CELIA THOMPSON

Critical literacy and text selection in English for academic purposes courses

Abstract

In this paper I plan to explore the relationship between critical approaches to literacy and the selection of EAP reading texts, taking Australia’s colonial and post-colonial society as an example of a theme around which discussion of text selection will revolve. Drawing, for example, on the writings of Benesch (1993, 1996) and Pennycook (1989, 1994, 1997), I suggest that by reconceptualising the selection of EAP texts within a critical pedagogical framework, we may be able to avoid perpetuating institutionalised forms of historical and cultural exclusion.

I would argue for an approach to literacy that reframes the text … as a social strategy historically located in a network of power relations in particular institutional sites and cultural fields (Luke 1996: 333)

The background to this paper lies in my experiences as a teacher of theme-based English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses in tertiary institutions in Australia over the past 13 years. Specifically, I am interested in identifying appropriate criteria to use as guidelines for text selection in EAP courses. This aim, together with my own interest in Australia’s colonial history and current questions concerning relations between Australia’s indigenous and non-indigenous (predominantly Anglo-Celtic) peoples, has motivated this study.

Introduction

The point of departure for this paper lies in my interest in the interconnections between theories of critical literacy and the selection of texts in EAP courses. I draw on the work on literacy by McCormick (1994), on discussions by Benesch (1993, 1996) and Pennycook (1989, 1994, 1997) about the ideological positioning of EAP courses, and on the writings of indigenous Australian authors such as Narogin (1990) and Noonuccal (1976), to show how ‘social identities and power relations […] become primary objects of analysis, critique and study’ (Luke 1996: 333) in the teaching and learning of critical reading practices in the EAP classroom. To do this, I will focus the discussion on a
number of texts written in English about colonialism in Australia that I have used in EAP reading classes.²

In these classes, the pedagogical focus has been twofold: first, to use texts as vehicles for the discussion of issues related to critical reading in academic contexts, and second, to introduce students to topics relating to Australian colonial and post-colonial society. Critical reading here has the sense not only of interpreting texts, but also of developing:

- the knowledge and ability to perceive the interconnectedness of social conditions and the reading and writing practices of a culture, to be able to analyze those practices, and to possess the critical and political awareness to take action within and against them (McCormick 1994: 49).

This approach to the teaching of reading has important implications for the types of texts selected for EAP courses. I will take ‘Colonial and post-colonial Australian society’ as an example of a theme around which I have designed tasks to develop the academic English language abilities of non-native English speaking students.

I argue for the need to develop a theoretical framework that takes the work of writers in the field of critical literacy into account in order to reconceptualise our approach to ‘academic’ text selection. Thus as EAP practitioners, we can be consistent with, and self-reflexive of, our roles as academic gatekeepers of different types of knowledge.³ I will support this position by highlighting the value of viewing literacy as a social construct and a political practice that has the potential to change existing social relations. Taking colonisation in Australia as a thematic example, I will discuss the ways in which indigenous and non-indigenous perceptions of colonisation have been presented in a variety of texts. Finally, issues concerning the meaning and implications of the term ‘academic’ will be raised with reference to the ‘non-academic’ and oral nature of indigenous writing. Using texts from my own teaching, I will attempt to highlight the importance of connecting such texts to the historical, political and cultural forces that exist beyond the confines of the classroom walls.

**Literacy as social construct and political practice**

There are a number of possible approaches that can be taken when discussing the concept of literacy. Over the past fifteen years or so there have been many studies into the literacy practices of different people in a wide range of situations. These studies have used a variety of theoretical frameworks, and have led researchers to focus on the implications of literacy at both individual and social levels (for example, Scribner and Cole 1981; Walsh 1991; McKay 1993; Barton 1994; Street 1994).

The approach to literacy that I adopt draws particularly on the work of educationalists such as Auerbach (1995), Benesch (1993, 1996, 1999) and Pennycook (1989, 1997, 1999) who view literacy as a social construct,
and the development of academic literacy as a form of political practice. For example, Auerbach (1995) suggests that instructors’ pedagogical approaches and choices of teaching materials both influence, and are influenced by, the nature of the socioeconomic and political forces that exist beyond the classroom. To deny the political nature of language education, argues Pennycook (1989), can be equated with ‘articulating an ideological position in favour of the status quo’ (p 591).

