WHY SHOULD I DO ACTION RESEARCH?
WHAT TEACHERS SAY...

‘Action research leads to self-analysis, examining strengths and weaknesses – reaffirming commitment to my principles of teaching.’

‘I felt personal satisfaction once I collected the data and completed the write-up – a feeling that I had challenged myself.’
Teachers’ Voices 3: Teaching critical literacy

Editors: Anne Burns and Susan Hood
Contents

Introduction and acknowledgments iv

Section One: Researching critical literacy 1

1 Critical questions in action research Anne Burns 2

2 Critical literacy: What does it mean in theory and practice? Susan Hood 11

Section Two: Action research 21

1 Oral discussions in teaching critical literacy to beginners Loretta Eastman 22

2 Developing critical literacy with post-beginner learners Judy Perkins 29

3 Incorporating a critical literacy perspective in an intermediate reading class Helene Reade 39

4 A place for critical literacy in developing discussion skills Helen Fraser 47

5 Portable critical literacy strategies John Rice 55

6 Critical literacy for insights into Australian systems and culture Sally Richards 61
Introduction and acknowledgments

In Australia during most of the 1990s intense debate about literacy and the relationship of literacy to learning, language, and ESL development have occurred. One of the key theoretical ideas to emerge from this debate has been the notion of ‘critical literacy’. Critical literacy, which is more than just a functional ability to read and write, is concerned with having an understanding of the political and ideological nature of literacy and with being able to question how readers and writers are positioned socially by written texts. Many teachers are attracted to the concept that teaching and learning literacy involves critical analysis of text. However, it is still rare to find pedagogical models and practical suggestions for teaching critical literacy.

This volume highlights the action research of a collaborative group of six Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) teachers from the English Language and Literacy Services (ELLS) in South Australia. Their aim was to investigate, within their own context, approaches to teaching critical literacy to second language learners at different stages of learning. Their action research was undertaken through the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR) as a 1996 Special Project.

The research encompassed several questions related to the notion of critical literacy, to the implications of teaching critical literacy and to exploring critical pedagogical approaches. These were:

- What is meant by critical literacy?
- What kinds of cultural assumptions are embedded in the notion of critical literacy?
- Can critical literacy only be taught to advanced students?
- If not, how can critical literacy be developed with students at various levels?
- What kinds of teaching approaches and methods can be used to teach critical literacy?
- What kinds of teaching materials need to be identified or developed to teach critical literacy?

These questions informed the group’s initial reading and discussion when they first came together in the ten weeks before the research project began. The questions were then more deeply investigated during the six-month period of the action research when the issues were explored in relation to classroom practice.

The group worked collaboratively with two NCELTR researchers, Anne Burns and Susan Hood, with regular discussion workshops taking place during the research period. Between workshops participants had time for reflection, data collection, data analysis, trialing of different kinds of materials, teaching strategies and activities, and observations of the outcomes of these initiatives.

This volume, which is the product of that research project, continues the practice of the Teachers’ Voices series in ensuring that AMEP teachers’ research is disseminated to a wider audience. Feedback from previous volumes has assured us that ESL practitioners value accounts of ‘doable’ research that resonate with their own teaching experiences and which offer new insights into practical classroom applications. With this in mind, we have arranged the teacher accounts in this third volume somewhat differently from the previous two. These arrangements are aimed at distinguishing suggestions for classroom application from the research process itself.
Each account begins by framing the research with a brief description of the classroom context, the research questions and the processes of conducting the research. Next, the teaching activities developed by each teacher as part of the research are set out with the intention of sharing practical ideas with other teachers interested in this topic. Each account concludes with the writer's reflections on the research and suggestions for other teachers. At the end of each account professional development tasks that can be carried out individually, or preferably with other colleagues in a collaborative group, are suggested. In these tasks ideas are highlighted for reflection and discussion and suggestions are given for mini-research activities in the classroom.

The teachers' accounts are prefaced by papers from each of the research coordinators. The first, by Anne Burns, continues the discussion on the nature and processes of action research which was begun in the previous two volumes, while the paper by Susan Hood discusses the central topic of the project – critical literacy.

The NCELTR project in South Australia ELLS was part of a national project exploring the integration of collaborative action research approaches into AMEP professional development programs. As in other states, the ELLS research was inspired and enlivened by the great – and continuing – enthusiasm for collaborative processes of classroom investigation of all the teachers who participated. Judy Perkins provided the original impetus for the project through her personal fascination with the notion of critical literacy and its pedagogical implications. It was Judy who initially brought the group together and who has continued to generate great interest in the topic amongst others in her teaching centre. She willingly assumed extra responsibilities – coordinating the research group, arranging meetings and conducting her own classroom research as well as taking on the extra task of observing and monitoring the conditions that supported the research in her own teaching organisation.

Loretta Eastman joined Judy in investigating possibly one of the most challenging questions – How can critical literacy approaches be taught at beginning ESL levels? Helene Reade pursued her interest in teaching critical reading at intermediate level, while Helen Fraser and John Rice complemented each other's work during their shared teaching of an English for Tertiary Studies class. Sally Richards explored critical literacy from a cultural perspective within a teaching module for advanced learners, called Australian Systems and Culture.

We would like to thank these teachers most sincerely, as well as colleagues from NCELTR – particularly Geoff Brindley and Catherine du Peloux Menagé, who again have shown commitment to the philosophy of collaborative action research which is embodied in this series. Helen Joyce's assistance in providing editorial support in the final stages is greatly valued.

We cannot conclude without mentioning our appreciation for the funding provided by the AMEP Section of the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs whose support of the NCELTR Special Project initiatives enabled us to conduct the research in the first place.

Anne Burns and Susan Hood
Project coordinators
SECTION ONE
Researching critical literacy

1  Critical questions in action research
   Anne Burns

2  Critical literacy: What does it mean in theory and practice?
   Susan Hood
1 Critical questions in action research

Anne Burns

Introduction

Although many teachers are now becoming more familiar with the term ‘action research’, they have not necessarily had direct experience of engaging in collaborative action research as part of their professional development. As a consequence many teachers begin action research without a complete understanding of the process. Teachers with whom I have worked have frequently suggested that you have to experience action research in order to understand what it is really about. As one teacher commented: ‘It is in the doing that it starts to make sense and become clear’. This volume attempts to bridge the gap between an ‘academic’ understanding of the principles of action research and hands-on experience by relating the experiences of six teachers in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) from the South Australian English Language and Literacy Services (ELLS) who were involved in an NCELTR 1996 Special Project.

During the course of the South Australian project, as in previous NCELTR projects, decisions had to be made at various points in the process and many of the research-related questions that emerged are likely to confront other teachers who conduct research in their own classrooms. As they arose, these questions were discussed with other colleagues and with the research coordinators in the collaborative group meetings which were an integral part of the project. This paper is devoted to setting out some of these major questions and to suggesting responses to them. The responses are based on experiences in this and other NCELTR projects and also draw on the literature on action research. Hopefully, they will provide pointers for readers interested in trying out action research in their own classrooms.

Key questions in action research

It is not my intention, in this chapter, to outline the theoretical steps and processes in conducting action research. This has been done in previous volumes of Teachers’ Voices (see Burns and Hood 1995; Burns and Hood 1997) and in other publications such as Kemmis and McTaggart 1988, Elliott 1991, Nunan 1990, and Burns 1994. Suffice it to say that action research is a form of systematic, naturalistic enquiry conducted within teachers’ own classrooms with the objective of monitoring classroom practice, reflecting on this practice and bringing about any necessary changes highlighted by this process. Kemmis and Grundy (1981, cited in Burns 1994) define action research as:

A family of activities in curriculum development, professional development, school improvement programmes, and systems planning and policy development. These activities have in common the identification of strategies of planned action which are implemented and then systematically submitted to observation, reflection and change. Participants in the action being considered are integrally involved in all these activities.
This very brief definition of action research serves to contextualise the questions that follow.

**Why should I do action research?**

Support for practitioner action research is growing in the professional ESL literature. The reasons for this are varied. Language teaching is becoming increasingly professionalised and there is a growing recognition amongst many language teachers of the inter-relationships between theory and research and classroom practice. Shifts in language pedagogy towards more communicative models of language teaching have increasingly required teachers to become curriculum developers, a role which has also served to heighten teachers’ interest in classroom research. Within teacher education there has been a comparable movement towards less deductive and more reflective and investigative approaches to professional development. This shift has come with the growing realisation that ‘there is no best method’ (Prabhu 1990) in language teaching and that teaching and learning inevitably depend on many complex and interrelated factors which arise from the local teaching context.

Teachers are, therefore, becoming increasingly interested in research which has relevance and application to their own classrooms. Action research offers a way of developing skills for conducting classroom research as well as a way of testing out proposals for teaching that come out of studies undertaken through experimental research. Action research also offers teachers a means of discovering new and improved practical strategies or solutions to classroom dilemmas through more systematic observation than is possible through intuitive ways of thinking.

AMEP teachers who have been involved in action research have consistently stressed the professional benefits. The following comments illustrate what teachers see as the major benefits of the process:

**Professional development**

[Action research leads to] self-analysis, examining strengths and weaknesses – reaffirming commitment to my principles of teaching.

**Reflection on practice**

The project gave me the opportunity to have some thinking time and to reflect on my course design practice.

**Collaboration and learning from peers**

It gave me an opportunity to meet with others outside the centre – to listen to their ideas and their methods for solving problems which seem to be common to all.

**Professional networking**

I found it useful to increase my professional network within Victoria.

**Development of research skills**

I felt a degree of personal satisfaction once I collected the data and completed the write up – a feeling that I had challenged myself.

**Personal growth**

It was fun! When you’re feeling pretty jaded by college and state bureaucracy, it’s nice to stretch the brain a bit.

**Teacher-researcher partnerships**

Positive feedback through discussions with Sue Hood.
How do I develop a research focus?

Teachers often find that identifying questions or a focus for their research is one of the most difficult aspects of the process, especially in the early stages. Even when the general theme or issue for the research has already been identified through group discussion, it can still be difficult to arrive at a more precise, individual focus. However, it is not necessary to have formulated a well developed question or hypothesis in order to begin. Kemmis and McTaggart (1981:18) suggest that all that is needed is ‘a general idea’, for example wanting to try out a new teaching strategy or recognising a gap between existing practice and teaching aspirations. Brindley (1991) reports that teachers may arrive at researchable questions by:

- identifying issues they had been concerned about for some time;
- reflecting on a ‘critical incident’ in the classroom, which sparks off a wish to find out more about a particular issue;
- wanting to test out implicitly-held theories or instinctive understandings of practice.

Other suggestions for identifying a focus for the research, which were gleaned from experience in NCELTR projects, include:

- Do some professional reading in the general area in order to develop your ideas.
- Discuss your ideas with other teachers in the research group and get their input.
- Talk to other teachers at your centre who may not be involved in the research and get their ideas.
- Consult your learners and get their views on the general research area.
- Observe and document your classroom in an open-ended way without any preconceived ideas and notice what emerges.
- Consider issues that may be more broadly related to new policy directions, curriculum documents or assessment procedures.
- Record ideas that occur in the classroom in a notebook and use them to reflect on possible questions for research.

It is also useful to be aware of the cyclical and exploratory nature of action research. It can appear, especially at the beginning of the process, that the research is confused or ‘going nowhere’. However, AMEP teachers have frequently commented on the fact that the questions they began with were not necessarily those that eventually became the most important aspects of the research. Action research is characterised by a spiralling and expanding process of uncovering features of your classroom which only become obvious after a period of systematic observation.

What kinds of questions should I ask?

The kinds of questions that are posed in action research will be different from those generated by empirical studies in the experimental tradition. Experimental or ‘basic’ research aims to test hypotheses which are based on theoretical concepts, to discover cause and effect relationships and to generalise the research beyond the research sample. On the other hand, action research questions begin from the immediate and concrete concerns of the classroom and have a local and practical focus. They are also investigated in real classroom settings rather than in experimental contexts set up specifically for the research. Essentially, action research questions involve the teacher in recognising a ‘reality gap’. They derive from some kind of evaluation of the current situation, an identification of issues within this situation that may be seen as needing change or refinement, and a statement of what can be acted upon in relation to these issues.

1 I AM GRATEFUL TO GILLIAN WIGGLESWORTH FOR THIS IDEA.
Several teachers who have participated in NCELTR projects have noted that their research benefited from being as specifically focused as possible. It was less manageable when they attempted to address too many different issues at the same time or when the research question or focus was too broad. Hopkins (1993: 63–64) suggests a number of useful guidelines for ensuring the viability of research questions. These are summarised below.

