Teaching Critical Literacy and Language Awareness

Catherine Wallace

This chapter is in three parts. First, I set out some definitions of literacy and critical literacy in the wider context of critical pedagogy. I then turn to how language awareness supports critical literacy: more particularly what kinds of linguistic tools enhance the teaching of critical literacy in a range of contexts. Finally, I give some examples of ways teachers might draw on different approaches to language awareness in classroom-based critical literacy pedagogy.

Literacy and Critical Pedagogy

Literacy

The term ‘literacy’ is used rather than ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ by those who favour a socio-cultural approach to teaching and learning over a cognitive one. As Paran and Wallace (2016) observe, to use ‘literacy’ privileges social action, allowing us to consider what social roles are associated with literacy. In general, the term ‘literacy’ invites us to address matters of identity, so that literacy practices are embedded not just in life at school but link to the other demands and roles of daily life. This is particularly relevant if we take an intercultural perspective, in the case of classes of multilingual students. A focus on socially situated anthropological views of literacy as behaviour – as opposed to a set of universal skills – allows us to observe who reads/writes what and how in a range of contexts of use. Moreover, ‘critical’ and ‘literacy’ collocate in that both indicate social, collective rather than individual processes. Having said that, reading and writing clearly remain concrete, specific activities within a broad literacy paradigm and it is helpful in a teaching context to talk more particularly of ‘critical reading’ and ‘critical writing’.

Critical Pedagogy

What do we understand by ‘critical’ in educational contexts? We can talk of ‘critical’ to indicate the encouragement of students to challenge the logic of texts, to argue coherently. This is sometimes framed as ‘critical thinking’ (see, for example, Paran, 2002).
What we might call the ‘strong’ view of criticality links it with matters of social justice and political action (see Wallace, 2003; Janks, 2010). In this view, critical literacy is “always invested in power relationships in that activities and relationships surrounding reading and writing… have unequal real-life effects for those engaged in them” (O’Brien, 2001: 38). A critical stance to literacy practices – our own and those of others, especially in the public domain – allows us to reflect on these power relations. Readers and writers engaged in the production or reception of particular texts are invited to consider not just the cognitive consequences of language choices but the ideological and political ones. Here I shall argue that there is a continuum rather than a disjuncture between the weaker and the strong view of criticality, and that traditional critical thinking needs to play its part in the more specifically political project of critical literacy.

The Contribution of Foucault

Teachers and students embarking on critical language study will want to reflect on the cultural and historical values embedded in changing ways of talking and writing about social structures such as class, sexuality, race and gender. The French philosopher Michel Foucault uses the term ‘discourse’ to describe how identities are represented within the major institutions of our society, such as education, medicine, law and the family; how this language is developed and kept in circulation in line with the dominant views and practices of different historical eras; how ways of thinking about a particular topic or slice of the cultural or social world can infiltrate people’s minds and take on the aura of ‘truth’ (Quist, 2013: 33). The Foucauldian notion of discourse has been helpful in allowing us to note the taken-for-granted, often below the level of consciousness, ways of talking and writing which impact on us daily. This understanding of discourse was a major influence in early work on critical discourse analysis, particularly the work of Norman Fairclough, which I discuss below.

Critical literacy is concerned with relations of power, as noted earlier, and Foucault (e.g. 1972) sees power circulating through networks rather than being amenable to individual control. Consequently, his work has been enlisted to argue for a reduced role for human agency, a position which appears to mesh with popular understanding of the contemporary world: one where we are reluctant to talk of certainties, of specific pedagogic outcomes, of material reality; there has been a retreat from the grand narratives of enlightenment discourse, accompanied by a preference for the local over the global. In this climate, there is doubt too as to the feasibility of action to further the cause of creating a better world.

A Foucauldian position can disable the power to action. Versions of critical literacy drawing on the work of Foucault can appear to position human subjects as “powerless, in the grip of discourses they are barely aware of and as relatively lacking in agency” (Locke, 2010: 95). If subject awareness disappears in this process one goal of a critical literacy pedagogy, particularly a language-focused one, namely to alert readers and writers to the manipulations of text, as well as to their own responses to texts – becomes unfeasible. It is not simply the elusiveness of reliable consciousness of self but the nature of the text itself. A postmodern view of the text would see it as ever-changing, hard to categorize, with both the original author and the envisaged or actual readers unreliable judges as to textual meaning.