The ideological positioning of EAP courses is an issue that Benesch (1993, 1996, 1999) and Pennycook (1994, 1997, 1999) explore in depth. If EAP programs adopt an approach which simply aims to provide students with the academic language skills and content-knowledge required to perform successfully in their chosen disciplines, then, as Benesch (1993) claims, this constitutes ‘an accommodationist ideology, an endorsement of traditional academic teaching and of current power relations in academia and in society’ (p 711). Both Pennycook and Benesch stress the need to adopt an approach to learning that encourages critical questioning, not only of all pedagogical approaches and materials, but also of the society of which instructors and students form a part.

If literacy in EAP contexts can be theorised as a practice through which social change can occur, how does such a theoretical position relate to the selection of EAP texts? I begin by briefly considering how indigenous and non-indigenous perceptions of colonisation in Australia have impacted on the language and identity of both the colonisers and the colonised.

**Perceptions of colonisation in Australia**

Contemporary Australia is still trying to come to grips with its colonial heritage and the ramifications of this colonisation for indigenous and non-indigenous Australians:

- Let no one say the past is dead.
- The past is all about us and within.
- Haunted by tribal memories, I know
- This little now, this accidental present
- Is not the all of me, whose long making
- Is so much of the past

(Noonuccal 1976: 94).

There are many written accounts in English documenting perceptions and experiences of colonisation in Australia. The ways in which authors both position themselves and are positioned in relation to the events that have taken place, is reflected in the specific linguistic choices they make in their writings. The opening chapter of Clark’s *A short history of Australia*, for instance, exemplifies the author’s attitude towards the colonisers and the colonised very clearly. He describes the indigenous peoples of Australia as
possessing a ‘primitive Stone Age culture’ which, according to Clark, was partially responsible for arresting their progression from barbarism to civilisation (Clark 1986: 9). Clark later revised his views. In later years, for example, he refers to the ‘wrongs the white people committed against (indigenous) people’ (1988: 2). However, the ideological foundations underpinning the 1986 text characterise the kinds of racist attitudes held by social Darwinists who believed in the ‘civilising’ effects of European culture and traditions on ‘primitive’ and inferior societies.

In her study analysing the style of English used to describe frontier conflicts between ‘whites’ and ‘blacks’, Christie comments on the differences between expressions used to portray the actions of ‘whites’ compared with ‘blacks’. She argues that the language used to present the actions of the squatters and border police often included terms such as ‘incidents, clearing operations, self-defence, punitive expeditions or police actions’ which contrast with expressions such as ‘attacks, incursions, atrocities, outrages, crimes, murders, or depredations’, which were commonly used to depict the activities of indigenous Australians (1993: 171).

For Christie, such euphemistic and sanitised expressions are unequivocal examples of the use of English as a language of oppression, ensuring the continued degradation of indigenous Australians by their white colonial masters. Moreover, claims Christie (1993: 171), there are no descriptions of border conflicts by indigenous Australians because in the 1800s they were not permitted to provide either written or spoken evidence in court (even in translation). This lack of the legal right to self-representation ensured that the silence and invisibility of indigenous Australians involved in such events was complete.

The need for indigenous peoples to ‘take action within and against’ (McCormick 1994: 49) the sociocultural conditions imposed by colonisation, and to represent themselves and tell their own histories is self-evident. However, the language(s) and textual forms in which these histories might be expressed raise a number of key questions for the selection of EAP course texts.

**EAP text selection and indigenous Australian writing in English**

What constitutes an ‘academic’ text? What kinds of criteria should be developed to answer this question? What types of texts are suitable for inclusion in our courses and why? What sorts of texts should be excluded and why? Are newspaper articles and letters appropriate? Is the language of poetry too difficult or too dense, especially for lower level proficiency classes, because of the often quirky, ‘non-standardised’ linguistic forms that are employed?