• Do not tackle issues you cannot do anything about. (For example, it may be impossible to do anything in the short or medium term to alter the curriculum framework or coursebook you are working with.)
• Take on small-scale and relatively limited topics. (A small scale project completed in a relatively short period is reinforcing and encouraging.)
• Choose a topic that is important to you or your students or one that you have to be involved with anyway in the course of your normal school activities.
• As far as possible try to work collaboratively on the focus of your classroom research. This increases professional support and reduces teacher isolation.
• Make connections between your classroom research work and the school or centre’s development plan priorities or aims.

In this volume the individual accounts of teachers’ research include the research question that guided their work. These questions provide examples of the kinds of questions that can be generated from a particular research focus area.

What methods should I use to collect data?
Quantitative methods of data collection are not necessarily precluded from action research, but most teachers are not in a position to set up the kinds of control and experimental procedures in the classroom that are characteristic of quantitative approaches. Generally in action research, therefore, qualitative, or naturalistic, techniques are widely employed. The range of methods for data collection commonly used in qualitative research can be classified into two broad categories: observational and non-observational. The examples below do not include all possible techniques that can be used in action research, but do offer a range of tools that AMEP teachers have found feasible.

Observational methods
Observational methods involve close documentation of the behaviours and interactions that occur in the classroom. Techniques for gaining this kind of information include:

• field notes: observation notes made during or after a class (for example, on the effectiveness of whole group or paired tasks, use of classroom materials, behaviour of different groups of students or individuals);
• diaries/journals: more personal responses to classroom events, including evaluations or reactions and reflective comments (student diaries are also an invaluable source of data);
• ‘jottings’: a stream-of-consciousness record of classroom events or happenings, which map what is occurring as an aid to memory;
• video and audio-recordings: verbatim records of classroom interactions and behaviours;
• transcripts: written representations of classroom interactions taken from video or audio-recordings;
• photographs/diagrams: visual records that re-create classroom layout, the physical context and students’ location in the classroom.
Non-observational techniques

Non-observational techniques involve using tools for gathering self-report data which are reflections of people's perspectives, beliefs or attitudes. The following have been used by teachers in the AMEP:

• questionnaires: sets of closed, ranked option or open-ended written questions used in non face-to-face situations to gather responses to research issues;
• interviews: face-to-face, structured, semi-structured or unstructured interactions between researcher and individual student which generate or gather data about the research issue (for example, students’ opinions or reactions to new teaching techniques, reflections on their own progress and so on);
• discussions: face-to-face, open-ended interactions with groups or sub-groups of students on issues related to the research topic;
• life/career history: an account of students’ previous life and learning experiences told from the perspective of the individuals involved and built up in increasing detail over a period of time;
• letters: personal accounts of learning experiences related to the research issue written from current to future students;
• written texts: samples of students’ work collected in a portfolio or over a series of drafts to trace progress/responses to tasks.

Undeniably, conducting research in one’s own classroom introduces an additional dimension to the many tasks teachers are already required to undertake. When selecting techniques for classroom research, therefore, it is worth bearing in mind some practical guidelines which may help to create a more manageable balance between the demands of research and teaching:

• Choose techniques that are suited to the purpose of your research.
• As far as possible integrate your research into activities that would normally be carried out in the classroom.
• Select data-gathering tools that you feel comfortable with.
• Choose techniques that seem feasible within the time and resources you have available.
• If possible, collaborate with other teachers – or team-teach – in order to collect data, or share data-collection tools.
• Choose techniques that take into account the likely audiences for your research (such as other teachers, professional colleagues, students).

How do I make sense of the data I’ve collected?

In many respects, procedures for analysing action research in particular, and qualitative data in general, are still developing. Unlike quantitative and experimental research which has a much longer and better established tradition, methods for qualitative data analysis are much less clearly articulated.

An essential characteristic of action research is that it is contextually based. Of its very nature, it relies on researchers who are intimately involved in the actual context tentatively and gradually forming hypotheses and questioning their findings. Making sense of action research data becomes in itself part of the process of reflection. This means thinking, not only about the problematic issues that arise in the classroom, but also about what happens when new teaching strategies, materials or classroom behaviours are put into action. Analysing action research data becomes, therefore, a continuing process of description and interpretation by the participants. This is done partly by trying out new strategies or plans of action and partly by stepping back and
attempting to view taken-for-granted or problematic issues in a more critical and objective light by observing them systematically.

Although the process of analysing data collected qualitatively is fluid and flexible in the ways discussed above, it is still valuable to propose a tentative framework for data analysis, as long as it is remembered that analysis is more likely to permeate the whole cycle of enquiry rather than to come at a discrete point in the research process. The framework outlined in Figure 1 is derived from AMEP experiences as well as more generally from processes of analysis outlined in the literature for qualitative research.

![Figure 1: The process of analysing data](image)

**How do I make sure my research is valid and reliable?**

Action research is sometimes open to the criticism that it is less rigorous than other forms of research – and questions even arise about whether it is really research at all. This may be because action research reports do not always identify the procedures for analysing the data. If action research is to be considered a viable form of research, action researchers need to attend to two central issues: reliability and validity. These terms are glossed by Nunan (1992:17) as follows:
In the action research situation, which is concerned with a unique classroom setting, the internal reliability of the interpretations that are made is a key consideration because it is in light of these interpretations that changes are decided. Action research becomes internally valid if the changes that are made can be shown to be soundly based on the analysis of the research data.

Achievement of external reliability, however, is improbable because the specifics of the classroom situation and the individual teacher's perceptions of the change processes required are an integral part of the research. An independent researcher wanting to replicate the research is likely to find difficulty in setting up an identical classroom situation.

The issue of external validity is also problematic. The idea of generalising to a wider population is in conflict with the philosophy of the local nature of action research, although it is certainly the case that other teachers may be able to gain fresh insights into their own practices through reading action research accounts.

How, then, can a teacher be confident that the interpretation of the data and the changes or strategies being implemented are internally valid and reliable? One safeguard which has been widely used in AMEP projects is the implementation of a procedure known as triangulation. This entails using more than one method of data collection to support a particular interpretation; for example, the comparison of the points of view emerging from one's own journal observations or audio-recordings with comments made by the students on the same issue in order to see whether there is agreement. Another way to ensure internal validity and reliability is to conduct member checks. This involves displaying the data to co-researchers in a collaborative discussion to confirm whether they would reach the same interpretation. A third technique is to look for data that point to rival interpretations; that is, to scan the data for evidence of any other patterns or regularities that would require a different explanation of what is occurring (see Hopkins 1993 and Burns 1994 for an extensive discussion of these techniques).

**What should I tell my students?**

An issue that has been of concern to teachers in AMEP projects is whether to tell their students about their research and if so, what to tell them. This touches on ethical issues which are a part of any research. Useful and extensive principles of procedure for ethics in action research are listed in Kemmis and McTaggart (1988:106–8), Hitchcock and Hughes (1995:51–2) and McKernan (1996:241–2). These authors all stress the importance of ensuring that students and other key participants are kept informed about the research, their permission to be involved is obtained, and their anonymity is respected when the research comes to be reported.
In second language learning contexts, explaining the research can be difficult when students’ proficiency levels are not high. There are a number of strategies that have been used by teachers to inform AMEP students about the research and to gain their consent:

• explaining the research in language appropriate to the level of the students and encouraging the students to ask questions about it;
• arranging for bilingual information or explanations through aides or other more advanced students;
• explaining the research to family members with higher levels of English.

In most cases AMEP teachers have found that students are eager to be involved and often feel ‘special’ to have been chosen. Dilemmas have occasionally arisen for AMEP teachers when they have been concerned about how the research might affect already sensitive classroom dynamics or when they have felt that informing the students would alter the nature of the data they wished to collect. In these more unusual situations, teachers have used the strategy of informing their students on completion of the research, giving their reasons for carrying out the research and asking their students’ permission to report on the research.

AMEP teachers have found that it is very unusual for anyone to refuse to participate in their research. However, in cases where individual students or other colleagues do state that they would prefer not to be involved, it is important that data about these individuals are not included in any final reporting. Research reports should, in any case, keep the identities of research participants confidential and use pseudonyms when referring to individuals.

What should I do when I’ve finished the research?

The insights generated by action research are generally of great interest to other teachers. Action research findings are relevant and practical as they reflect the immediacy and reality of the classroom situation. They also provide practising teachers with a basis for building and discussing personal theories of teaching and learning that come out of shared experiences.

There are various ways that action research can be reported. In the AMEP projects, writing a report for the *Teachers’ Voices* series has been a major way to disseminate information to other action researchers. According to many of the teachers who have participated, the writing process is itself a part of the reflective cycle of research and it enables them to synthesise and present their data and interpretations more rigorously and systematically than they might have otherwise done. Other ways in which teachers have reported their research include:

• presenting information at staff meetings and professional development days;
• giving oral presentations or poster sessions at professional association seminars and conferences;
• making a video for presentation to other teachers;
• writing a paper for a journal or newsletter;
• being part of a teacher panel on classroom research;
• mentoring other teachers conducting action research;
• talking informally to interested colleagues about their research and encouraging them to participate.

Informing others of the completed research is an important means of professional development as well as a culmination of all the efforts that have been put into the research process. It also ensures that the research does not remain local and personal but is disseminated for perusal by the wider community of ESL professionals.
Concluding remarks

In this paper I have tried to address a number of critical moments in the research process from an ‘insider’ perspective. These questions have consistently been raised by AMEP teachers, and I believe they have relevance for anyone interested in doing action research. I hope that the basic guidelines suggested here will enable other teachers to build on our experiences and to swell the numbers of those who are attracted to the idea of research in language education as well as research on language education.

References


Critical literacy: What does it mean in theory and practice?

Susan Hood

Introduction

Critical literacy, or more generally critical language awareness, is a concept which has been adopted relatively recently in second language teaching in Australia. This current interest in critical approaches is consistent with the concerns of many English as a second language (ESL) practitioners for social justice and equity of access for their students. It also reflects a sensitivity to issues of cross-cultural communication and to the potential for cultural values to be imposed through the process of teaching a second language.

This chapter explores the notion of critical literacy from a number of perspectives. In the first instance there is an identification of the theoretical frameworks that have given rise to the notion of critical pedagogy and of the different ways it is being interpreted. This is followed by a consideration of how a critical orientation relates to other dominant approaches to teaching reading and a review of the reading practices advocated within the literature on critical pedagogy.

What is a critical approach?

Critical practice in language and literacy pedagogy implies a recognition that discourse is socially constructed, that it both reflects and helps to construct relationships of power by naturalising and privileging certain ideological positions. If we simply assume that discourse is neutral or innocent, we inevitably give uncritical support to the ideological status quo of the text and this, in itself, is a political position (Usher, Bryant and Johnston 1997).

A critical approach to language pedagogy involves denaturalising language in order to challenge what we take as common sense readings, to identify the ideological positions of texts and to create opportunities for alternative reader viewpoints. With particular reference to the teaching of English, Gee (1992:67) argues that the teacher must:

accept her role as one who socialises students into a world view that, given its power here and abroad, must be viewed critically, comparatively and with a constant sense of the possibilities for change. Like it or not, the English teacher stands at the very heart of the most crucial educational, cultural and political issues of our time.

There are some differences in interpretation amongst those who advocate a critical approach to literacy. For example, while many practitioners within the fields of adult literacy and adult ESL share a common concern for social justice and equity and a recognition of the social construction of meanings, there are significant differences between the two fields in the extent to which critical literacy is seen as a linguistic issue. This is not surprising given the different histories of the sectors and the dominant discourses which operate within them.
The field of adult literacy has developed largely from a voluntary and non-institutionally based provision (McConnell 1992) in which progressive approaches have been strongly supported. In much of the literature from this sector, links are made between critical literacy and progressive ideologies and practices within a liberal humanist tradition. The dominant orientation within the adult literacy field is to see literacy as empowerment. McConnell (1992:123) describes this view as:

a shift away from the utilitarian, product oriented goals of education towards the more humanist goals of the development of self-directing, lifelong learners in societies that are characterised by equity of access and opportunity in education and social justice.

While arguing that ‘critical awareness and critical consciousness are the essential features of learning’, McConnell sees these as a consequence of a developing individual psychological state. ‘The growth of self-esteem is, I believe, fundamental to the process of empowerment’ (1992:124).