There are also difficulties with the notion of fluid and multiple identities, associated with the work of Foucault and other theorists such as Nussbaum (1997), as noted by
May and Sleeter. There is a presumption that everyone has an equal opportunity to pick and choose from the melange of identities available to them (May and Sleeter, 2010: 5). When we are teaching groups such as new migrants or those with a relatively insecure social position, it may be the case, as Richard Sennett notes, that those with fewer and less complex social networks need clearer social maps (Sennett, 2006: 81). One kind of identity, for instance, which may not be so readily negotiated or seen as fluid for many students, is that of religion (see Wallace, 2008 for a fuller discussion).

A Marxist Position

Mindful of some of the problems with the postmodern position represented by Foucault (although he himself did not use the term) and other notable figures such as Derrida and Rorty, several key theorists in the field of critical pedagogy have reaffirmed the need to move beyond the local, in order to account for wider structural forces such as capitalism, racism and sexism in the context of growing, global social inequalities. A major critical educator, Peter McLaren, has in recent years distanced himself fundamentally from the main tenets of postmodern and post-structuralist theories, particularly with regard to their anti-universalist and anti-foundationalist positions. As long ago as 1993, McLaren, writing with Colin Lankshear, wrote: critical literacy makes possible, among other things, “a more adequate and accurate ‘reading’ of the world, [so that] people can enter into ‘rewriting’ the world into a formation in which their interests, identities, and legitimate aspirations are more fully present and are present more equally” (Lankshear and McLaren, 1993: xviii). Lankshear and McLaren posit the feasibility here of a more truthful ‘accurate’ reading of the world, appearing to adhere to the Marxist view of false consciousness – put simply we replace the false world with one which is at least improved or closer to the truth. In this view, progress in human affairs is achievable and indeed necessary within an agenda for critical pedagogy. As Eagleton notes, “while a whole traditional ideology of representation is in crisis this does not mean that the search for truth is abandoned” (Eagleton, 1988: 395).

Habermas and Communicative Action: the Linguistic Turn

A major influence on critical pedagogy has been critical theory. This is most closely linked to the Frankfurt school and philosophers such as Adorno, Marcuse and more recently the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas. Habermas takes a linguistic turn in his theory of communicative action. His view is that underpinning any real-life communication – where all sorts of misunderstandings clearly take place – is a shared ideal understanding that disagreements may be rationally resolved (see Pusey, 1987: 73). In other words, it is possible to converge on an agreed meaning but in a spirit where openness is an option; unlike in views of communication which emphasize difference or even the impossibility of convergence on truth, consensus remains the ultimate ideal goal. Debate in classrooms and elsewhere does not necessarily seek closure but the possibility of consensus is always on the table. Habermas refers to this as the ideal speech situation (Habermas, 1979).

The position is similar to that of the philosopher Paul Grice (1975), better known than Habermas by applied linguists, who describes a set of conversational maxims against which we take our bearings in human interaction. In the view of both Grice and Habermas there are universal principles of successful communication. Matters of
truth are intersubjectively negotiated. As with the work of Grice, Habermas is open to accusations that his communicative model only makes sense in a world “devoid of class and property relations” (Pozo, 2003). Nonetheless, the ideal speech situation allows teachers to reflect on ways of organizing and analysing classroom talk in concrete ways. It offers us a framework to look at talk, more specifically ways in which critical talk nurtures and is nurtured by critical literacy, as when pupils in the classroom share their interpretations of texts. Habermas’ notion of communicative action is compatible with Hallidayan systemic functional linguistics, which is set out below. Several critical educators, such as Young (1992) and Wallace (e.g. 1999, 2003), draw on both Habermas and Halliday in accounts of classroom-based critical language study.

Critical Literacy: the Work of Freire

Finally, bringing together many of the issues raised by other theorists, is the work of the Brazilian educational philosopher Paulo Freire, seen by most critical educators as foundational in the field, both theoretically and practically. Freire set out his political and ideological position in his classic text the Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 1972). Freire’s pedagogy was built around the notion of key or generative words, which encoded the life experiences of the poor and disadvantaged groups Freire and his co-workers taught in Brazil. Examples might be *favela* (slum) or *lavoro* (work), key words arising directly from the everyday experiences discussed by the participants in what are called ‘culture circles’. As Freire notes, “reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world” (Freire and Macedo, 1987: 35). One might equally claim that in writing or producing texts we are *writing* the world, producing worlds that are socially and ideologically constructed.

The Freirean legacy is particularly evident in materials produced for adult literacy ESOL. Auerbach and Wallerstein developed a coursebook based around Freire’s notion of *codes*, viewed not just as key words but any image or artefact which might serve as a trigger for dialogic talk in the classroom, particularly among disadvantaged groups (Auerbach and Wallerstein, 2004). And *Reflect: a Freirean inspired literacy scheme* similarly links the literacy acquisition process with individual and community empowerment, addressing the need for recognition that “the practice of literacy is closely linked to the practice of power … learning takes place through people’s practical engagement with different forms of literacy in their own environment, where it is used as an integral part of a process of analysis, reflection and action” (Cascant-Sempere, 2009: 12).