Attempts to discuss such questions with other EAP staff a number of years ago revealed a tendency to focus on text type. All our texts had to measure up to some sort of rigid notion of academic writing as impersonal, abounding with well-formulated thesis statements, and referring to the work
of others to support the authors’ central propositions. In short, texts selected as suitable readings for our courses were those that were written in the style of academic journal articles and books, because students needed to be exposed to texts that would model the kind of ‘academic’ writing we expected them to reproduce.

More recently, discussions of texts have moved in different directions. More emphasis is placed on questions such as: are we using primary or secondary sources? Are certain texts biased, and if so, why and how? Are we presenting a variety of viewpoints on particular topics? Do our texts contain ideas that are intellectually stimulating and that challenge our assumptions about the world around us? Are we promoting one particular view of the world? Finally, in relating to the theme of colonisation in Australia, are we excluding examples of the work of indigenous Australians from our reading packs because it is too difficult to find texts by indigenous writers that conform to our sense of the meaning of the term ‘academic’?6

Davies et al (1997: 32–4) argue that the traditionally oral nature of Australia’s indigenous languages impacts upon the written discourse in English of indigenous Australians in the form of features such as repetition and the use of direct speech. For speakers and writers of standard Australian English (SAE), the prevalence of such features may be interpreted as lacking in linearity and transparency of structure (Davies et al 1997: 35).

The implications of this perspective are potentially far-reaching. Narogin (1990), for instance, claims that it is precisely the adoption of this kind of attitude by some Australian publishers that has been instrumental in maintaining the silence and invisibility of indigenous Australian authors by preventing them from being published. European editors, he argues, promote the notion of a Western-based literary canon and pressurise indigenous Australian writers into writing in ways which dilute the indigenous nature of their work. Narogin emphasises the importance of realising that choosing to use a particular language or dialect constitutes a form of political action (1990: 92). He suggests that indigenous writers should adopt their own forms of writing rather than comply with ‘Western’ literary conventions, (1990: 92 and 153). Likewise, it is important to recognise that excluding the work of indigenous Australian writers from our course reading packs on the grounds that their writing is ‘non-academic’ constitutes an act of political dominance that cannot be justified.

My discussion so far has focused on presenting literacy as part of a broader sociopolitical context, and exploring the relationships between critical literacy and texts about colonialism in Australia that have been written on, and by, its indigenous peoples. I have outlined the kinds of questions that have been raised in EAP staff discussions on text selection at my own workplace, arguing that indigenous writing in English should not have to conform to conventions that stem from dominant ‘western’ values in order to be published. I have also highlighted the inherently political nature of text choice for reading materials in EAP courses.
I would now like to provide more detail about the EAP programs in which I have been involved which have used both indigenous and non-indigenous Australian writers’ texts to introduce students to different perspectives on colonial and post colonial Australian society.

**Using indigenous and non-indigenous Australian writers’ texts about colonial and post-colonial Australian society in the EAP classroom**

The EAP context in which I have been working in Australia over the past 13 years has been varied. I first introduced the writings of indigenous Australians such as Sally Morgan (1987) to ESL students in the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector as part of a theme-based ESL/EAP course accredited to Units 1 and 2 of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) in Australian Studies. Study of Morgan’s writings (along with authors from a range of cultural backgrounds) was in a course module entitled ‘Multicultural Australia’. Generally students engaged immediately with the autobiographical nature of Morgan’s writing and with her personal quest for a clearer sense of her own identity. The students were eager to relate her work to issues of equity for members of different cultural groups when discussing ‘multiculturalism’ both as policy and socioeconomic practice.

Most recently, I have used extracts from some of these texts as teaching materials, particularly in theme-based university EAP credit courses at the University of Melbourne in the Centre for Communication Skills and English as a Second Language (CCS & ESL). These credit courses were first developed in 1992 and were designed primarily for undergraduate students from non-English speaking backgrounds to assist them to develop the language and communication skills required to achieve their full academic potential during their university studies. In this paper, I refer to texts which relate particularly to the first of these courses, which was developed around themes and topics on Australian colonial and post-colonial society. Such content material was considered to be of interest to students from diverse language backgrounds and varied disciplines, since many would be recent arrivals in the country, eager to discover more about Australia’s history, institutions and current affairs.

