

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LANGUAGE IN CRITICAL LITERACY

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## Introduction

In previous papers (Emmitt and Wilson, 1999, 2002, 2004) we have stressed the importance for students in a democratic society, to be aware, informed, articulate, able to critique texts and take action. Hence, we see literacy teaching as being more than reading and writing for understanding; literacy teaching must also include critical literacy.

But what is critical literacy? Over recent years we have attended many critical literacy conference sessions (particularly in USA) where the focus has been on social issues and education for social justice. In these sessions critical literacy appears to be synonymous with social justice education. These sessions have raised questions for us as to what is critical literacy. How is reading and writing critically, different to reading and writing? Where is the language/literacy in critical literacy if critical literacy is only teaching about social issues?

In our thinking, critical literacy involves reading and writing differently. We believe that critical literacy provides a powerful tool in educating children for a better world. However, it includes more than teaching about social justice issues. Critical literacy pedagogy, we believe, must provide learners with analytical tools to read and write critically; that is, to know:

- that texts are not neutral
- that text creators have choices in selecting text forms, content, language and visuals, which may privilege certain views of the world over others;
- as readers, how to analyse texts for the purpose of identifying creator constructions of events and people
- as writers, how to construct texts without perpetuating long held stereotypes
- how to challenge texts and take action for a better world.

In this paper we focus on one aspect of critical literacy – critical language awareness and tools to analyse texts. Analytical tools are essential if the promise of critical literacy is to be realised. Knowledge of linguistic analyses is what language/literacy teachers can best contribute to the effective use of critical literacy pedagogy. Learners need analytical tools to deconstruct different types of texts in order to determine whose views are being represented, whose voices are silent and to make an informed judgement as to desired action.

The paper will comprise two parts: firstly, the theoretical perspectives where we share some views on critical literacy and critical language awareness that inform our thinking and secondly, a framework for applying critical language awareness in the classroom and practices to develop students' analytical skills with literacy. These practices will highlight the significance of students understanding how language is used in the construction of texts to empower some groups in society over others.

## Theoretical Perspectives

### Critical Literacy

Literate practices are not neutral or innocent; literate practices privilege and celebrate texts which maintain the disadvantage of minority groups (including women and girls, people of colour, rural people, religious groups, aged people, and people with disabilities). In classrooms, teacher commentary and questioning around text interpretation and construction may reinforce dominant cultural ideologies. Choice of texts may maintain a literary canon and exclude other genres and formations of language use and literacy which are important in students' peer and family communities (Comber and Nixon, 1999, p. 319).

Critical literacy focuses on being able to critique such texts. Critical theories of literacy derive from critical social theory and its interest in matters of class, gender and ethnicity, and are related to critical pedagogy and critical language awareness (Morgan, 1997). Critical pedagogy, also originating from critical social theory, is designed to oppose the dominant ideologies, social institutions and material conditions that maintain socio-economic inequality (Morgan, 1997). Critical literacy with its aims to develop students' critical awareness of inequalities and how language constructs and represents these inequalities is a key part of critical pedagogy. Teachers who subscribe to critical literacy have a stake in social change – no matter how small- and aim to encourage students to investigate, question and even challenge relationships between language and social practices that advantage particular social groups over others (Gilbert and Taylor, 1991). Therefore, critical literacy is more than critique of social and cultural texts; it is also about affecting change in one's environment through literacy texts. But to understand texts this way tools of analysis are required.

Fairclough (1989, p.5) discusses the meaning of critical:

*Critical* is used in the special sense of aiming to show up the connections which may be hidden from people – such as the connections between language, power and ideology. ... Critical language study analyses social interactions in a way which focuses their linguistic elements and which sets out to show up their generally hidden determinants in the system of social relationships, as well as the hidden effects they may have upon the system.

Language study and analyses have to be a part of critical literacy.

Lankshear (1997, p. 44) proposes three interrelated perspectives or dimensions on critical literacy that assist in conceptualising critical literacy in the classroom. To him, critical literacy might involve:

- 'Having a critical perspective on (language and) *literacy* or literacies per se, where literacy itself is the object of critique;
- Having a critical perspective on particular *texts*, where the critique of texts and their worldviews is the object;

- Having a critical perspective on – i.e., being able to analyse and critique – wider *social practices* ... etc which are mediated by, made possible, and partially sustained through reading, writing, viewing, transmitting, etc., texts. Here social practices, their histories, their normative work, and their associated literacy practices and artefacts, etc., are the target of analysis and critique.’

For critical literacy to be effective all three dimensions need to be developed. However, in this paper we are focusing on dimension two with the focus on analysing and evaluating texts.