The critical literacy teaching and learning practices which develop from this adult literacy orientation, focus predominantly on relationships of power in learning contexts, the role of the learner as decision maker and the valuing of multiple points of view. McConnell (1992:132) suggests that ‘the relations between the teacher and the learner are important aspects of the conditions of empowerment through literacy’. Such relationships should be evidenced by a learner-centred approach in teaching programs where there is a ‘real use of students’ own language for real purposes’ (1992:133).

Others in the field of adult literacy (Wickert 1991; Lee and Wickert 1994) suggest that this dominant liberal progressive discourse serves to contain rather than empower adults with reading and writing difficulties. They also suggest that it denies a role for the teacher as a knower within the educational process. Wickert (1991) argues for closer attention to language, as it is in language that ideological assumptions are embedded and through language that power is exercised. She suggests that critical linguistics (for example the work of Kress) and critical discourse analysis (as described by Fairclough 1992) provide a theoretical framework for probing the assumptions, values and beliefs of the discourses with which teachers and students engage.

In contrast to the field of adult literacy, the field of adult ESL in Australia has a strong tradition of institutionally based provision and a professionally trained and supported workforce (Hammond and Wickert 1993; Shore et al 1993). Teachers in this field have seen their role, regardless of their orientation to practice, as having something to do with language. While progressive ideologies contributed to deskilling teachers with respect to knowledge about language, ESL teachers nevertheless persisted, with the assistance of published teaching materials, and often at the insistence of their students, to attend to language as system. However, until fairly recently, this orientation to language has been from a predominantly structural and asocial model of language.

ESL practices in critical literacy have been oriented towards an explicit exploration of how language works to construct social and cultural meanings and relationships of power. This orientation has been supported by a focus on teaching language as system, by a growing interest in the theoretical framework of functional linguistics (Halliday 1985) and, more recently, by insights from social theory (Clark 1995; Wallace 1996; Wignell 1996; Hood, Solomon and Burns 1996).

This post-progressive social orientation to language promotes an explicit pedagogy where the rules of the game and the forms of language which the society rewards do not
remain invisible, where the students are not left to infer or discover these rules and forms of language through immersion in meaningful activities. An implicit pedagogy is simply seen as privileging those for whom the rules and forms of language are already part and parcel of their social practices (Gee 1996). This strongly linguistic perspective argues not simply for a consideration of discourse but for the explication of how genres have evolved to fulfil cultural and social purposes, and how the systems of lexico-grammar express and construct meanings, social relationships and ideological values.

The issue of the place of language in a critical literacy program seems to be a key dividing issue between language and literacy practitioners. Halliday (1996:340) suggests that:

> while the 'literacy debate' has moved on to higher, more rarefied levels, it tends to be forgotten that reading and writing are activities constructed in language.

Viewing literacy from a linguistic perspective means two things (Halliday 1996:339):

1. treating literacy as something that has to do with language; and
2. using the conceptual framework of linguistics – the theoretical study of language – as a way of understanding it.

Halliday (1996:357) does not use the term critical literacy but refers instead to the concept of literacy as informed defence. He argues for an understanding of language and teaching about language on the following grounds:

> To be literate is not only to participate in the discourse of an information society, it is also to resist it, to defend oneself and others – against the anti-semantic, anti-democratic ‘technologizing’ of that discourse. And here more than ever one needs to understand how language works, how the grammar (in its systematic sense of lexico-grammar) interacts with the technology to achieve these effects. If you hope to engage successfully in the discursive contest, you have first to learn how to engage with the discourse.

Wignell (1996) explains this explicit linguistic approach to critical literacy as a pedagogy which explores both literacy and critique simultaneously. He sees it as a pedagogy which provides insights into the literate practices of society in order, not to assimilate students to them, but to put students in a position to challenge them.

Some have argued against explicit teaching about language, especially in the teaching of the genres of power. McConnell (1992:127) claims that it is too easily assimilationist, that it teaches people ‘to fit in with the literacy of the dominant culture, even if this means denying their own cultural heritage and identity’.

Poynton (1993) offers a critique of systemic functional linguistics from a feminist post-structuralist position. She acknowledges the necessity for close attention to language and grammar and for a metalanguage. However, she cautions against an approach which is too linguistic, that is structural, and which takes insufficient account of social theory. She argues that this can easily give rise to a belief in the singularity of the text and an assumption that the meaning is in the text, with virtually nothing to say about reception. In this way singular readings are naturalised as the meaning of the text. She sees this essentially as a theoretical concern which stems from separating the experiential and interpersonal metafunctions of language and the register categories of field and tenor. This separation implies that what is going on
experientially is transparent. Poynton (1993:14–15) argues, however, that:

if one is to really explore the mechanisms for constructing representations and negotiating social relations (ie field and tenor), then one has to look to the interactions of metafunctional components rather than their separation and distinctness.

She argues for a framework for analysis which draws on both a functional model of language and a critical theory.

The papers in this volume present the voices of teachers who have grappled with these issues in their own teaching practices. For the most part the teachers take a more linguistically oriented approach to teaching critical literacy, being concerned to develop a metalanguage and an understanding of the role of grammatical choices in the representation of meanings.

What is a critical approach to reading and how does it relate to other dominant approaches?

In teaching critical reading we need to consider both the nature of the text and the nature of the reading process. Our attention in teaching a second language may be focused on control of particular linguistic systems, on instrumental functions of language or on creative expression. However, we need to understand that, according to critical theory, the texts which we import into the classroom or generate for pedagogical purposes will position the reader ideologically and construct relationships of power.

Applied linguists and social theorists have debated the question of the ideological loading of texts as a consideration in the teaching of critical literacy. Widdowson (in Wallace 1996:338) argues that there are some texts which do not invite a critical reading (eg a fire drill) while other texts are strongly opinionated or ideologically loaded. Others (Gee 1992; Kress 1993) argue that all texts are ideological encodings. For example, Gee (1992) cites the apparently innocuous and innocent example of a set of instructions on an aspirin packet and unpacks the ideological positioning of the text. Wallace (1996:339) concludes that

there is a case for saying that texts are not equally invested with power relations (and do not) … reveal or mask their ideological provenance to the same degree.

Several writers (eg Freebody, Luke and Gilbert 1991) propose the selection and presentation of multiple texts on a topic which juxtapose different positions and hence make otherwise hidden meanings more apparent.

As you will see in the accounts of action research which follow in this volume, this question of which texts to use in a critical reading class is one which concerned the teachers. More ideologically loaded texts may assist students to take on a critical reading stance but the texts which are often chosen for this purpose can present too great a challenge to students at lower levels of reading proficiency. However, if we consider that there are questions to be asked about the social and cultural practices associated with all texts, we can begin to incorporate a critical perspective into our work with students at any level. A number of the teachers deliberately explored the teaching of critical literacy with beginner level learners while others explored the idea of using multiple texts presenting contesting views around an issue or topic as a way
into a critical awareness of texts. Some teachers encouraged their students to locate their own texts.

**How has the construct of reading shifted?**

In many ways the shifts in literacy teaching practices which have characterised the past decade have laid the groundwork for a more critical pedagogy. Psycholinguistic approaches which dominated reading pedagogy in the 1980s (Goodman 1967; Smith 1978; Carrel, Devine and Eskey 1988) moved away from a view of comprehension as simply a passive decoding of the meanings which had been encoded by the writer. These approaches gave prominence to the role of the reader in constructing meanings through interaction with the text. Reading came to be seen as an active process in which the reader is required to activate a schemata of existing knowledge and experience in order to make sense of a text. Such a view constructs reading as essentially an interpretative process in which different readings are possible given the varying experiences and schemas of individual readers. However, reading is seen as essentially an individualistic, cognitive psychological process, with an underlying assumption of the neutrality of texts. While they emphasise the interpretation of meaning, psycholinguistic approaches assume it is the reader's responsibility to find the meaning in the text, not to challenge it.


> If some template for the incoming information needs to be already available to the reader before that information can be bound into the schema or be used to aggregate, refine, or restructure that schema, then the question arises of how the template was acquired in the first place.

Schema theories propose that the reader makes sense of a text by bringing to the reading of the text relevant background knowledge which is seen as an individual cognitive resource, not a cultural resource. This view does not present a problem if we assume that the meaning in texts is neutral and transparent. However, if a text is seen to covertly encode and naturalise particular sets of values and beliefs, then making sense of the text becomes problematic. It is not enough to suggest that the reader needs to have the appropriate background knowledge and to understand the writer's meaning. Clark (1995) argues that within a psycholinguistic approach the assumption is that there is only one set of appropriate schemata for this culture, and therefore there is no real room for alternative competing views of what is appropriate.

Texts covertly encourage the reader to 'reconstruct and reciprocate the writer's apparent position' (Freebody, Luke and Gilbert 1991:441) by taking on a position or stance which allows them to make sense of the information presented. As they note:

> It is in the reader's self-positioning through the deployment of her or his 'sense-making procedures' that the central ideological work of school reading is done.

Teachers experienced with a psycholinguistic approach are accustomed to considering the relationship of texts to students’ experiences and knowledge and this can provide a useful point of departure in moving towards a critical approach. However, a critical approach to reading is premised on an understanding of the cultural and social, rather
than psychological, construction of knowledge. It recognises the covert encodings in texts and the consequent positioning of readers with respect to values, beliefs and ideological stances.

More recently the significant influence of systemic functional linguistics (Halliday) and genre theory (Martin) in ESL pedagogy has provided teachers with new insights into how meanings are constructed in language. These theoretical perspectives enable teachers to go beyond a superficial individualistic response to texts and allow for a more thorough investigation of issues of power and positioning. This has translated into classroom practices in which teachers are engaged in explicitly deconstructing texts with students, frequently making comparisons between texts, explaining their social purposes and connecting the language of texts and reading strategies to social contexts of use.

It has been suggested that, in taking on this theoretical linguistic knowledge, there has been an overemphasis, in some teaching contexts, on the text as product (Fairclough 1992; Kress 1993; Watkins 1996) and a neglect of the processes of producing and interpreting texts. However, there is no doubt that having some explicit understanding of how language works provides a valuable resource for reading texts critically, and for grounding abstract theory in material practice.

Some accounts of practice which offer explicit guidance for incorporating a critical perspective into teaching are beginning to appear in the ESL literature. Hood, Solomon and Burns (1996), drawing on the systemic functional model of language, provide teachers with an analytical framework for the exploration of texts and suggestions for classroom activities. Wallace (1996) and Clark (1995) use sets of framing questions and guidelines for analysis with tertiary level students to frame a critical discussion of texts. For example, Wallace (1996) provides the following set of questions (adapted from Kress 1989), as a starting point for the critical analysis of texts:

1. Why has this text been written?
2. What is the text about?
3. To whom is this text addressed?
4. How is this topic written about?
5. What other ways of writing about the topic are there?

The questions are intended to guide students gradually to a greater depth of analysis. A sample task invites students to ‘judge whether they thought that they were part of the model readership of the text and on what basis they formed their conclusion’ (Wallace 1996: 346). Students are also gradually introduced to closer analysis using a Hallidayan framework.

For the teachers in the action research project these, and similar models and guidelines, provided a valuable starting point for adapting and developing their own framing questions and tasks. For some of the teachers the development of an effective ‘portable’ set of practices for approaching texts become the focus of their inquiry.

Does a critical literacy approach allow students to resist resisting?

Student resistance to critical reading may be an issue when students come from cultural traditions where resisting either the text or the teacher is considered highly inappropriate (Wallace 1996:341). Atkinson (1997) cautions against the uncritical adoption of a culturally based concept for students whose cultural experiences are perhaps diametrically opposed to the modes of thought and education endorsed by a critical approach.
Wallace (1996) suggests that we look at the issue of submissive or critical readings not as a polarised divide, but rather as a layered and complex set of responses where different kinds of responses can co-exist for the one reader. In other words it is not a question of students finding the right critical reading of a text but of students seeing the potential for their own multiple readings of the text.

In discussing the broader context of postmodern practices in adult education, Usher, Bryant and Johnston (1997:120) suggest that the different readings of a text by students and teachers can become the basis for critical awareness. They write that this as an:

attempt to triangulate experience through an investigation of personal meanings alongside the meanings of engaged others and the presence and influence of different contexts and different discourses.

This provides another angle on presenting contesting voices to students. Usher et al (1997:116) caution that:

the critical easily becomes the norm, a final truth which is just as heavy in its regulation as any openly oppressive discourse – as, for example, in the worst excesses of political correctness. Indeed in some ways this regulation may be even more difficult to resist, speaking as it does in the name of empowerment and transformation. As Gore (1993) argues, critical pedagogy, whilst rhetorically opposing ‘regimes of truth’, can itself easily become one.