Applications of Theory: Dilemmas in Practical Critical Literacy

Whose Opinion?

Whichever of the above positions one favours, dilemmas confront the aspiring critical educator. First is the matter of the political stance which exponents of critical literacy adopt in the classroom. The substance and manner of critical language study may end up looking like ideological imposition rather than an opening up to scrutiny of contemporary social issues, relating either directly to the lives of participants or to wider global circumstances. Locke notes how it may be the teachers’ ideological axes which are “heard grinding away in the classroom” (Locke, 2010: 95). Can one be sure for instance
that in talking about “strikes”, as in the vignette below, taken from the *Reflect* material, it is not the teacher who has most at stake here rather than the students, who are being taught in an adult ESOL class in London?

we worked on the context of the teachers’ strike. The group were affected by the strike, both due to their ESOL class being cancelled and due to their children’s schools being closed. On the day following the strike we did a cause and effect tree. Students worked in two groups and completed the tree with their own ideas. The groups then swapped trees and looked at the other ideas, asking questions if necessary.

From a questionnaire completed for the evaluation of *Reflect ESOL*, Moon and Sutherland, 2008: 9

Whose Empowerment?

A second issue relates to empowerment. Whose empowerment are we concerned with? Are we committed to direct action on behalf of our students, or to longer-term goals, that is, not necessarily with action as an outcome, rather with consciousness-raising about matters of social equity in the widest sense? Do we want to assess and analyse inequalities in texts in an armchair manner or take subsequent social or political action to redress injustice?

Many critical educators are unapologetic advocates for their students. Ellesworth (1989), in a widely quoted paper on critical pedagogy, is unequivocal in arguing for this position: she says “the concept of critical pedagogy assumes a commitment on the part of the teacher/professor towards ending the students’ oppression”. The class which Ellesworth describes in her paper was centred around the rights of particular social groups, which might be in competition with each other. She raises the matter of conflict in the class, with students taking up polarized positions in defence of favoured identities, thus setting up rival identity groups in the classroom, all of which led Ellesworth to challenge the feasibility of critical pedagogy – indeed famously to argue, in line with the full title of her paper: “if this is critical pedagogy why doesn’t it feel empowering?”.

May and Sleeter take a different view. They note the need to “locate our own struggles within wider discourses and their associated power relations” (May and Sleeter, 2010: 10). There needs to be structural analysis of unequal power relationships of whatever kind and wherever located, whether within specific texts or interactions between teachers and pupils. Part of this process will be understanding oppression of the other, rather than necessarily furthering causes close to our own experience. The larger aim is then not to encourage learners to see their own identities directly mirrored in the teaching material we present to them, but, by a positive process of othering, to empathize, to cross boundaries. Auerbach, a major advocate and interpreter of Freire’s work, notes that the material we as teachers draw on, of whatever kind, should not simply “reflect back” but allow more oblique connections to be made with our students’ lives. (Auerbach, personal communication).

Whose Awareness?

Linked to the matter of crossing boundaries through a process of critical empathy is another question: not so much ‘whose oppression?’ as ‘whose awareness?’ It is possible to claim that oppressed people are only too aware of their own oppression and
disadvantage. If we see critical pedagogy only as resistance from the margins, classes on critical pedagogy may reinforce that sense of marginalization; may even, indeed, be patronizing. It is rather a matter of educating the privileged or the mainstream to be aware of what may otherwise be invisible to them, to notice the oppression of others. As noted in Wallace (1999), it is important that critical pedagogy is not seen as the exclusive concern of groups marked in some way by ‘difference’.

Whose Interpretation?

A final pedagogic question, more directed at the reading of particular texts, relates to the role of the text and the reader. Some wish to keep the text open. On this view, text interpretation is indefinitely deferred. A major influence here is the work of Derrida (1976 in O’Regan, 2006). Derrida invites us to see critical work as an open-ended process which defies closure. A counter position argues for the text as a concrete and material artefact which has meaning in itself, apart from either writer intention or reader interpretation (see Wallace, 2003: 13 and Eco, 1979). Allowing this kind of stability means that we can look at the text at face value initially – the text qua text – before the deconstructive critical work is embarked on. In short, the text is open to different interpretations but is not endlessly open and can be analysed in and for itself. As Morgan (2004: 171) notes, seeing this central role for the text offers us a practical way to work in the classroom, especially if we are working with learners who already have some knowledge of texts and grammar, such as many learners of English as a foreign language.