Ira Shor (1992, p.32) also emphasises the key roles of analysis and critique in critical literacy. For him, critical literacy is:

analytical habits of thinking, reading, writing, speaking or discussing which go beneath surface impressions, traditional myths, mere opinions, and routine clichés; understanding the social contexts and consequences of any subject matter; discovering the deep meaning of any event, text, technique, process, object, statement, image, or situation; applying that meaning to your own context.

A key challenge for teaching is how to engage students with study of “how texts work” semiotically and linguistically, while at the same time taking up explicitly how texts and their affiliated social institutions work politically to construct and position writers and readers in relations of power and knowledge (or lack of)’ (Luke, Comber and O’Brien, 1996).

However, we stress again, that critical literacy is more than understanding how the language works in texts. Linguistic analysis and literary deconstruction are treated often, as instructional ends in themselves, rather than means for socially productive textual work. “We would argue that *text analysis and critical reading activities should lead on to action with and/ against the text*. That is, there is a need to translate text analyses into cultural action, into institutional intervention and community projects” (Luke, O’Brien & Comber, 2001, p.117).

### Critical Language Awareness

The term ‘Critical Language Awareness’ was coined by researchers and educators from the Language-Ideology-Power research group at the Lancaster University in the UK (Clark, Fairclough, Ivanic, & Martin-Jones, 1987; Fairclough 1989, 1992). It is based on the same theoretical underpinnings around language and power as critical literacy. (Janks (1993) used these concepts as the basis for the development of workbooks for secondary students in South Africa. In summary, critical language awareness focuses in language study on understanding how language represents power structures in texts in the belief that knowledge about how language works gives students an explicit and tangible point of reference from which to both generalise from and to offer as evidence for what they say in response to their analyses Language is entwined in social power in a number of ways: it indexes power, it expresses power, and is involved whenever there is contention over and challenge to power. Power does not derive from language, but language may be used to challenge power, to subvert it, and to alter distribution of power in the short or longer term

(Kress, 1985). Just think of the role of language in the debates about sexism and racism! In some genres creators of texts often use language in sophisticated ways to mask overt power, hence it becomes important that students become aware of these techniques and able to critique the texts.

Critical language study or critical language awareness – helps address the practices by which language enacts social practices. Ivanic’s checklist for a language program is a useful starting point (Ivanic, 1990, p.132):

- A. Critical awareness of the relationship between language and power
  - Recognize how people with power choose the language that is used to describe people, things, and events
  - Understand how many types of language, especially written language, have been shaped by more prestigious social groups, and understand, hard to use, confidently, or hard to write
  - Understand how the relative status of people involved affects the way we use a language (for example, a doctor speaks differently from a patient)
  - Recognise that when power relations change, language changes too-both historically and between individuals
  - Understand how language use can either reproduce or challenge existing power relations
- B. Critical awareness of language variety
  - Recognise the nature of prejudice about minority languages, other languages of the world, and varieties of English
  - Understand why some languages or language varieties are valued more highly than others
  - Understand how devaluing languages or language varieties devalues their users
  - Value your own spoken language
  - Recognise that speakers of languages and language varieties other than standardised English are experts.
- C. Turning awareness into action
  - Recognise how language can either be offensive or show respect – and choose your language accordingly
  - Recognise what possibilities for change exist in current circumstances and what the constraints are
  - Learn how to decide whether to challenge existing language practice in particular circumstances
  - Learn how to oppose conventional language practice if you want to.

In addition, students need a language to talk about language – a meta-language. Commonly in Australia, terminology and concepts from traditional grammar and systemic functional linguistics are used as a shared language between students and teachers. In examining a text, for example, the participant roles of women and men can be determined; whether they are actors or acted on; whether they are the doers or the done to – look at the verbs (processes) that the participants are engaging in; do they have positive or negative effects? Particular techniques such as nominalisation can be used by writers that obfuscate agency. (Nominalisation is the process by which verbs in texts are changed to nouns (things) and information is packed more densely into nominal group structures.) Therefore, students need to know the difference

between nouns and verbs and have a meta language to talk about language. Students need to understand the possible role of active or passive voice in a text. With the use of passive voice the agents of the action are not revealed; the doers of the action are not specified and so much has to be inferred. Therefore readers need to be asking why is the passive voice used. Why are the agents hidden? How has this grammatical construction shaped the actual event being written about?

Within the context of the classroom, critical literacy offers a critical approach to text, a language of critique or a critical discourse, and examination of literacy across content areas. However, before critical literacy can occur within the classroom, students need the opportunity to engage in meaningful use of literacy, or in other words, to use literacy in ways that relate to their interest and needs. It is important to work from an inclusive model of literacy (Freebody, 1992, Luke & Freebody, 1999). Without the opportunity to write and read for a range of purposes or access to a variety of texts, there is no basis upon which critical discussion of and reflection on literacy can occur. Such opportunities are essential if students are to begin to examine the ways in which texts are constructed, and for what purposes (Green, 2001).