**Conclusion**

The teachers whose research is documented in this volume discuss many of the questions which have been raised in this chapter. These questions include:

- How does a critically literate approach relate to previous practices in teaching reading and to the teaching of other language skills?
- What practices are usefully retained?
- When and how can a critical approach to reading be integrated with other language related work in the classroom?
- To what extent are any interpretations of texts by individual students legitimate responses?
- How does the teacher deal with the mismatch between the cultural knowledge assumed in the text and that which the student brings to the reading?
- How can the teacher avoid their own critical reading becoming the right reading?
- Are students allowed to ‘resist resistance’ (Wallace 1996)?

The teachers whose voices are heard in this collection of papers approach these questions with an understanding of the theoretical debates but explore them in the practical and complex context of the classroom. They deal with the theory at the level of practice and from this perspective add to our overall understanding of what it means to adopt a critical approach in the ESL classroom.
References


SECTION TWO

Action research

1 Oral discussions in teaching critical literacy to beginners
   Loretta Eastman

2 Developing critical literacy with post-beginner learners
   Judy Perkins

3 Incorporating a critical literacy perspective in an intermediate reading class
   Helene Reade

4 A place for critical literacy in developing discussion skills
   Helen Fraser

5 Portable critical literacy strategies
   John Rice

6 Critical literacy for insights into Australian systems and culture
   Sally Richards
1 Oral discussions in teaching critical literacy to beginners

Loretta Eastman

Framing the research

The teaching context

My class was a fairly fast-paced group of 15 beginner learners. For most this was their first or second term of learning English in Australia. The course was held at a regional centre and I taught the class for 11 of its 15 hours per week over a 10 week term. The profile of the group was:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality:</th>
<th>5 Bosnian, 5 Vietnamese, 2 Chinese, 1 Cambodian, 1 Moroccan and 1 Iranian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational level:</td>
<td>literate in Roman script</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex:</td>
<td>7 male and 8 female students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The research in brief

The focus question for my research was: How can you prepare people to become critically literate through oral activities at low levels?

After discussing the difficulties and limitations involved in teaching critical literacy to learners with low level English proficiency, our project group agreed that approaching it through oracy development was appropriate with beginner learners. I adopted the following research methods for this study:

- I told the class about the research project and the oral activities it would involve.
- I kept a journal of my aims, thoughts, observations and realisations.
- I analysed the journal to see how the research process had developed and to identify particular activity strands.

Class goals

Because most of the class had recently arrived in Adelaide they identified settlement issues, such as housing, health and government department registration, as priorities.

As I was interested in the general notion of critical awareness – that is understanding oral and written text as a related process of communicating – my goals were to:

- raise awareness of the assumptions and purpose of the speaker or writer;
- raise awareness of the assumptions that readers bring to a situation or text which help or hinder their understanding;
- encourage learners to discuss and question:
  - their own world views
  - Australian language and behaviours they found puzzling or interesting.
The activities

I did not begin the class with a 10-week plan of activities for critical literacy. Half way through the course I attended a workshop, and two sessions – one on journal writing and one on the value of first language use in the classroom – influenced the latter part of the course. By the end of the ten weeks I noticed that three parallel strands had emerged in my teaching. The first involved awareness raising activities to highlight culturally determined practices and assumptions. The second, which developed out of class discussion, focused on the appropriateness of language, register and relationship, and their realisation in English. The third involved journal writing used as a means to promote reflection and analysis of language and situations encountered daily, and of learning outside the classroom.

Awareness raising activities

In the second week of the ten-week course, I began the research with classroom activities to promote discussion of culturally related beliefs:

- We read a fable The Lion and the Fox (Text 1) and discussed maxims that were commonly used in various countries.
- We discussed and compared layout and superficial content of newspapers and magazines from the various language groups.
- We discussed superstitions.

The Lion and the Fox

One day the lion, king of the jungle, told all the animals in the forest that he was sick and dying. He told them to come visit him to hear his last words. The goat, the sheep, and the cow went into the lion’s cave to say good-bye to their king. The fox, who was very smart, just waited outside and watched.

None of the animals came out. Finally, after a long time, the lion got up and came out of his cave and saw the fox sitting there. The lion said to him, "Why don’t you come visit me, my friend? You know that I am sick and dying."

The fox answered, "Pardon me, Your Majesty, but I did not wish to crowd you. I saw many animals go into your cave, but none of them have come out. Until some of them come out, I will stay outside in the fresh air."
- We talked about customs and procedures in different countries for such things as borrowing money, renting a house, buying a car, finding a job and meeting new people (Worksheets 1 and 2).
- We read a letter to the editor from a writer disgruntled by the potential security risk presented by junk mail in letterboxes (Text 2).

The discussion and homework that followed these activities were useful in beginning to raise awareness of the cultural assumptions and expectations that underlie social practices – for example, in some countries tipping the postman to make sure future letters do not go astray. Spontaneous and thoughtful class discussions arose on cultural issues. One for example, was on the acceptability of bigamy if a woman could not have a child.

Text 2: Letterboxing complaint

Can you please tell those people who deliver newsletters to put it properly into the letterbox and don’t let it hang halfway out.

One does all one can these days to prevent being broken into and then along come these idiots, especially on the weekend and deliver the newsletter and let it hang out of the letterbox to show everybody who is and who isn’t home. How stupid can you be!

I would appreciate it if those deliverers placed the newsletter properly into the letterbox, thanks.


Worksheet 1

Some thoughts
1. I think the best thing about people from my country is...
2. I think the worst thing about people from my country is...
3. I think the best thing about people in Australia is...
4. I think the worst thing about people in Australia is...
5. I think Australians don’t understand people from my country very well because...
6. I think people from my country don’t understand Australians very well because...
7. A strange Australian custom for me is...
8. I think a strange custom in my country is...
9. I cannot understand why...

Worksheet 2

In your country how do people:
1. find a house to rent?
2. buy a second hand car?
3. borrow money to buy a car?
4. borrow money to buy a house?
5. find a job?
6. meet new people?
7. spend their evenings?
Discussion activities

The second activity strand I identified arose during class interaction. This focus on the
language arose spontaneously in discussion and in the serialised reading I had chosen,
although no specific attention had been given to these as critical literacy activities.

I noticed that some students lacked the language knowledge to make appropriate
choices of register, particularly in relation to politeness. An early example was ‘Shut
up, I don’t understand you’. This led to my introducing explicit discussion about what
is considered polite or not polite and acceptable or not acceptable in the students’ own
languages and in English.

Although teaching social formulae and associated register is normal at beginner
levels, I approached the teaching of appropriate register more deliberately with this
class. For example, in a lesson on greeting cards I spent time discussing who the
recipients of the card would be, given the wording and overt or implied sentiments –
humorous, religious, youthful or serious.

Another deliberate focus on register was the presentation of a number of
illustrations of social situations with empty speech bubbles (Worksheet 3) in order to
tease out the register, relationship and politeness issues, and to discuss cultural factors.
Learners discussed in groups what they would say in each of the depicted situations.
Suggestions were then pooled, analysed and discussed in terms of if, when, and with
whom the utterances would be appropriate in English.

Worksheet 3: Excuse me…

from B. Harley. 1979. Waterloo St. Sydney: ABC
A further focus of this second strand occurred as a by-product of reading a short story, *Mario and the wrong radio* (Pankhurst and Shumack 1982). The class experienced problems comprehending the text. This difficulty lay in the colloquial expressions, adjectives and exclamations denoting agreement, emotion and relationship. For example, interpreting the dramatic intent behind a description such as ‘strange and terrible’; or the interpersonal relationships conveyed in the statements ‘What do you want?’ or ‘I’d love to but I’m afraid I can’t’; and the attitudes expressed in ‘Thank goodness!’ ‘Bloody hell!’ or ‘That’d be great’ proved to be a good source of language analysis and discussion.

**Journal writing activities**

The third strand related to the language development and reflection that arose through journal writing. I had used journal writing with previous classes on many occasions as a method of providing writing fluency practice and reflection on learning. However, after attending a seminar in which Michael Carroll talked about using journal writing as a means of getting his learners to reflect on his course and how they learned (see Carroll 1994), I began to think about using daily journal writing as a way to assist learners to reflect on social uses of language, particularly the language they read or heard in their activities outside the classroom.

I introduced this type of journal entry as a means of stimulating reflection and classroom discussion of their experiences of English in use. I wanted the activity to provide a way for learners to select and make explicit language areas they found problematic during their settlement into the Australian English speaking society. My instructions to them were to feel free to write about whatever they wished, but also to notice and write about:

- interesting words and language they read or heard on the bus or in the street or in shops;
- confusing language;
- things that people said and did in social environments such as parties, pubs, discos;
- particular times when they had difficulty talking with someone in a service situation such as a bank, shop, garage or child care centre.

Journal writing became a nightly homework activity and we spent ten to fifteen minutes at the beginning of each lesson discussing some of the topics that students volunteered. There were two or three learners who did not often write at home, so once a week the class spent ten minutes writing in their journals at the beginning of a lesson. I found that this provided an opportunity for the reluctant writers to reflect on and introduce topics of personal interest into class discussion.

**Reflections on the research**

The assumption that critical literacy is a worthwhile area for skill development rests within the western tradition of analytical thought and logic which is not necessarily shared by all cultures (see Atkinson 1997). For this reason I attempted at the outset to be clear about my own understanding of critical thinking and my purpose for introducing it into the ESL classroom. My aim was for the learners to be able to express their beliefs about social and cultural practices and to interpret Australian practices. I believed that the raising of awareness and the subsequent questioning that such discussion would encourage would prepare learners to become critically literate.
What differed in my teaching during the research was not so much the content I presented, but the deliberativeness with which I focused on taken-for-granted views and aspects of language, especially relationship and attitude markers. I believe that, to varying degrees, members of the class displayed:

- recognition of a variety of viewpoints;
- awareness of how attitude and intent are manifested differently through different languages;
- sensitivity to the meanings attached to certain elements of English, particularly register and relationship;
- acceptance of open discussion;
- reflection on, and questioning of, English in use;
- application of learning outside the classroom.

The problems I identified in the process of the research related to the restrictions of the learners’ language level and to my own assumptions. Learners at lower language proficiency levels lack the communicative competence to effectively challenge the attitudes of the teacher who usually holds the greater power and status in the group, and the teacher’s meanings and assumptions tend to be accepted by the students. Ideally in relation to critical thinking activities, students should have the right to evaluate the teacher’s stance, but students at beginner level are unable to do this. I also needed to examine the notion that being able to assess critical literacy development in beginning learners may be unrealistic. In fact, is it even fair to expect such assessment when survival language is their priority?

Further suggestions

Hindsight is wonderful! I make these suggestions in the light of what worked and what I feel was incompletely achieved. To prepare beginner learners for critical approaches to literacy I would:

- start learners writing in journals freely from very early in their learning and deliberately direct some of this activity towards encouraging them to note and comment on Australian social practices and language use;
- use activities that allow for multiple interpretations, such as the visual and empty speech bubble activity;
- give equal discussion time to activities focusing on the language that realises relationships and attitude and to those that convey content, facts and events;
- allow first language in the classroom, deliberately organising ‘same language’ groups, where students can discuss and clarify their thoughts in preparation for activities related to cultural practices and language use.

Discussion tasks

1. In her reflections on her research, Loretta wrote:

   …the notion of being able to assess critical literacy development in beginning learners may be unrealistic. In fact, is it even fair to expect such assessment when survival language is their priority?

   Do you agree? Can you think of any ways of assessing critical literacy development with beginner learners?
2 Loretta stated that she attempted to clarify her own understanding of critical literacy and critical thinking. What do you understand by these two terms? Discuss them with other colleagues and develop some common definitions.

3 To what extent do you agree that critical literacy ‘rests within the western tradition of analytical thought and logic’ as Loretta suggests. What cross-cultural implications do you think there may be in relation to your students and the notion of critical literacy?

Classroom tasks

1 Collect or develop some speech bubble activities like the one used in this research. Use them in class as part of a critical literacy activity and note your own and your students’ reactions. If possible work with other colleagues and exchange your views on how your activities worked.

2 Have you ever used journal writing as a way of encouraging students to note and reflect on language use outside the classroom? Try this out with your students over one or two weeks and get feedback from them on the language they have observed in different situations. Discuss with them whether they find journal writing a useful way of reflecting on their language learning.