A final dilemma for the classroom teacher, which is central to the interests of this chapter, is where does language awareness fit in and how? I turn to this matter in the next section.

The Role of Language Awareness in a Critical Literacy Pedagogy

We can talk of language awareness on a number of levels, from awareness of language (to include literacy) as social behaviour to awareness of the effect of language choice within particular texts. And at the micro level of the specific text, we can respond descriptively, simply noting language use, or analytically and interpretively, moving into matters of writer motivation and the aesthetic or ideological effects of language choice. Students have long been alerted to the power of lexis, in particular to ideas of denotation and connotation, from the early days of the field of semantics, presented in popular classic texts such as Language: The Loaded Weapon (Bollinger, 1980) and Language and Woman’s Place (Lakoff, 1975). The semanticist Hayakawa introduced the vivid terms snarl and purr words to describe how terms such as ‘fascist’ or ‘hard-left’ stand in for reasoned debate or argument (Hayakawa, 1949). Terms for political views, such as communist or fascist, are particularly prone to degenerate into snarl words (Leech, 1990: 44). As Leech notes, these are words whose conceptual meaning becomes irrelevant, because whoever is using them is simply capitalizing on their unfavourable connotations in order to give forceful expression to their own hostility.

Other levels of awareness include pragmatic and intercultural awareness. It is no accident that many language awareness studies have been carried out with bilingual subjects who are often better able than their monolingual peers to draw on critical insight into language use and choice, as they take their bearings from experience of other languages/
cultures. James and Garrett (1992: 16) draw on the research of Cummins (1978) to note the superiority of bilinguals in evaluating contradictions or semantic incongruities. While semantic and pragmatic awareness of language use remain important parts of the artillery of the critical applied linguist, it is still helpful to access tools which allow us to dig deeper into the more hidden parts of the grammar. For many critical linguists, Halliday’s Systemic Functional grammar offers this possibility.

**Hallidayan Systemic Functional Grammar**

Halliday’s Systemic Functional grammar (see for instance Halliday, 1994) is a grammar of text, based on the view that every text unfolds in some context of use. It is essentially a social grammar which, in its view that texts are social artefacts and that grammatical choice is socially significant, makes it compatible with the view of literacy as a social practice. Practically, the grammar invokes a simple framework consisting of three metafunctions: field, tenor and mode. These serve to identify the social context of the text through what Halliday calls register. Ideational, interpersonal and textual meaning, linked respectively to field, tenor and mode, work together to create textual meaning in contexts of use. Within these broad categories are grammatical features such as participants and processes (nouns and verbs in conventional grammar, and linked to ideational meaning); modality and mood (linked to tenor of discourse) and cohesion and theme (the textual metafunction). Systemic Functional grammar offers a metalanguage which can be used at different degrees of depth. At the same time, even if teachers draw in highly selective ways on particular grammatical features – such as modality or cohesion – these terms are embedded within a principled framework within which its constituent parts work together to produce overall textual meaning.

In a functional grammar, form is mapped on to functions; the selection of lexicogrammatical structure results in predictable language functions. An example might be the choice of a recent turn of phrase in a TV news item to describe the increased number of homeless people in Britain during the last 5 years: “lives have descended into chaos” rather than a potential transitive version such as: “the cuts to social benefits have led to chaotic lives”. Hallidayan linguists would argue that the option of the first version, which conceals agency or causation, is not accidental but ideologically motivated. Critics of Systemic Functional grammar note, as Morgan says, that this mapping of forms on to social function appears to be excessively deterministic (Morgan, 2004: 170). And yet the framework has the potential to allow students to offer warrants for interpretation in the course of close textual analysis. Halliday himself says that interpretation is always in play, even at the first level of analysis: “even the first step, the analysis of the text in terms of its grammar, is already a work of interpretation” (Halliday, 1994: xvi). There are also, he notes, always indeterminacies. Although there are predictable patterns in certain discourse types, such as deleted agency, the effects of these remain open to debate. Meanings are not closed or determined. The interplay of language levels allows one to “look at the whole thing simultaneously from a number of different angles, each perspective contributing towards the total interpretation” (Halliday and Hasan, 1985: 23). The grammar can also be applied at different levels of sophistication, meaning that learners with limited grammatical knowledge can begin to work in a modest way with relatively visible and accessible parts of the grammar, gradually adding more subtle and complex grammatical items to their repertory.
The LINC Materials: Application of a Systemic Functional Model

In the 1980s, there was a response to the teacher training needs of UK secondary schools which had a critical orientation, and drew in part on Hallidayan Systemic Functional grammar: Language in the National Curriculum (LINC)

The LINC project adopted a text-based view of language with a focus on complete texts. It was inspired by studies on genre in Australia, a movement which was strongly indebted to Systemic Functional grammar. The LINC material devised activities that invited students to consider ideational, interpersonal and textual features in community or everyday texts, such as advertisements. This was with a view to alerting readers to the manner in which particular deployment of the grammar can be subtly manipulative. Carter, one of the writers of the material, notes that the aim was to teach students “not merely to look through language to the content of the message but rather to see though language and be empowered better to understand and explain the ways in which messages are mediated and shaped, very often in the interests of preserving a particular viewpoint or of reinforcing existing ideas” (Carter, 1990: 108).

