# Introduction and Literature Review

Williams (2009, 2012) noted the complexity that developmental reading courses present in a community college curriculum. In particular, Williams called for different forms of pedagogy to meet the evolving needs of an increasingly diverse developmental reading population. Before unfolding this investigation on critical literacy, we address the reading and literacy research that led to these perspectives on criticality.

This paper explores critical literacy scholarship, informed by the previous research in this area. Chall (1983) contended that students make a shift in learning-to-read meta-processes when they transition from learning to read toreading to learn*.* Chall’s notion of the learning-to-read meta-processes aligns with Rosenblatt’s (1988) conception of transactional reading. Rosenblatt developed the notion of transactional reading, where students are aesthetically engaged in a text. Rosenblatt claimed that this type of aesthetic engagement led students to more fully exploring their readings.

In critical pedagogy, Freire (1970/1993) conceptualized that instructors need to situate their teaching in the lived experiences of students. This type of instruction afford students the opportunity to construct new knowledge and develop a sense of critical consciousness. In this tradition, researchers have contended that students need to situate new textual information in order to apply this knowledge to their lives. From a different yet epistemologically akin conceptual framework, the work of Gee (1989) and Street (2003) added to Freire’s theory of critical pedagogy. Their work is referred to as “new literacy studies.” Perry (2012) noted that Gee and Street’s conception of new literacy studies is a variation of critical literacy, which is undergirded by Heath’s (1980) understanding of literacy as a social practice.

We purposefully outline this short review of criticality because it provides a foundation to discuss what type of instruction best serves linguistically diverse students (LDs).[[1]](#footnote-1) August and Siegel (2006) and Hodara (2012) provided more inclusive language to offer clearer descriptions of English language students as language minority students (LMs). We cite August and Siegel and Hodara for their noteworthy appraisals of previous poorly theorized terms, such as the English language learner and English as a second language. However, we theoretically transition from the LMs conceptualization in favor of a more modern and inclusive term: LDs. In our transition of terms, we bring the insights developed by August and Siegel and Hodara into our understandings of LDs.

De Kleine and Lawton (2015) defined LDs as English language learners who speak a language, or languages, other than English. De Kleine and Lawton went on to identify this group of students and the multiplicity of languages they speak. De Kleine and Lawton note the complexities of LDs’ learning dispositions and the relative difficulty many face in higher education. Some academic literature tends to misrepresent and undervalue the LDs population. Often, LDs are simply not adequately researched. This work weightily examines LDs and explores the appropriate instructional methods that best support their learning.

# Critical Literacy, Community College, and the Complexities of Reading Poorly

In this research we investigates the premise that developmental reading courses are essential for equipping LDs to perform college-level reading. Like Chall (1983), Freire (1970/1993), Gee (1989), Rosenblatt (1988) and Street (2003), all of whom rooted their pedagogy in a form of criticality, Biancarosa (2012) and de Kleine and Lawton (2015) believed that students must be proficient readers. They underscored that students need strong reading skills to transition from basic enactments of literacy to higher level representations of literacy. De Kleine and Lawton contended that students must embody this form of critical consciousness when proficiently analyzing difficult texts. In community college developmental reading courses, students often need to demonstrate a high level of literacy skills, which is evidenced in their exit exam.

The perceived mainstream thought is that most developmental reading students do not demonstrate these high-level literacy skills. Over the last decade, developmental reading courses have been fully under review. In fact, Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levey (2006) and Hodara (2012) argued that the placement of students into a developmental reading course actually jeopardizes their probability of success. Montero, Newmaster, and Ledger (2014) enthusiastically took issue with Attewell et al. and Hodara by highlighting that students, particularly nonnative English speakers, profoundly benefit from a literacy program.

However, in the current audit culture zeitgeist, community college reading researchers are not required to have any classroom experience or student interaction. Nonetheless, these researchers can have profound influence on community college reading policies. For example, Columbia University’s Community College Research Center (CCRC) seems to have more impact on the City University of New York’s (CUNY) developmental college reading curriculum than the instructors who actually teach LDs. When one closely examines CCRC’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) applications with CUNY, it is troubling to see that some of the IRB protocols involve no student or faculty interactions (Hodara, 2012). In these studies, nearly every historical CUNY student record was available to CCRC. Yet, instead of investigating actual students in real classrooms, CCRC often used only propensity measurements, thus avoiding the complexity of human subject research. Kincheloe and Tobin (2009) noted that this type of cryptopositivism is standard in the new research era. In no small way, instructors of LDs need practical solutions and innovative pedagogy. CCRC, in this sense, seems to have little to offer to the developmental reading research. The employment of statistical formulas and propensity measurements is intellectually astute, yet instructionally and ontologically amiss.

Nonetheless, this type of work seems to trump actual classroom teaching experience. CCRC’s research influenced how CUNY determines its entry reading placement. Previously, the passing entry score was 75. However, in a memo to chief academic officers, CUNY Executive Vice Chancellor Vita Rabinowitz noted that CCRC research was a pivotal determinant for changes in CUNY’s policy on reading placements (personal communication, September 23, 2016). In other words, LDs could enter mainstream college classrooms with poor reading skills. Although a full discussion of CCRC’s research is beyond the scope of this work, it is important to note that LDs are an at-risk population. LDs at the K–12 level may receive support from numerous programs for their underdeveloped reading skills. For example, LDs are eligible for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Response to Intervention, 504 plans (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2015), and numerous other educational supports. However, at the college level, LDs receive little to no instructional supports in the community college setting.

LDs frequently populate the developmental reading classrooms, and efficacious pedagogical strategies are needed to support them. Guba and Lincoln (1989) noted that catalytic research greatly benefits marginalized students. We implemented Guba and Lincoln’s model primarily because it greatly benefits LDs. We note the importance of Guba and Lincoln’s authenticity criteria as an informing principle of this work.

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1. In this article, the term *LDs* is used purposefully. The letters *L* and *D* are capitalized and the *s* is lowercase—LDs. LDs is always plural in this paper. The use of LDs is consistent with the academic literature. Also, LDs is not to be confused with similar terms, such as LD (learning disabled), or LDS (Latter-day Saints). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)