References


2 Developing critical literacy with post-beginner learners

Judy Perkins

Framing the research

The teaching context

I worked with a group of 12 post-beginner students in the Adult Migrant English Service (AMES) Settlement Program for 10 weeks. My class was an extension class of 2 hours a week that focused on the development of reading skills and vocabulary as part of a 16-hour a week class. The profile of the group was:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality:</th>
<th>Vietnamese, Bosnian, Chinese, Hungarian, Polish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational level:</td>
<td>8–12 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
<td>early 20s to late 40s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of residence</td>
<td>4–18 months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The research in brief

The focus question for my research was: What resources and activities can be used to develop a critical literacy perspective in a low level reading class?

It seemed to me that if a critical perspective was an important aspect of literacy development then it must be incorporated into teaching at all levels. Having done some reading and thinking about critical literacy while working with intermediate students, I wanted to know:

- whether a critical literacy perspective could be incorporated into the development of literacy skills with students at a lower level and if so, how;
- whether analysis and discussion about authentic, real-life texts would be more difficult with post-beginner learners than with more advanced students;
- what kind of texts would be both interesting and accessible to the learners and provide a rich resource for discussion;
- what kind of classroom activities would encourage critical analysis;
- whether a clear progression of critical skills could be observed.

I collected data through the use of a journal and by writing field notes during and immediately after each lesson.

Class goals

All of the learners wanted to find a job as soon as possible. Their specific aims in this course were:

- to learn about Australia;
- to learn the language needed to find a job and work in Australia;
- to be able to deal with health issues in English.

My aims for this course were:

- to empower the learners as active and critical members of Australian society;
to develop the learners' reading skills and extend their vocabulary;
• to give the learners strategies to approach real-life texts with confidence;
• to think critically about a text by identifying:
  – where the text might be found
  – why the text had been written and who it was written for
  – how reliable the text was
  – the writer's position and their own position as reader.

Activities

The starting point was to find texts which, while both relevant to the learners' stated needs and of appropriate linguistic complexity, would also enable the learners to critically analyse the text in line with the course objectives.

Initially I found this difficult and spent a lot of time looking for 'ideal' texts which would illustrate precisely the points I wanted to make. However, on reflection I realised that critical literacy development should be a part of normal reading activities, and that learners should be able to look at any text with a critical eye. I therefore decided to use the same kind of texts as I did for my normal reading program. There were a couple of exceptions to this and these turned out to be the least successful.

As it was possible that the experimental activities might not always be successful, it was important to embed the activities in tasks which would be interesting, enjoyable and immediately relevant. The activities described below were used in conjunction with a variety of vocabulary development activities and 'reading for pleasure' texts; for example, humorous stories and simple Australian short stories.

Activity 1: Evaluating different sources of job information

In this first activity the class talked about texts rather than reading one in the classroom. My aim was to get to know the learners and to find out, firstly how easy it was for them to access the texts necessary for finding a job and secondly how they evaluated these texts. The whole group brainstormed the process of finding a job, listing different sources of job information and discussing their relative merits.

All learners were aware of a number of sources of job information and could comment on them in relation to their own needs. Typical comments were:

the CES (Commonwealth Employment Service) has no jobs for us
newspaper X is no good for us, but newspaper Y is good
the CES computers are too difficult for us to use

I concluded that the learners were able to evaluate the relevance and usefulness of the texts they read in this context and to identify the ideal reader the writer had in mind.

Since the underlying aim of developing a critical stance to texts is to empower learners, I felt it was important to consider the issue of power in the classroom. The teacher has more power and status than the learners by virtue of his or her position as teacher and because of being a native English speaker and an established and knowledgeable member of Australian society. I considered aspects of classroom dynamics – such as the physical setting, group structures, where I stood or sat, questions of authority, and so on – to be an integral part of what I was trying to do. In this activity, therefore, I deliberately downplayed my role as teacher and acknowledged the learners’ experience and knowledge. I sat among the learners rather than standing at the front of the classroom and allowed them to direct the flow of talk, encouraging them to question and learn from each other and not to defer to me as the sole authority.
This was a useful activity in terms of establishing both teacher and learners as sources of knowledge and expertise within the classroom and demonstrating to me – and to them – that they were already exercising a degree of criticality in their response to English texts.

**Activity 2: Adding extra questions to the usual reading exercises**

In a sequence of three lessons learners read brochures and then answered questions. In the first lesson we looked at a Medicare leaflet, in the second about twenty different tourist brochures and in the third, learners were presented with a variety of brochures on different topics such as banking, traineeships, eating for health, Equal Opportunity, drinking and driving, sexual harassment and insurance. Learners chose which brochures to read according to their individual interests.

The main part of these lessons consisted of typical reading development activities, such as identifying key vocabulary, predicting the contents, skimming and so on. It was primarily in the ‘before reading’ and ‘after reading’ sections that I added new questions so that the learners would:

- think about the text ‘as a text’ – that is, written by a writer with a stated or unstated set of beliefs and a specific purpose in writing;
- evaluate the reliability of the text;
- begin to analyse the language in a text to discover what it can tell us about the text.

Learners were not used to discussing texts in this way and were at first unsure what they were supposed to do. However, after some discussion they had little difficulty in answering most of the questions.

**Lesson 1: The Medicare brochure**

Learners were given a Medicare brochure about taking medicine and asked to read it in conjunction with the worksheet provided (Worksheet 1). They had few difficulties answering the ‘Before reading’ activities, which asked them to identify the context and purpose of the text, and could satisfactorily answer the ‘After reading’ activity which required a judgment about the usefulness and reliability of the brochure.

The one question that did cause problems was in the ‘Thinking about the writing’ section where learners were asked to analyse an aspect of the language used in the brochure. Even after talking it through, some of them were still unsure what I meant and we abandoned the question. I think that if I had raised the question in general class discussion rather than writing it on the worksheet for the learners to answer in groups, it would have been more successful.
Teachers' Voices 3

Lesson 2: The tourist brochure
In this lesson as in Lesson 1, learners were required to analyse the text in the ‘Before reading’ and ‘After reading activities, (Worksheet 2). An additional aim of this activity was to give learners confidence in tackling difficult texts – not by understanding every word but by knowing their way around the text to find relevant information. The questions were structured to encourage them to look at all the brochures quickly, noting what they were about, extracting specific information and becoming familiar with the generic structure. Learners then chose one brochure to look at more thoroughly and to read in greater detail. At the end of the activity they were approaching the brochures with confidence, despite the difficult language.

Worksheet 1
TAKING MEDICINE – What questions should I ask?

Before reading
Discuss these questions in your group and write some possible answers.
1. Where might you find this leaflet?
2. What kind of text is this? (for entertainment, for information, etc)
3. Who wrote this leaflet?
4. Who is the leaflet written for?

Reading for specific information
5. Does this leaflet tell you what medicine to take if you have a headache?
6. Does it tell you questions you can ask your doctor?

Reading for detail
7. What are three things your doctor might tell you to do if you are sick?
8. Should you ask the pharmacist or the doctor this question: Can I keep the medicine in the fridge?

Learning new vocabulary
9. Write down the new words you want to learn.

Thinking about the writing
10. Make a list of all the pronouns in this text.
11. Is ‘I’ the writer, the reader or someone else?
12. Is ‘you’ the writer, the reader or someone else?
13. Why has the writer used ‘I’ and ‘you’ in this way?

After reading
14. Does this leaflet give you good, reliable information?
15. What have you learnt from this leaflet?
Worksheet 2

Reading tourist brochures

Before reading
1. Where might you find these brochures?
2. Who wrote them?
3. Why were they written?
4. There are lots of pictures in the brochures. Why? Is it helpful to have lots of pictures?
5. Do you have similar brochures in your country?

Reading for information
6. When we are reading for information we do not have to read all of the text. We look for key words to find the information we want.

Look at the brochures. Where would these people like to go?
Write the place and the suburb it is in.
a) Mary has two small children. They like all kinds of animals.
b) Barry and Jenny like flowers and trees.
c) Jo is a student. He is interested in history and old things.
d) Anne is very sporty. She loves swimming and diving.
e) Alison and Tony's 10 year old son is very interested in science.
f) Philip likes Aboriginal art.
g) Barbara and Jeff like boats and ships.
h) Robert is a keen sportsman. He likes excitement and new sports.
i) Susan knows a lot about Australian animals and likes to watch them.
j) John has a 13 year old son. They both love cars.
k) Where would you like to go?

7. Choose one brochure and find the following.
   Place
   Opening times
   Address
   Costs

8. Can you get something to eat and drink there?
9. What can you see or do there?
10. How do you get there from your house? (Look at the map of Adelaide and the bus map)

After reading
11. Does the brochure give you enough information? Is there anything else you would like to know?
12. Is it difficult to read? Why?
13. Can you get good, reliable information from these brochures?
14. Which is more reliable, these brochures or advertisements in the newspaper?
Lesson 3: Selected brochures
When the learners were presented with a variety of brochures to choose from, they chose without hesitation and knew exactly what they wanted to find out, even if they could not express it easily in English. One learner chose a particular text to work on in class because it was short and manageable and chose another, much longer one, to read at home because it was something she really wanted to know about. Again, thinking about the question of power in the classroom, I felt that it was important for the learners to make decisions about what they read.

The repetition of similar analytical questions about reading in each lesson (Worksheet 3) meant that the learners began to answer the questions easily and routinely. This will now become a routine part of my reading lessons.

Activity 3: Identifying the unspoken beliefs of writers and readers
This lesson started with a vocabulary exercise using pictures to learn the names of household objects and appliances. It was a highly interactive activity that learners found immediately useful. We then went on to an activity which I was unsure would be successful but wanted to try. We looked at two texts – the first was a page from a department store catalogue advertising electrical appliances and the second an extract, from ‘The Green Consumer’s Guide’ (Text 1) about using appliances wisely.

In this activity we first discussed what I meant by ‘unspoken beliefs’ and the learners all agreed that generally they could identify unspoken beliefs when reading in their first language, but that it would be very difficult to do in English. They were asked to complete a worksheet in small groups (Worksheet 4) and it provoked lively and sophisticated discussion, exactly as I had hoped. It also underlined for me how learners can communicate sophisticated ideas in very simple language.
Text 1

For the Green Consumer there are three basic guidelines:
1. Consider whether you really need the appliance.
2. Select the most energy-efficient product whenever you can.
3. Use the appliance as efficiently as you can. Use the clothes dryer only on days when Nature can’t dry your clothes for you, turn unnecessary lighting off, wait until you have a full load for washing machines and dishwashers, and so on.


Worksheet 4

**Identifying the unspoken beliefs of writers and readers.**

1. Read the two texts. What do the writers think about buying and using electrical appliances?
   - Writer 1: .........................................................................................
   - Writer 2: .........................................................................................

2. Do you think the writer agrees with the statements below? Put a tick if you think the writer would agree with the statement, a cross if you think the writer would disagree and a question mark if you are not sure.
   - a) If you buy a Food Processor, your life will be better.  
     - Writer 1:  
     - Writer 2:  
     - You:  
   - b) The environment is very important.  
     - Writer 1:  
     - Writer 2:  
     - You:  
   - c) We should think about the environment when we are shopping.  
     - Writer 1:  
     - Writer 2:  
     - You:  
   - d) Using a lot of energy is good for society.  
     - Writer 1:  
     - Writer 2:  
     - You:  
   - e) We don’t have to think about the environment.  
     - Writer 1:  
     - Writer 2:  
     - You:  
   - f) We don’t always need appliances.  
     - Writer 1:  
     - Writer 2:  
     - You:  
   - g) We should use electrical appliances to do all our work.  
     - Writer 1:  
     - Writer 2:  
     - You:  
   - h) We should not have any electrical appliances.  
     - Writer 1:  
     - Writer 2:  
     - You:  
   - i) It doesn’t matter how much energy an appliance uses.  
     - Writer 1:  
     - Writer 2:  
     - You:  
   - j) We can all help to make the earth better for our children.  
     - Writer 1:  
     - Writer 2:  
     - You:  

3. Which of the statements do you, the reader, agree with? Put a tick, cross or question mark beside each statement.
One group of learners, however, found the task difficult. The language was too complex and the activity itself was too abstract and removed from context for them as learners. It may have been better to discuss unspoken beliefs in passing over a number of texts, rather than to focus a whole exercise on it, and also to discuss it in a more concrete way.