In 1992, the then Conservative government considered the material too radical. LINC was withdrawn from official circulation, though it continued to be used below the radar by teachers interested in critical work and is still available for purchase. However, once banned, the LINC initiative faded from public view and the critical perspective the approach invited has not been revived in any significant way since in the UK. It was left to others, mainly working outside the school system or within the adult ESOL and literacy world, to take the interest in critical literacy and language awareness further, through such initiatives as Reflect, noted earlier.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Language Awareness

Norman Fairclough’s influential book Language and Power appeared in 1989, around the same time that the LINC materials were in development. Critical Discourse Analysis as set out in Language and Power took as axiomatic that all language use was permeated with power relations and was a new attempt to theorize discourse from a critical perspective. CDA was indebted to earlier work in critical linguistics, notably Language and Control (Fowler, Hodge, Kress and Trew, 1979). In Language and Control, Tony Trew claimed, following Halliday, that grammatical choice is socially and ideologically motivated, that formal linguistic choices are not matters of personal preference but are fundamentally shaped by social custom. Fairclough built on this earlier work by offering a fuller theorization of discourse as not simply reflecting but constituting social life, in part influenced by the Foucauldian view of discourse. Fairclough aimed to provide a more textually oriented discourse analysis than Foucault’s abstract approach. He called this “textually oriented discourse analysis” (TODA). Fairclough makes clear that TODA is intended as a tool to critique the ideology of texts. The framework built more on context and genre but remained fundamentally indebted to Halliday, drawing on the three metafunctions of field, tenor and mode, but adding more information about the socio-historical context in which all language use is framed.

The move to apply CDA, in particular a textually oriented discourse analysis, to classroom teaching took shape a few years later in 1992 in an influential collection.
entitled *Critical Language Awareness*, which specifically aimed to bring some of the new theory into the classroom (Fairclough, 1992). The CLA movement of the 1990s had a twofold aim: to build on the earlier language awareness movement by injecting into it a sharper socio-political relevance and, secondly, to put the reinvigorated CDA movement, inspired largely by Norman Fairclough, to some practical pedagogic use. Arguably a weaker view of ‘critical’ – to mean a preparedness to challenge uses and forms of language – was already encompassed by existing models of language awareness (see for example, Hawkins, 1981, 1984 and James and Garrett, 1992). However, a stronger definition, emphasizing the need to address more explicitly language and power, was set out in early studies of critical language awareness by Clark et al. (1990,1991), Janks (1994) and Wallace (1992). Thus, as described in Wallace (1992) in a class on critical reading with EFL students, students and teacher started with a set of five orientating critical questions as set out below. These were designed to encourage learners to think about the key question in critical reading: cui bono? Who gains and how from the production of particular texts, genres and their accompanying discourses?

Why is this topic being written about?
How is the topic being written about?
Who is the reader of this text?
What other ways of writing about the topic are there?

*Wallace, 1992: 71, adapted originally from Kress, 1989: 7*

The class then progressed to closer analysis of selected texts and parts of texts. This analysis was guided by much more specific questions than the initial orientating questions, designed to point to the way that linguistic choice positions what is talked or written about in predictable and patterned kinds of ways.

Critical reading is a precursor to critical writing, to being able to make strategic use of the same rhetorical features which are seen to be effective in texts which are read. Clark and Ivanic (1992: 171) point out too how CLA can help develop socially responsible writers. Criticality is in play when as readers or writers – often reading our own writing – we attend to salient features of the text and scrutinize and reflect on these; secondly, when we stand back from our own stance to the text.