Students who enrol in these credit subjects are required to read texts relating to the content of the lectures given by relevant faculty lecturers and attend tutorials with ESL/Communication Skills lecturers that focus on developing academic listening, speaking, reading and writing skills based on these content materials.

Where the teaching focus is on critical reading, students may be asked to compare values and opinions of different authors. For example, students might be asked to compare the following two statements:
'As other peoples made the transition from barbarism to civilisation, chance protected the Aborigines from such changes’ (Clark, 1986: 9). Governments and institutions need to see and to find ways of working with different knowledges. Part of this is beginning to see European-type knowledge as just one sort of knowledge among many (Yunupingu 1994: 119).

In-class discussions about such texts have resulted in student exploration of the connections between their classroom studies and the broader social and political issues facing contemporary Australian society. For instance, recently students have been keen to find out more about the current movement towards reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, and to reflect on the roles they themselves might play in this process. They have been motivated to inquire, for example, about meetings about land rights. One student was keen to write an article for an Indonesian journal on the theory and practice of multiculturalism that included an analysis of the position of indigenous Australians in contemporary Australian society.

**Concluding comments**

In this paper I have explored some connections between a view of literacy as a social construct and a form of political practice, and the selection of EAP course texts. Taking colonisation in Australia as an example of a course theme for discussion about text selection, I have attempted to highlight the interconnections between reading/writing and questions of language, identity and social transformation.

If debates about the inclusion or exclusion of certain texts in our EAP curricula are ‘a nexus for struggles over difference, identity and politics’ (Luke 1996: 317–318), then such struggles need to be exposed. It is only in this way that we can avoid perpetuating the exclusionary practices which deny writers of ‘non-academic’ or alternative text types, both the possibility of representing themselves in their preferred writing styles, and the means of reaching a large and diverse readership. It is precisely by engaging with struggles over difference, identity and politics that we can work towards achieving the ‘pluralisation of knowledge’ (Pennycook, 1997: 263). This, in turn, can lead to a greater understanding of the nature of the historical and cultural forces that shape the ways in which we make sense of our worlds. This understanding enables us to challenge the status quo. As Malcolm and Rochecouste argue in a seminal report about the difficulties experienced by indigenous Australians in engaging with academic discourse forms, ‘Cultural inclusiveness in higher education […] means achieving a greater level of self-awareness on the part of the educators’ (1998: 71).

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Alastair Pennycook and Neomy Storch for their assistance and encouragement with an earlier version of this paper.
Notes

1 See Brinton et al 1989, for discussion of this term.
3 While the focus of this paper is on developing a critical approach to reading it is important to point out that students are encouraged to adopt a critical approach in all aspects of their academic training.
4 For a much fuller treatment of critical approaches to TESOL refer to the special edition of TESOL Quarterly, 1999, 33, 3 (guest edited by Alastair Pennycook).
5 The date quoted here refers to the 6th edition of Clark’s A short history of Australia. The original text was written in 1963.
6 It is important to note here that I do not mean to imply that just because a text is written by an indigenous Australian it automatically warrants selection. Its relevance to the course theme; the particular viewpoint it expresses; how it relates to other selected texts; its length and lexical complexity would also be important factors to consider.
7 The Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) is granted to students in the state of Victoria at the end of their secondary school careers on successful completion of specified work requirements.
8 See Bullivant (1995) for a detailed discussion of the relationship between the development of multiculturalism as a policy and ideologies of linguistic and cultural empowerment.
9 Since working on this article I have developed a reading and writing activity based on texts referred to in this paper. Examples of students’ writing produced during these activities will be reported on in a future article that will discuss critical pedagogy and the teaching of ‘critical thinking’.
10 More recently CCS & ESL have been developing credit-bearing discipline-specific courses in Economics and Commerce, and Engineering and Architecture. The provision of these courses is directly the result of students’ desires to study the content of their chosen disciplines and the development of closer links between CCS & ESL and staff from different faculties. Feedback from both students and faculty staff indicates that these co-teaching approaches are proving to be highly valued.

References


Malcolm, I and J Rochecouste 1998. *Australian Aboriginal students in higher education*. Macquarie University, NSW: the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research and Edith Cowan University, Perth, WA: the Centre for Applied Language Research