This activity was one of the times in the project when I let the activity dictate the reading text. In general, it seemed that at this level relevance to the learners’ lives is the most important factor in the choice of text.

**Activity 4: Comparing different texts on the same topic**

In this activity we looked at very short extracts from a number of genres – a letter to the editor, a dictionary, a childrens’ book, a newspaper article and a short story. All had the same topic – dogs. The context for this activity was the short story and a vocabulary exercise about Australian native and farm animals. The aim was to highlight the writer’s position by contrasting very different positions on the same topic. The learners were asked to identify where the texts came from, the author’s attitude to dogs and to find evidence in the text that revealed the writer’s position. The final part of this activity was for learners to state whether their position as readers was the same as that of the writers’ (Worksheet 5).

In this activity, also, learners were at first unsure what they were being asked to do, but after some explanation and a pre-reading exercise to learn some of the vocabulary, they completed the task, showing so much interest that we ran into the coffee break. The comparison of texts with a common topic seemed to be useful for demonstrating the choices available to a writer and how these choices reveal their position.

**Worksheet 5**

**Comparing different texts about the same topic**

1. Read the five texts quickly and underline or highlight words you don’t know.
2. Find the meaning of important words by:
   - guessing
   - asking another student or the teacher
   - looking them up in the dictionary.
3. Read the five texts again and fill in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where does this text come from?</th>
<th>How does the writer feel about dogs?</th>
<th>Which words (or pictures) tell you this?</th>
<th>Do you agree with the writer?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reflections

What kind of texts are suitable for developing critical literacy?
At the end of the ten weeks I concluded that if texts are authentic, of interest to the learners, and drawn from a variety of sources they can be used to develop critical literacy at this level.

What kind of classroom activities would encourage critical analysis?
The integration of extra ‘before-reading’ and ‘after-reading’ questions into ‘traditional’ reading activities works well. The repetition of similar questions over a number of lessons enabled the learners to answer easily and routinely and, presumably once the habit was established, would lead to students asking themselves the same questions when reading outside the classroom.

A comparison of different texts on the same topic can be useful in highlighting the different choices and the different possible positions available to a writer on any topic however uncontroversial.

Activities aimed at developing a specific aspect of criticality in isolation can work, but because of the nature of the research project with its limited time frame, and a desire on my part to try as many new approaches as possible, I often felt that the learners and I were jumping into a task unprepared. In future reading classes I will use the same kind of activities but provide more scaffolding.

The introduction of both detailed language analysis and difficult concepts is initially probably better done in general discussion than by written questions. The teacher can then progress in small steps until all the learners feel comfortable with what is being asked of them.

Is there a clear progression of critical skills?
Yes, I believe there is. Questions, such as the following about the whole text, were relatively easily answered by all the learners:

- Where would you find the text?
- Who wrote it and for whom?
- Why was it written?
- Is it a reliable source of information?

Uncovering hidden viewpoints or unspoken beliefs involves a more subtle use of language than learners may be capable of at post-beginner level because identifying the writer's position often depends on understanding nuances of language. The task is easier with texts which learners commonly read in their daily life, either in Australia or in their own country.

Suggestions
As a result of this research I can make a number of suggestions:

- Consider the question of power within the classroom and what can be done to share power more equally.
- Acknowledge learners' existing knowledge and critical language awareness.
- Create a climate in which this knowledge and awareness can emerge and then be built on.
- Allow the learners to make choices about the texts they read.
- Ensure that difficult and challenging activities, which may initially seem baffling to the learners, are embedded within enjoyable and immediately relevant activities.
- Integrate questions and activities to develop critical literacy awareness into normal reading activities.
• Repeat questions, activities and discussion points over several lessons so that they become an automatic part of approaching a text.
• Take into account the different levels of critical language awareness that will exist in any class.

Discussion tasks

1 Judy collected data about her activities through a journal and field-notes. What other methods could have been used to collect data which would integrate with classroom activities for post-beginner learners?

2 ‘I deliberately down played my role as teacher and acknowledged the learners’ experience and knowledge’. Discuss with other colleagues when and how teacher should down play their role?

3 What kinds of critical literacy skills do you think may be transferable from first to second language? What cross-cultural factors may influence the development of critical literacy?

Classroom tasks

1 Select one of the activities that Judy developed for her learners. How could you use or modify a similar task with your learners? Try out one of these activities and observe their responses.

2 Select a topic that reflects your learners’ needs and interests. With the learners, brainstorm the written sources of information that may be available on this topic. Document the learners’ responses. Discuss with them which of these sources they think are more or less helpful to them.

3 Collect a number of different kinds of texts, such as brochures, newspaper items, advertisements, books and short stories, that are suitable for your learners and ask them to make their own selections. Observe what selections they make. If possible, interview some of your learners about why they chose particular kinds of texts.
Incorporating a critical literacy perspective in an intermediate reading class

Helene Reade

Framing the research

The teaching context

I was teaching an Intermediate Modular Program where students negotiate the curriculum with their team of teachers, resulting in a course structure that enables students to focus on particular language skills. I chose to teach one of the reading modules and taught the class for 1.5 hours a week over seven sessions. Although the students were all working towards the Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) Level 3, there was no formal assessment attached to this module.

I worked with a group of 13 intermediate level students. Their profile was:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality:</th>
<th>Croatian, Bosnian, Iranian, Spanish, Greek, Japanese, Romanian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational level:</td>
<td>11–15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
<td>22–45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of residence:</td>
<td>3–12 months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The research in brief

The focus question for my research was: What changes do I need to make in my teaching to incorporate a critical literacy perspective?

My major aim was to understand the term 'critical literacy' more clearly and to incorporate it into my teaching practice. More specific objectives were directed at ensuring that:

- learners became more critical readers through my experimentation with methods that were different from those I normally used in a reading class;
- learners developed critical reading skills by completing activities designed to promote those skills;
- I identified what teaching methods and skills are involved and how they differ from normal practice.

Research methods included:

- reflecting on and discussing the term 'critical literacy' with other teachers in the group;
- keeping a teaching log;
- document collection.

The last two methods were suggested by Burns (1995: 8), and were close to my normal practice in any class. I told the learners about the project and they were keen to be involved.

In comparison with other research that I have read about, action research seems to lack a formal reporting element. It was more the case that my actions became directly
responsive to what I saw needed to be done in the classroom as I gradually came to a greater understanding of what critical literacy was about.

**Class aims**

The students’ ultimate aim was to further their education in Australia. As a step towards achieving this they were working towards the CSWE Level 3 and believed that to do well they needed to improve their reading skills. They aimed to improve their reading skills by taking this extra reading module.

The essential difference between the purpose of this and other reading classes was the development of practices that would extend beyond the normal reading skills, such as predicting, skimming and scanning, that were the focus of core classes. My aim was to encompass approaches such as:

- questioning the content of the text;
- identifying who wrote the text;
- considering who the text was written for (see Clark 1995:70).

**Classroom activities and materials**

To illustrate the methods employed to achieve my aims, I outline below an early unit of work based on a specific theme – the Olympic Games – and include a brief discussion of the methodology used. I then present a set of questions I developed to guide discussion as the term proceeded. These worksheets reflect my changing understanding of what is involved in developing critical literacy. Finally, I discuss the results of a questionnaire given to the students after six lessons.

**A unit of work**

In the first session, held in July 1996, I brought in recent newspaper pictures from the Atlanta Olympics of an Australian horse-rider evidencing incredible Aussie ‘spunk’, and Australian swimmers hanging their heads in shame. I also gave the students a copy of an Atchison cartoon from a local newspaper which reflected humorously on these
two events (Text 1). In order to structure the discussion, I used a list of points based on an article by Clark (1995) (Worksheet 1).

After discussing the cartoon, we read and discussed a feature article and a letter to the editor from the same newspaper (Texts 2 and 3) which were both on the Olympic Games. The discussion continued into the next session. In the discussion the points on becoming a critical reader were again used.

Worksheet 1

**Becoming a critical reader**

- identify the social purpose
- identify the topic
- identify the ideological presupposition (what the write believes is the accepted attitude to take on this topic)
- look for different meanings
- understand the truth, reliability and authority of the article/reader
- get the meaning of the writer by examining the way the ideas are written down
- recognise how the writer involves the reader in the attitude/content
- work out how you relate to the text as a reader

Text 2

**Olympics a media circus and a farce**

Is anyone else sick of the Olympic hype?

The Olympics is a media circus and a farce and makes a mockery of the striving for athletic skills. I understood the Olympics originally celebrated the movement of the human body.

The nationalistic and jingoistic film clips are manipulative and insidious. I despair at the power which advertising and corporate sponsors have.

Most people are not impressed by the pathetic linking of the Olympics with sponsors such as Coke.

The present form of the Olympics provides an opportunity for rich and powerful nations to dominate the medal count and to attempt to perpetuate the global racist myths so common in the media.

Wealthy nations which can afford to assist their best athletes do not get to compete on an equal footing with poorer nations. Most poorer countries are lucky to field a handful of competitors. Their best athletes are unable to afford to train or compete at an international level.

Many African countries have competed extraordinarily well, given their lack of financial and sports development opportunities.

Imagine the “medal count” if these athletes were able to receive the training options that wealthy nations provide.

I am also not impressed by pugilists re-enacting military and warrior behavior in the form of boxing, javelin, shooting and judo.

These warlike “sports” should be replaced by tennis ball throwing competitions. I’d like to see that.

Letter to the editor in The Advertiser, 26 July 1996
Atlanta misses the bus

At the end of week one, I’ve got to tell you that these Olympics aren’t getting any better. Atlanta can’t handle them. It’s as simple as that. Transportation is a disaster. Atlanta will be remembered as the Games that missed the bus.

The technology doesn’t work. By the time you get a result from the IBM computer system here, I’d better off ringing Adelaide and asking the boys at the Players’ Bar.

And the town is a mess. I’m sorry. Playing get-the-heebie-jeebies isn’t normally my style. But with all these vendors who have sprung up all over the streets, walking around the Olympic city is like a bad day at the Royal Show. A very bad day, where southern-fried sports fans cook in temperatures approaching the century as they wander from stall to stall, wondering what the heck the Olympic Games are all about.

First, the buses. They are big blue brutes, mostly driven by ladies who are so large that they ought to be arrested for wearing shorts.

The unluckiest guy at the Olympics was the Italian photographer who got hit and killed by a bus. Most of us can’t find a bus. Here’s a poorbugger who gets run over and killed by one.

The 3000 bus drivers come from all over the United States. Most of them know their way around Atlanta about as well as I know my way around downtown Omus.

One panicked when she got out on the freeway, on her way to the rowing venue at Lake Lanier.

“I can’t handle freeways,” she shrieked, pulling the bus over, leaving the keys in the ignition, and fleeing.

The athletes are so frustrated that a bunch of rowers from Poland and Ukraine stood in the middle of the road the other day and commandeered a bus that was supposed to be going to the hockey.

Who can blame them, after 1992 judo gold medallist David Khakhalatvich from the former Soviet republic of Georgia lost the chance to defend his title when he got caught in traffic and missed the weigh-in?

Downtown, in Tent City, it smells like day-old fried chicken, which it probably is, seeing inspectors from the health department can’t keep up with the proliferation of vendors who’ve opened up shop.

Most complain they’ve gone broke. Many have come from interstate, to find that the stall they leased is in a street from which all traffic has been diverted.

Some have cut their losses by packing up and going home. Dale Thomas, of New York, is considering that option.

“I invested $45,000 leasing this stall and stocking it with T-shirts,” he tells me. “At the halfway mark, I figure I’ll lose around $30,000.” The problem is there are too many vendors selling too much of the same old junk.

Next to the Redneck Souvenir Stand, there’s a mob of Africans selling wooden elephants. I mean, who, in their right mind would want to come to the Olympics in Atlanta to buy a black wooden elephant?

The reason for all the vendors is that the city of Atlanta not only got greedy and decided to sell its soul for a guaranteed $US25 million from street kiosks but it also decided that private property owners could lease anything they liked, to anyone who would pay them.

“We couldn’t do much about it,” shrugs Sharon Gay, of the Mayor’s office. “If we tried to stop them, it would have been unconstitutional.”

Security is a worry, particularly since it was revealed that 51-year-old Rolland Atkins, of Colorado, strolled into the opening ceremony, carrying a loaded .45 calibre semi-automatic handgun and 11 rounds of ammunition.

Asked how the gunman could have breached the high-security system at the Olympic stadium, ACOG communications chief Dick Yarborough draws guffaws from journalists when he replies, “He came early…”

Yarborough goes on to finish his sentence by adding that the ceremony hadn’t begun when the gunman was arrested.