**Teaching Critical Literacy**

The teaching of critical literacy has received greater attention in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa than in the United States or the United Kingdom, at least with regard to the incorporation of a language awareness element in text-oriented critical discourse analysis. Sometimes this is discussed under the banner of critical multiculturalism, as in a study by Terry Locke who conducted a two-year project in South Auckland on teaching literature in the multicultural classroom. Within this, there was a critical discourse analysis element in that students were invited to interrogate the way in which discourses routinely positioned poor Pacific Island families in South Auckland in predictable ways (Locke, 2010). Terry Locke sets out teaching goals for subject English which include one key one with regard to knowledge about language, in particular awareness of textual features:
the fostering of textual practices which draw attention to the relationship between
texts and issues of power, inequality, injustice, marginalization and misrepresenta-
tion in the wider society

_Locke, 2010: 89_

During the 1980s, predating the LINC project, an innovative publication entitled
_Changing Stories_ (Mellor, Hemming and Leggett, 1984) was available from the English
and Media Centre, based in central London, which took a critical perspective to work
with texts. This work was originally produced in Australia but, along with sister collec-
tions, _Making Stories_ (Mellor, Raleigh and Ashton, 1984) and _Reading Stories_ (Mellor,
O’Neill and Patterson, 1987), became important material in critical language study. The
material, timeless as it deals with traditional folk tales, is still available for purchase and
is described thus online:

_Changing Stories_ explicitly draws on students’ experience of narrative and is
designed to highlight issues of gender; the similarities and differences between sto-
ries from all over the world.


A particularly important element in the approach was to ask students to think of
alternative discourses: how could this text have been constructed differently? Thus,
chapter two of _Changing Stories_ explores the ways in which stories change over time,
using as an example five versions of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ that range from a very
early version, through to James Thurber’s famous ‘send-up’ and concluding with a femi-
nist version in which Red Riding Hood and Grandmother take charge of affairs as
active protagonists.

It testifies to changing times and changing priorities that, as with the LINC mate-
rial, nothing with a similarly critical orientation has taken the place of this material
produced 30 years ago now. In the United Kingdom, there is currently little attention
to critical literacy, at least in schools. It has been left to the Adult ESOL sector to take
this work forward (see Cooke and Simpson, 2008). Certainly, lip service is paid in school
literacy discussion to the need for young people to be informed and critical citizens and
a reference is made to critical thinking in this section of the new national curriculum
_English for Key Stage 3_, when pupils are prepared for national examinations at age 16.
Here we see how the term ‘critically’ is introduced in this section of the curriculum,
where the writers say that there is a need to read critically through:

- knowing how language, including figurative language, vocabulary choice, grammar,
text structure and organizational features, presents meaning
- recognising a range of poetic conventions and understanding how these have
been used
- studying setting, plot, and characterization, and the effects of these
- understanding how the work of dramatists is communicated effectively through
performance and how alternative staging allows for different interpretations
of a play
- making critical comparisons across texts
- studying a range of authors, including at least two authors in depth each year.
One notes vagueness here: “reading critically” is linked to “knowing how language presents meaning”, but it is not specified in what way or to what effect whole texts and parts of texts represent meaning. Nor are teachers given any guidance as to how one might make “critical comparisons across texts”.

Examples of Teaching Critical Literacy and Language Awareness: From Consciousness-Raising to Textual Analysis

I include here four vignettes of teachers teaching critical literacy in a range of contexts and with different kinds of learners, to include young children, secondary school students, university students learning Dutch, and an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) class. Critical language awareness is brought into play in these literacy lessons, with varying degrees of explicitness. What they share is that that all the lessons centre around texts, although the nature of the text differs, as does the context in which they arise. Language is also central; the aim is to encourage students to be aware of language at varying degrees of particularity, ranging from ways in which language encodes identity to ways in which ideology is reproduced within the minutiae of small language choices within written texts.

Mother’s Day

The first example is from Jennifer O’Brien’s class with 5–8 year-olds (O’Brien, 2001). O’Brien wanted to make available to her young learners a critical position towards classroom texts, through providing a particular kind of language to talk about their observations. The children were not invited to look at specific language choices within texts but they were expected to gain understanding of how the use of language defines, and potentially contests, social reality. This was achieved through asking the children to interrogate images and to consider choices, arguably the first stage of critical language awareness. O’Brien’s major interest was in the construction of gendered identities and the texts selected were ‘Mother’s Day Texts’ (presented in the form of a catalogue of things to buy for mother on Mother’s Day), which invariably displayed images and words about mothers that were strikingly at odds with the real-life mothers of the children. O’Brien wanted her pupils to be aware of the way in which texts do not simply reflect reality but “create versions of reality” (ibid. 40). A concrete example of O’Brien’s approach is this task to guide the reading of the Mother’s Day advertising texts.

- What groups of people get the most out of Mother’s Day?
- Make two lists: how the mothers in the catalogs are like real mothers and how the mothers in the catalogs aren’t like real mothers.