The above theoretical positions have lead us to develop and use the following framework to assist teachers develop their students' text analytical skills.

### **A Framework for analysing texts for critical literacy purposes:**

The framework that we describe below has four phases.

#### 1. Pre-Analysis

##### A. Determining purposes for the analysis

- To identify the construction of a particular group eg boys/girls; immigrants
- To identify stereotyping of a social group
- To identify author position or values on the issue
- To identify author message
- To identify the powerful groups on this topic
- To identify those whose views are not presented.

##### B. Reading, understanding and using the text (code breaker, text participant and text user roles).

#### 2. Text Analysis: Deconstruction of text/s

##### A. Context and content: Possible strategies:

- Pre-reading activity: children predict how the character will be portrayed eg draw the rabbits; draw a scientist; draw an elderly woman. After reading the text children describe the actual construction of the character in the text and compare with their predictions.
- With short fiction, have students predict what will happen next at several points through the text. Later sort and classify the predictions. These reveal alternate decisions the author could have made.
- Use retrieval chart to collect data relating to:

What actions are attributed to a particular group?  
How does the group behave in particular situations?  
How and where does the group live?  
What work is the group depicted doing?  
What clothing is the group depicted wearing?

#### B. Linguistic

##### Genre/discourse

- Which genre have the creators used?
- Which audiences are comfortable and competent with this genre?
- Which dialects are used? How are they used? eg. disparagingly

##### Grammatical

- List all verb phrases which describe actions attributed to group/character.
- List all noun phrases which describe the character or social group
- Identify whether the text is written in the passive or active voice.
- Is theme/rheme in writing made explicit?
- Is nominalisation used?

#### C. Layout and visuals

- List the colours used to portray different genders, characters, social groups
- List the settings for the different characters.
- List the characters foregrounded in the art work. Note those who are on the fringes.
- Note the use of line in the overall design, eg in magazines. Are the lines straight, curved, bold, fine, zig zag.
- Note backgrounds, end papers and borders. What are these depicting?

### 3. Text Analysis: Evaluation and Conclusions

The data gathered in the deconstruction is evaluated and conclusions are drawn.

Possible strategies are:

- In short fiction, where students have predicted what will happen next, discuss why the author made the decisions she did through the text. What do these decisions say about the author's values?
- Using data noted on retrieval charts write about the construction of the group or character.
- Analyse the verb/ noun phrases for the creators' construction of the group  
Ask: if all we knew about this group (eg boys) came from this text we would think boys were.....

- Where a text is written in the passive voice, determine which agents of action are being shielded? Why?
- Creators' values: Write, what was the author message?  
What does the author believe about this group or this event in history.  
What do the creators value?  
  - What do these creators have to gain from constructing this text?
  - Which audience was this genre prepared for? Could an alternate genre have been used? Which genre? To whom would this have been more accessible?
  - Identify the silent voices: On this topic who are the interested parties? Whose perspective is missing from this text?

#### 4. Action

The reader/viewer needs to make decisions to accept the position created, or undertake a 'rereading' of the text/s and take appropriate follow-up action.

The action should be relevant to the text and context. Possible actions are:

- With short fiction: re-write the story using one of the students' earlier predictions to show how changed author decision means changed story, and changed message.
- With reference to conclusions drawn on retrieval charts, write, 'Is this how life has to be for this group? Why? Why Not?'
- Write to creators to support the creators' perspective.
- Write to creators to disagree with creators' perspective.
- Develop word chains which show how language can create positive or negative perceptions of a particular group. For example consider words used to describe the unemployed.  
beach bum, money sniffer, dole bludger, retrenched worker, he's between jobs, job seeker
- Re-write the piece with changed construction of character/group, perhaps drawing upon word chain
- Write a new text with different construction of that social group.
- Re-write the piece in different genre for a different audience eg. in rap
- Students construct texts with increased thought and sensitivity for the social groups being written about; they do not unthinkingly assume traditional stereotypes.