So what? So all gunmen in future should turn up during the heats?

The Mayor of Atlanta, Bill Campbell, is disdainful of critics. “They should take them out to the shooting venue and get rid of them,” he says.

Fat chance of that, mayor. You couldn’t find a bus to get them out there.

I have covered a lot of sporting events in my day. These Olympics are the greatest cock-up of them all. They’re calling it the Lost Continent of Atlanta. And I’ll tell you what. Dawn Fraser is in the best place here. In hospital.

Mike Gibson in The Advertiser, 26 July 1996
I felt that the focus on one topic would illustrate explicitly the position taken by different writers and that this would help us to identify how we were being wooed as readers.

Using the point list provided a very focused way of gaining an understanding of the different genres. The identification of the writer's beliefs, the recognition of the methods used by the writer to involve the reader, and the understanding that the reader has a role in determining the reliability of the article gave the discussion a vigour which, in my experience, is never attained when learners seek simply to identify main points and information contained in a text.

Discussion guides

Subsequent to the unit on the Olympics, I developed sets of questions to guide discussions on various topics and reading texts. These worksheets show how the emphasis or focus of the discussions gradually changed during the course. Some of them related to specific topics we discussed, such as an article on animals in zoos and safari parks (Worksheets 2 and 3). Others could be used more generically for reading different texts (Worksheets 5 and 6).

Worksheet 2

Questions relating to content

1. Skim the article. What is the topic?
2. According to the writer, what things are:
   - good about zoos
   - bad about zoos?
3. What are:
   - the negative points he makes about safari parks?
   - the positive points?
4. What are said to be the qualities of the people who are involved in safari parks?
5. What plan does the writer suggest for zoos and safari parks? How can it be carried out?

Student questionnaire

Towards the end of the research, I asked the students to complete a questionnaire on their responses to the reading course (Worksheet 6). The students' responses were as follows:

- 60 per cent said that the course wasn’t as they had expected because it didn’t involve ‘ordinary’ reading.
- 60 per cent reported that they had learned either to ‘read between the lines’ or to ‘understand the main ideas without having to understand all the details'.
Worksheet 3
Questions relating to how the content is expressed
1. What is the writer's purpose?
2. What is the main idea?
3. What facts and opinions does the writer use to get his main idea across?
4. What words and phrases show the writer's:
   - feelings?
   - attitudes?
   - passionately-held opinions?
5. What does the writer want us to do? What is his position on the topic?
6. What is your position?

Worksheet 4
Being a critical reader
Answer the following questions after you have read the text
1. What does the title mean?
2. Where might you find this text?
   - in a newspaper
   - in a women's magazine
   - in a brochure
   - in a current events magazine
   - other
3. How can you tell?
4. What is the topic?
5. For whom is it written?
6. Who probably wrote it? What would their job be?
7. Why has the text been written?
• Most of the students believed that a critical approach to reading is a skill that they use in their first language, but that they lack confidence to use it in English because of their gaps in vocabulary and their inexperience with both register and social norms in Australia.
• 90 per cent believed that their reading, now redefined, had improved as a result of the course.
• They were shocked to discover that we have only one mainstream newspaper in Adelaide.

Reflections

During this course my teaching became quite different from the way I had been teaching previously. For example:
• I often moved through the lesson far more quickly than I normally would have in my efforts to focus the students on the critical skills.
• I provided vocabulary meanings from the context of the text in my efforts to focus the students on purpose and meaning. I used a matching activity prior to the reading itself in order to allow them to read for the broader purpose and not get ‘bogged down’ in the new words.
• I made the assumption that the students could readily apply the skills of skimming and scanning, and so did not focus on these skills, although we did spend quite a lot of class time in predicting the contents of the text.
• I tried to organise the class time so that an article was introduced in one lesson and then, to allow for private reading, discussed in the next.
• I searched for special texts that would enable the learners to see explicit examples of writers giving opinions and trying to sway the readers.
• I found that I felt freer to make use of less traditional text types, such as cartoons.
• As the term proceeded I used fewer questions about content and more about personal responses in order to focus the discussion.

The sessions began to feel like authentic activities of the kind that I participate in with friends over coffee rather than those which are more typical of a ‘language class’. I

Worksheet 5

Being a critical reader

Answer the following questions after you have read the text
1. Where would you find this text?
2. Who would have written it?
3. What do you think the title could be?
4. For whom is it written?
5. What is the writer’s position on the subject?
6. What is your position?
7. What is the writer’s purpose?
8. What are the features of the writing which are the most powerful in defining the writer’s position?
believe that the added dimension provided by the questions appealed to these adult learners and therefore resulted in authentic reading. It enabled the learners to gain insights into some of the cultural beliefs and practices of their new environment that will surely assist them in their settlement as well as in their further study.

**Worksheet 6: Student questionnaire**

Please answer these questions about the critical literacy course.

1. Has this reading course been as you expected?
2. If you answered No in what way has it been different from what you expected?
3. What do you think you have learned during this course?
4. Have you used any different skills for this course from those in your other classes?
5. Has your reading improved as a result of this course? Please comment.
6. Please comment on the difficulty of the materials we have used.
7. Do you plan to continue this reading class next term?

**Discussion tasks**

1. What further questions for action research on critical literacy, either reading or writing, could be developed for this intermediate class?
2. What questions could be developed with your own class?
3. Discuss what methods could be used for collecting action research data which would fit in with your normal classroom activities.

**Classroom tasks**

1. How would you adapt the discussion guidelines used by Helene for the class that you teach? Try them out with your learners and observe the results.
2. Select a series of newspaper articles, cartoons or short features that reflect different points of view on the same topic. Develop activities using these texts and use them with your learners.

**References**


4 A place for critical literacy in developing discussion skills
Helen Fraser

Framing the research

The teaching context
The research was undertaken in a weekly discussion module lasting 1 hour 45 minutes. Two classes were involved.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CLASS 1: 12 students (both men and women)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nationality:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational level:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language level:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CLASS 2: 18 students (both men and women)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nationality:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational level:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language level:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students in Class 2 were also attending a reading module in which they were also focusing on critical literacy (see Chapter 5 in this section).

The research in brief
The focus question for my research was: Can a critical literacy approach support the development of discussion skills?

Much of the stimulus material I use in teaching a discussion skills module is written text, especially newspaper articles. Reading was therefore already an integral part of the discussion group activities. The linking of reading to discussion through a critical literacy perspective would seem to relate well to the students’ goals for undertaking further study at a tertiary level. The specific questions that guided my research were:

- What kinds of texts work best in exploring critical interpretations of texts?
- What kinds of questions work best in exploring critical interpretations of texts and in generating discussion?
Methods of data collection included:

- collecting the students' written answers to questions on texts;
- observing and making notes of the discussions (I had volunteer tutors participate in discussion groups, allowing me time to move between groups);
- taping the lesson and analysing the discourse both to examine how the students responded to the questions, and to consider their responses to the topics.

Class goals

The students were seeking to return to their professions or to undertake further studies at tertiary level. The discussion module aimed to develop high level discussion skills related to relevant topics and to promote a critical perspective in oral discussion.

Activities

Activity 1

Initially I chose texts which had a clear political position and I began with a dense political text. In the first instance we looked only at the headline and the artwork. The text contained complex vocabulary which I decided to teach before the class engaged in any critical analysis of the text itself. Unfortunately, the vocabulary was so politically charged that while working out the meanings of various words, we were unable to avoid engaging in discussion of the substance of the text. Consequently, the critical literacy aspects of the discussion with which I had wanted the students to engage were to some degree pre-empted. Because the choice of language so clearly depends on the writer's point of view, especially in a text of this nature, it was naive to think I could 'deal with the language' in one lesson and 'have the discussion' in another.

Activity 2

In subsequent texts on political issues I decided to focus only on certain sections selected from within several longer texts and chose to focus on those sections that revealed policy switches or contradictions in positions. I also used political cartoons. The texts and the related questions that seemed to best enable the students to engage in more spontaneous, involved, free-flowing and interesting discussions were those that were not too long and where the subject matter was not too far removed from the students' lives or interests.

One successful lesson revolved around several texts from *The Australian* 18 September 1996 that looked at different aspects and implications of a Prime Ministerial visit to Indonesia. These articles were titled 'We're a culture apart, PM tells Asia', 'Fisher forced to clarify PM pledge on Asia ties' and 'Howard achieves his modest task'. I also included a Nicholson cartoon on East Timor from the same publication.

Along with the texts, I gave the students a number of questions intended to be discussed in small groups (Discussion sheets 1 and 2). My comments on these questions appear on the right of the handout.
Critical literacy in developing discussion skills

Discussion sheet 1
Questions on the written texts
1. Does Mr Howard think Australia is part of Asia?

2. Is Australia part of Asia? In what ways? In what ways not?

3. What future would you like Australia to have?

Questions on the cartoon
1. What is this cartoon saying?

2. Which newspaper would you expect to find it in? Why?

3. What do you think about the situation in East Timor?

4. How far do Australia’s trade needs conflict with its human rights’ stands?

This was the kind of question I might have asked in the past in relation to written texts. The depth to which we went, however, changed with this project.

These two questions did not differ from the kinds of questions I tended to ask generally and were designed to draw on students’ own experiences.

This question is also a fairly standard way into a discussion on either a text or an issue.

This question, however, was a new one and one which many of the students were able to answer accurately – possible a flow-on from John’s classes (see Chapter 5 in this section).

These two questions were also standard discussion-type questions.

Activity 3
I also used texts which at first did not appear to be political or to display any contentious positioning. I wanted to see what would become apparent to the students from a close analysis of headlines and illustrations as well as the text. I was also trying to see whether this kind of close textual analysis could be done successfully within the framework of a discussion module – that is, could we do this kind of work without seeming to take an overly strong ‘reading’ focus? This activity proved to be very interesting. Discussion sheet 2 is an example of a successful activity of this kind.
Discussion sheet 2

For a vision of the future, look below the surface

By JOANNE ROGERS

PRESSURE on land will force developers to build cities downwards and governments should be preparing for that time now, according to an expert in underground engineering.

Dr Ray Sterling said government bodies should begin giving attention to underground mapping to avoid unnecessary expense and inconvenience when the time came to construct below ground.

"Projects that are going on now are going to have a cost or a real blocking effect on things you may want to do five or 10 years down the road," he said.

"The main planning occurs at the local government and regional areas but certainly I think it's an issue that all levels of government should either encourage or undertake."

Underground mapping is one of the recommendations of the Warren Centre of Advanced Engineering's multi-million-dollar Underground Space Project. The group's summary report, written by Dr Sterling, who is director of the Trenchless Technology Centre in Louisiana, US, and visiting fellow to the project, will be released in mid-August.

Dr Sterling said Australia already had some good examples of the use of underground space, such as the Sydney Harbour Bridge tunnel, Sydney Opera House car park and the Snowy Mountains Scheme.

However, it had not been forced to use the space under its surface as much as other countries because of its mild coastal climates and low population density.

Dr Sterling said there were increasing environmental and social reasons for building below ground.

He said the trend was evident in new housing developments, where utility cables were often buried rather than strung from poles, even though the process was more expensive.

"I think that's a clear indication that in the marketplace it's more cost effective to put the utilities underground because it makes the properties more valuable," he said.

Roads, railway lines and stations, pedestrian access routes, car parks and shops were the most common underground structures.

"It is not our goal to put people underground, to create an underground city.

"What is intended is to save the surface so that people can enjoy what they most enjoy about cities — the open spaces, the grand buildings, the views and the lively street life."

The Underground Space Project has brought together planners, developers, strategists, financiers, lawyers, sociologists and scientists to study and recommend how Australian cities can better be planned, integrating surface and underground space.

The group has identified many benefits for underground construction, including less noise and air pollution, less traffic congestion and more attractive cities.

Its recommendations will include changes to archaic legislation regarding underground property rights.

The group has focused on underground mapping as one of the most pressing issues arising from the study and as a potential growth area for engineering services.

Discuss issues arising from this article including:

1. What kinds of structures does this planning group want to have underground?

2. Does it envisage cities underground?

3. Do you know of any large underground structures (e.g., railway stations, car parks, hospitals)? Do they include shops or other services?

4. What do you think should go underground?

5. What kinds of changes do you think they may have recommended to the ‘archaic legislation’ regarding underground property rights?

6. Why do you think the group has recommended underground mapping?

7. What benefits might come from this?

These questions were intended to explore the contradictions between the written text itself and the headline and accompanying photograph.