One important question for the children was: whose mother isn’t here? This points to the invisibility of some social categories, particularly in advertising material. Overall, O’Brien was able to show through the work she did on analysing and re-creating texts about mothers the gaps between the social worlds constructed by the media (in this case Mother’s Day catalogues) and the students’ worlds. The students found that “most of the women… were young, Anglo-Australian and pretty: they identified Greek, Lebanese, Cambodian, Vietnamese and Aboriginal mothers as missing” (ibid. 50).
Romeo and Juliet

Paul Nancarrow (2010) describes a class where he taught *Romeo and Juliet* with older learners in a multilingual London school. Many of Nancarrow’s pupils speak a language other than English and can draw on rich cultural and linguistic resources, not always acknowledged within an increasingly monolingual curriculum in UK schools (see Wallace, 2013). Nancarrow was keen to challenge a “version of multicultural education which simply sets out to celebrate diversity … ignoring the realities of pupils’ lives and of the society in which we live” (Gravelle, 1996: 101). What Nancarrow brings to our discussion is that he focused on literature – the main arena of critical work for many teachers – and was concerned to maximize his learners’ bilingual resources. He asked them to reflect on specific language choice in light of the unfamiliarity of Shakespeare’s language for all the students. While the bilingual students certainly had some difficulties culturally with aspects of the text, they were able to make critical use of their unique linguistic capital as bilinguals in ways not so readily available to their monolingual classmates: these are Nancarrow’s comments on the rather different kind of language awareness which the bilingual students appear able to access.

Lilly, a Russian speaker said that, “the language did sound strange at first, perhaps that’s why people say it’s another language but when you understand it, it’s alright even if it does sound old, archaic.” As a bilingual, Lilly seemed to be able to overcome the oddness of hearing “another language.” She seemed to suggest that you could work it out. In contrast, Becky, a monolingual English girl, said she had real problems: “I think it’s very hard to understand.” Sanah, a Kurdish speaker said that certain old words make it sound romantic: “Thy – it sounds romantic.” …. overall there was a general willingness, among the bilingual students, to focus on the “actual language.” … (the monolingual students) seemed to rely more on physical context, making little attempt to work out the language.

Nancarrow, 2010

Men’s Health

Gerdi Quist teaches Dutch as a foreign language at a major university in London. She works in the context of a traditional university where so-called ‘language classes’ are clearly distinct from culture or content ones, which are often dedicated to the teaching of literature. She was concerned to develop her students’ critical awareness of language at the same time as developing conventional language competence, to help them to become “critical intercultural language users”. At the heart of the approach was a view of language learning as culture learning. Quist took everyday texts from the news media or magazines and encouraged her students to subject them to critical analysis (Quist, 2013). She worked on two levels. She worked outwards in the sense that she started with discussing the conventional features of the text, only later bringing in cultural elements though the notion of *cultuurtekst*, which she draws from the Dutch literary critic, Maaike Meijer (Miejer, 1996). By this she refers to the network of culturally and ideologically accepted ways by which themes are interconnected across a text, leading one to talk, for instance, of “a Dutch articulation”, in the case of the key text considered in the study. Quist acknowledges she is on dangerous ground here – that to
talk of ‘Dutchness’ or equally, of ‘Britishness’ lays one open to the charge of essentialism. However, she wishes to argue that there are ideological tendencies embedded in texts, which link to taken-for-granted views and values which are shared by the majority readership; that due to society-wide historical processes and structures global discourse can take on a national ‘articulation’. Criticality is involved in Quist’s approach through moving away from the liberal view of the ‘good’ text, that is, one that is logically and clearly structured and embodied in the critical thinking view, to the problematizing approach of what Quist refers to as ‘mapping discourses’, that is “recognising the ways texts construct the world in culturally routinized ways” (O’Regan, 2006: 118). Thus, she moves from critiquing logical argument and coherence, what we have called the ‘critical thinking’ orientation, to critiquing discourses which are socio-culturally mediated.

Quist describes two lessons dedicated to the analysis of a text from the magazine *Men’s Health*. Quist notes that in the first lesson the students responded at what she calls ‘text’ level, taking the text at face value. In the second reading of the text the students created a larger dialogic space, allowing them to talk beyond the text and in doing so to raise issues around the nature of cultural assumptions embedded in texts. She also, like Nancarrow, drew on bilingual/bicultural resources by inviting two Dutch students to join the group of mainly dominant English pupils, in order to enrich the debate around the notion of *cultuurtekst*.

