size and reliance on self-reported data, although suitable for this level of exploration, imply that the results cannot be generalized. Further work may involve synchronizing perception and ability by using reflective narratives alongside performance-based CDA activities. Longitudinal studies could follow the processes of future development of this self-reported awareness, or its conversion into critical reading habits beyond academia. Lastly, to determine the transferability of this reflective CDA model, it would be interesting to recreate this reflective design with other types of texts (e.g., social media and advertisements) and in other cultural contexts.

Conclusion

This paper shows that students who have learned CDA can eloquently describe a major shift in their critical reading consciousness. From the perspective of the sociocognitive framework created by van Dijk, we can view this change as a combined evolution: the acuity of focus on the linguistic form (semantic) can lead to the questioning of the textual authority (cognitive), and ultimately bring about the realization of the role of discourse in society (social). The results support the viewpoint that exposure to CDA, even at a limited scale and in a course format, when subjected to systematic reflection, can trigger a long-lasting critical attitude. This research places the voice of learners at the centre of focus and, therefore, the final value of CDA may lie in creating well-trained text analysts or thoughtful, responsible individuals capable of facing a complex discursive world.

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