### **The Framework in action in the classroom: The Australian Idol in Grade5/6**

#### **1. Pre-Analysis**

##### **A. Determining Purposes for the Analysis**

- To identify the construction of a pop star by
  - a) An Australian judge of Australian Idol Program
  - b) National and World winners
- For children to examine their own positions as to what makes a successful pop star

##### **B. Reading and Understanding the Text (Text Participant)**

- Introduction: Teacher checks as to how many children are familiar with and view 'Australian Idol'? (all but 4 of the 54 children)  
Teacher checks whether children are aware of the furore following one judge's attack upon one of the final six contestants re his body shape.
- Children read 'Is this man too fat to be a pop star?' (Herald Sun, Sep 26<sup>th</sup>, 2004). Children write their opinions in the genre of argument. The whole class shares and discusses. Examples of children's writing are included below.

Is this man too fat to be a pop star?

My opinion is that as long as Courtney sings well then Ian Dickson should leave him and his weight alone. One of the major reasons I think this, is because Dicko is the one who always raves on about the way he wants someone who can sell records, so why does his image matter? I doubt people are going to walk into Sanity and say 'I like this guy's voice but he's fat si I don't want to buy his CD.'

Another reason is since his unofficial nick-name is 'the fat guy', so now it's his brand, just like Guy Sebastian's afro and Shannon Noll's goatee beard. It gets him to be noticed.

I think the media have gone over the top though. There is much worse things happening in the world than a guy being called fat!

Daniel

Is this man too fat to be a pop star?

If Ian Dickson said that comment in concern about his heart and fitness, then yes, I do agree with him.

I think our Australian Idol needs to have a good personality, a good style of music and of course, a good voice,. I think Courtney has got all of that and mostly everyone loves him so much.

Also if he loses weight for health problems, then I agree with Dicko, but if it's just for looks, I strongly disagree.

Kelly

- The children list those talents they believe important, for success as a pop singer. A class list is compiled.
  - outgoing performer
  - crowd worker
  - versatile singer
  - mover and groover
  - passionate singer
  - confident performer
  - dancing sensation
  - spirited singer
  - superb mover
  - audience connector
  - golden voiced singer
  - talented entertainer

## 2. Text Analysis: Deconstruction of Text

a) Individually children re-read the article underlining all the groups of words or individual words which stand in place of 'Courtney' (noun phrases).

b) Class list of these noun phrases is compiled from children's lists:

bulky Australian Idol singer  
24 year old performer from Perth  
he  
the big guy  
the fat guy

c) Read 'Winning Hints' from *Idol Party* magazine.

Working in pairs, the children underline all the words which these successful National Idol winners use to describe what it is that aspiring stars need to do, to get to the top (verb phrases).

d) Class list compiled from children's lists is:

avoid smoky places  
don't be lazy  
push yourself  
be yourself  
need a good voice  
believe in yourself  
live for music  
don't let it go to your head  
work hard  
don't try to be cool  
be on the same level as those listening  
put some emotion into songs  
be yourself  
be versatile with range of songs  
be talented and very disciplined  
believe singing is only thing you can do

### **3. Text Analysis: Evaluation of data; conclusions drawn**

a) Children study the two class lists –one list of noun phrases from the Herald Sun article reporting the judge's comments, and the other, the verb phrases from the successful Idol competitors. Individual children summarize the construction of a successful pop star from each of these lists.

Eg Judge's list: A pop star has to be slim and look good.

Competitors' list: To be Australian Idol it is important to be yourself, to work hard and to believe in yourself.

The children note that the competitors do not mention body image other than one, the World Winner, who states it does not worry him what he looks like.

### **4Action**

b) Children each make a large poster of Courtney performing. When the art work is completed the children write two captions to attach to their posters. One caption is to reflect the values of the judge focusing on body image, and the second is to describe Courtney as a performer. Some samples of their captions follow.

- a) Popular Idol singer scores!! b) Bulky Aussie Idol singer faces his weight. (Susie)
- a) The singing hippo performs. b) The golden voiced performer works the audience brilliantly. (Jess)
- a) The fat man sings. b) Idol sensation sings his heart out. (Sarah)
- a) Chubby Australian Idol singer tries his best. b) Legendary singer lifts off the roof. (Vish)
- b) Children write either to Courtney, to the producer of Australian Idol, or, to Ian Dickson, the judge to express their point of view.

## Conclusion

In this paper we focused on one aspect of critical literacy – the language and literacy central to the desired outcomes of critical pedagogy. Critical literacy adds a powerful dimension to literacy pedagogy which includes knowing how to identify and analyse those choices creators make in the construction of texts, including linguistic choices.

In summary, critical literacy education involves:

- The understanding that some texts are valued over others in a society
- The understanding that creators of texts consciously use language and visuals within texts to position or empower some social groups over others
- Skills to be able to analyse and interrogate texts
- Action as a result of engaging with texts.

In this paper we have tried to demonstrate how relevant discourse or text analysis can occur in the classroom to support the critical understanding of texts, and hence, fulfil the promise of critical literacy.

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