Quist concludes that the revisiting of the text as *cultuurtekst* invited problematizing of interpretations which were, at the first conventional analysis of language features, more confidently given. During discussion of the text as *cultuurtekst*, she notes “the students became less confident in their voice”. This level of uncertainty, of doubt, this struggle for meaning, is seen by Freire as key to critical work. As he notes in conversation with Donaldo Macedo, “Educators should stimulate students to doubt” (Freire and Macedo, 1987: 57). This kind of doubt or uncertainty can arise in classroom interaction around text but also in the way in which texts are interpreted. This may not mean the denial of ultimate convergence on an agreed meaning, as noted earlier in the discussion on the ideal speech community. Rather the absence of certainty, as students struggle to articulate new and often difficult and complex ideas, acknowledges and values the process by which meanings are discussed in the classroom – regardless of the final outcome of the discussion.

**The Childminder**

Wallace (2003) describes how she taught an optional module at one of London’s new universities. It was designed for learners of English as a foreign language who were interested in attending a class that drew on their existing grammatical knowledge of English and who wanted to put this grammatical knowledge to use in text analysis of a critically analytical nature. The class *Critical Reading* presented an explicit language framework and set of metalinguistic terms, drawn from Hallidayan Systemic Functional grammar. The progression of the module worked differently to that of Quist in her class with learners of Dutch. While Quist started with the micro analysis of her focus text, widening out in a subsequent lesson to bring in what she calls the *cultuurtekst* dimension, this class moved, over the 18 weeks of the course, in the opposite direction, from context to text, with early lessons supplying a metalanguage to describe the context of situation, along with terms such as ‘model reader’, ‘genre’ and ‘discourse’.
Language awareness evolved from a focus on reader behaviour, acknowledging the view of literacy as socioculturally embedded, noted at the start of the chapter. At this early stage, learners recorded simple observations, drawn from everyday life, about who reads or writes what kinds of things where and when. Once we moved to look at particular texts, key metalanguage was introduced gradually over the course beginning with terms that related to more visible and readily describable textual features, such as pronouns and modal verbs, linked to the tenor of texts, progressing to discussion of textual meanings such as theme and cohesion. By the end of the module, students were able to work with a full range of ideational, interpersonal and textual features.

This extract of a discussion about a childminder who had been accused of racism by introducing the children in her care to a gollywog may provide a flavour of the classroom discourse. Two students, Yuko from Japan and Victoria from Spain, and the teacher are problematizing the notion of racism:

Yuko: …we don’t know if she’s a real racist or just doing her job as a childminder. We don’t know that. This “support” (the news text announces that the childminder has received public support) … is it supporting her being racist or is it supporting her being a childminder– a good childminder. We don’t know yet.

T: What evidence is there in the text for these positions… Why is it ambiguous?

Victoria: She (Mrs Newton, the childminder) never says she’s not a racist. She never says that. I think she’s so convinced of the way she’s been brought up and everybody’s been reading these stories of – er maybe we’re all racist.

At the end of the reading course students were invited through a series of in-depth interviews to consider how their view of texts and reading had changed.

This process is reflected in Lankshear’s literacy cycle as follows:

Lankshear proposes that a teacher wishing to take a CLA approach to critical literacy might usefully see the teaching as progressing over what he calls three phases of a literacy cycle, beginning and ending with the socio/cultural context of literacy as cultural/ideological practice. The goal is for students to develop awareness in the following ways:

1 Being able to take a critical perspective on literacy behaviour in a range of cultural settings
2 Having a critical or evaluative perspective on specific texts
3 Having a critical perspective on wider social practices in light of the close, detailed analysis carried out in phase 2.

Lankshear, 1994: 10

Summarizing Points

Critical literacy and critical language awareness are not currently what we might call ‘hot topics’ in language teaching and learning. This is particularly so in UK schools as we experience a time of strong emphasis on what has come to be known as outcomes-based education; while criticality and creativity are seen, in principle, as crucial to
student success in the 21st century, the pressure to achieve a particular grade over-
rides this concern. Any pedagogy which is perceived as riskier, to include critical lit-
eracy approaches – however interpreted – can only thrive in congenial circumstances.
O’Brien (ibid.) acknowledges that the early 1980s was a fertile period for this kind
of work in Australia. The same could be said for the 1980s and 1990s in the United
Kingdom.

And yet the need does not go away. While the print texts of yesteryear appear old-
fashioned – few read newspapers these days – there is arguably an even greater need to
interrogate the anonymity of internet texts and the range of print texts which still daily
confront us. As long as representation in a wide range of print and digital artefacts
continues to derogate particular groups of people and to promote the interests of the
privileged and elite, the need remains to offer learners kinds of language awareness
which serve as tools to challenge discriminatory discourse.

Related Topics
Critical pedagogy; critical theory; Systemic Functional grammar; Critical Language
Awareness

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