This questions draws on students’ own experience.

These two questions look at whose interests are being represented in the text and are questions that I asked as a consequence of this project. I found them a very useful kind of questions.
Discussion sheet 3 above demonstrates another successful activity where interpretation of the text was combined with personal experience. To answer questions on the text, students drew on their experience of the world. The students’ discussion alternated between contributions of relevant anecdotes and illustrations from their own experience and interpretations of the position being argued in the text. They did not take the questions in order, but as the discussion evolved, they covered the territory I had wanted to explore with them. I found that they had a clearer understanding of one of the main strands of the argument in the text than I had when I went into the lesson.

Discussion sheet 3

Teaching of maths does not add up

By JOANNE ROGERS

ENGINEERING students are not learning enough mathematics to keep up in fast-changing, high-tech industries, a visiting professor from England says.

Professor Leslie Mustoe told a conference in Sydney this week that in disciplines such as electronic engineering, Asian students were consistently topping courses because they had studied more mathematics at school.

“They have a better mathematical background when they come to university and are therefore better able to cope with the theoretical aspects of the subject,” he said.

“This is something we should be worried about.”

Professor Mustoe, from the mathematical sciences department at Loughborough University, criticised the almost global trend of diluting courses in mathematics and other subjects that were perceived as “hard,” such as sciences and economics.

“In my own country there’s an attitude that things have to be interesting and entertaining,” he said.

“Teachers talk about dividing a pizza up into quarters or thirds or whatever, rather than just dealing with fractions.”

Discussion sheet 3 above demonstrates another successful activity where interpretation of the text was combined with personal experience. To answer questions on the text, students drew on their experience of the world. The students’ discussion alternated between contributions of relevant anecdotes and illustrations from their own experience and interpretations of the position being argued in the text. They did not take the questions in order, but as the discussion evolved, they covered the territory I had wanted to explore with them. I found that they had a clearer understanding of one of the main strands of the argument in the text than I had when I went into the lesson.
Critical literacy in developing discussion skills

Issues arising from the article
1. What do engineering students in high-tech industries need according to the visiting professor?
2. What credentials does the visiting professor have?
3. Why, according to the professor, do Asian students do well in their engineering courses?
4. The article says ‘This is something we should be worried about’.
   a) What is ‘This’?
   b) Who do you think ‘we’ is?
   c) Why do you think the professor thinks ‘we’ should be worried?
   d) What do you think about this?
5. What attitude does the professor have to the teaching of mathematics in England?
6. Do you share this attitude?
7. Do you think maths is taught well or badly in Australia?
8. How should maths be taught to engineers, according to the professor?
9. What does the professor say the engineers think?
10. What does the professor say the mathematicians think?
11. What, if anything, do you think?

Your own experience
1. What experiences of learning mathematics did you have?
2. If you have taught mathematics, what approaches have you used and why?
3. What fields of work, study or leisure activities have you spent time on?
4. What expertise have you developed in your fields of interest?
   - What special technical knowledge required?
   - What other specialised knowledge needed?
   - How do people acquire this kind of knowledge (by studying, hands-on, both, other)?
5. Recall one really positive learning experience you have had. What did you do? Why was it successful?
6. Recall one negative learning experience you have had. What did you do? Why was it unsuccessful?

Reflections
Texts that related more closely to aspects of the students’ own experience, for example the text on the teaching of maths, were more useful in generating student contributions to the discussion, and therefore in evaluating the usefulness of the questions I asked.

The method of approaching texts described in this paper yielded very interesting discussions which tended not to be confrontational but were more academic in style.
with interpretations of texts being made and supported by evidence from the text. However, discussions were also more personal than most academic tutorials because when students gave their views on issues they drew very much on their life experience to illustrate their points.

In devising the critical questions I was initially trying mainly to explore the standard kind of bias; that is, what the writer’s position was. However, I was surprised to find that the most interesting question for discussion turned out to be the one related to whose interests the article served. (Such a question may need to be worded differently depending on the text.) This question prompted a discussion around a deeper level of understanding than had been reached in past discussions based on newspaper articles. It had the effect of revealing more clearly the writer’s position, uncovering the purpose behind the choice of the subject matter and the interests of the people at the centre of it. This was a satisfying way to reach a conclusion to the discussions.

Suggestions

If I were to continue with this research I would tell the students what I was doing, tape every lesson and finally discuss their views on what we had been doing. It is an area which is rewarding to research.

Discussion task

1. To what extent do you think students can transfer critical reading skills from first language to second language reading?

2. Discuss the idea of using more than one text on a topic, to assist students in understanding the notion of author’s voice. If possible find two or more texts which present different (or contesting) points of view to focus your discussion. Was this approach to teaching critical literacy more successful than reading a single text?

Classroom task

Explore critical reading as an approach to discussion in your own class using the following procedure:

1. Select a text from a local newspaper on a topic that you judge to be of interest to your students.

2. Plan some preparatory activities to introduce the topic and to generate interest in reading the article.

3. Devise two sets of discussion questions based on the models in this paper – the first set relating to issues raised in the article, including a question to probe whose interests the article serves and the second set encouraging students to discuss their own experiences.

4. Try out the activities and make field notes (either during or immediately after the lesson) on what happened. Tape some or all of the discussion to listen to later.

5. Identify which questions ‘worked’ best and why. Were there any unexpected aspects to the lesson?
5 Portable critical literacy strategies

John Rice

Framing the research

The teaching context

The class was an English for Tertiary Studies class comprising of 18 learners of intermediate level and above:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality:</th>
<th>mixed language backgrounds – Spanish speakers from Latin America, Chinese, Vietnamese, and one European language speaker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational level:</td>
<td>10 or more years education in first language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language level:</td>
<td>high intermediate in speaking and reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
<td>22 to 55 years.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The research in brief

The questions I wished to investigate were:

- What aspects of criticality are easiest, and hardest, for students to grasp?
- Can I devise a series of questions that students can apply to any text they encounter; questions that are simply stated and easy to remember, and that would generate a high level of ‘critical’ awareness?

My principal aim was to devise a series of strategies that students could apply almost generically to any text – a sort of pocket manual of criticality, if you like. In the process of devising the strategies, student responses to questions, student feedback, and my own observations were systematically collected. The strategies I devised were progressively modified in light of the ongoing data.

Class goals

These students were working towards an intermediate level certificate, and were being officially assessed, to some degree, on their ability to demonstrate criticality in reading. They had identified as their priority enrolment in further studies programs.

My goals were to:

- develop students' critical skills in reading;
- equip students with a series of questions they could apply when reading a variety of texts.

Activities

Devising the ‘portable’ worksheet

I began by devising a series of questions that I considered to be clear, simple and useful as a starting point for examining a text and one’s own response to it (Worksheet 1). The questions were deliberately not numbered so that they would be seen as applying not sequentially, but in any order depending on the text.
The interdependence of the worksheet questions

The first article we examined using the questions in Worksheet 1 was an article ‘Boys are teachers’ pets’, taken from Greenhall and Swan’s *Effective reading* (1986) (Text 1). The text reported on some research findings described in a recently published book by Dale Spender.

Working as a class, we soon discovered that the answers to some of the questions were contingent upon answering others first. In the case of Text 1, it was first necessary to determine where the text might be encountered before one could identify its purpose or its audience. Merely identifying the topic did not enable us to clarify the latter two points. We discussed how the questions were like a series of doors that gave entry to the ‘black box’ of the text. At times some of these doors would be locked, only to be opened when certain others had been unlocked. Some students came up with the idea that, equally, the text was a labyrinth – only comprehensible once all the doors in the maze had been opened, and that this had to be done in a certain sequence.

These analogies seemed to assist students in the subsequent discussions about the role of the questions. In the case of Text 1, for example, to fully appreciate the way language was working in the text and what material interests might be behind its construction, it was essential to know that the text was a newspaper article reporting on information published in a book. Initially the students had difficulty with many of the questions. As we examined one, it appeared predicated on the answer to another, until we arrived at the question ‘Where might you find this text?’ Students then generated a set of hypotheses about its original context – the guesses being a research paper, a report from the ministry of education, and a newspaper or magazine. We then set about eliminating possibilities by examining the formality of the language, the group as a whole arriving at a consensus that the text’s informality suggested that it was not the first two options. What this did raise for me was the importance of sensitivity to English register in determining the social functions of texts, and the general lack of this sensitivity, even at advanced levels.

Once the context was understood, some students identified the social function as not being merely to report information – as would be the case for the two rejected genres – but also to provide a certain level of entertainment in order to interest readers

---

**Worksheet 1**

- Where might you find this text? How can you tell this?
- What is the topic?
- What is its purpose? (What is its genre?)
- To whom is it written?
- Who probably wrote it – what would their position be?
- In what institution?
- Why was the text written? Are there any economic/material interests affecting why it has been written in the way it has?
- How does the language of the text help to achieve its purpose?
- What other ways of writing about the topic are there?
- What sort of ideal reader has this text constructed?
Boys are teachers’ pets

THE CLASSROOM is a man’s world, where boys get two-thirds of the teachers’ attention—even when they are in a mixed-sex class. Boys shout out of turn at punishment, and receive praise for sloppy work that would not be tolerated from girls. They are accustomed to being teachers’ pets, and, if girls get anything like equal treatment, they will protest vehemently and even wreck lessons.

These claims are made in a book out this week, written by Dale Spender, a lecturer at the London University Institute of Education. She argues that discrimination against girls is so deeply embedded in co-educational schools that single-sex classes are the only answer.

Her case is based on tape-recordings of her own and other teachers’ lessons. Many of them, like Spender, had deliberately set out to give girls a fair chance. “Sometimes,” says Spender, “I have even thought I have gone too far and have spent more time with the girls than the boys.”

The tapes proved otherwise. In 10 taped lessons (in secondary school and college), Spender never gave the girls more than 42 per cent of her attention (the average was 38 per cent) and never gave the boys less than 58 per cent. There were similar results for other teachers, both male and female.

In other words, when teachers give girls more than a third of their time, they feel that they are cheating the boys of their rightful share. And so do the boys themselves. “She always asks the girls all the questions.” said one boy in a classroom where 34 per cent of the teachers’ time was allocated to girls. “She doesn’t like boys, and just listens to the girls.” said a boy in another class, where his sex got 63 per cent of teacher attention.

Boys regarded two-thirds of the teacher’s time as a fair deal—and when they got less they caused trouble in class and even complained to higher authority. “It’s important to keep their attention,” said one teacher. “Otherwise, they play you up something awful.”

According to Spender’s research, double standards pervade the classroom. “When boys ask questions, protest, or challenge the teacher, they are often met with respect and rewards: when girls engage in exactly the same behaviour, they are often met with punishment and rebuke.”

A boy seeking attention will quickly get a response from a teacher. “But girls can be fobbed off, their hands can be held up for ages, and their often polite requests for assistance can go unheeded as the teacher is obliged to remain with the boys.”

One girl, talking about a male teacher, commented: “You wouldn’t want to have your hand up to tell him there was a fire, if you were a girl. We’d all burn to death before he asked you what you wanted to say.”

Boys’ written work, too, is judged by different standards, says Spender. When she asked teachers to mark essays and projects, the same work got better marks when teachers were told that it came from boys. “When a boy decides to make a thing of it, there’s not a girl that can stand up to him,” one teacher said of a project on inventions. But, in fact, the work had been done by a girl.

Neat and tidy work from girls was treated with some contempt. “I think she could have spent more time on getting some facts than on making it look pretty.” was one comment. “Typical, isn’t it? All that effort just to make it look nice—you can’t beat girls for being concerned with appearances,” was another. But when Spender indicated that the same work came from a boy, the tone changed dramatically.

Spender concludes that, in mixed classes, the dice are loaded against the girls. If they are as boisterous and pushy as the boys, they are considered “unladylike”; if they are docile and quiet, they are ignored.

A few schools have introduced single-sex groups for maths and science, says Spender, and have found significant improvements in girls’ results. Sexual segregation within schools for certain subjects—rather than a return to single-sex schools—is the most hopeful solution she suggests.

Peter Wilby in The Sunday Times from S Greenhall and M Swan, Effective Reading, CUP 1986
in the newspaper as a whole and to make it an economically viable enterprise. Through the question, ‘How does the language of the text help to achieve its purpose?’ we then identified the language that contributed to this sense of informality and which made the text more emotionally engaging than a scientific or pedagogical report. Once certain students had pointed the way, most others soon identified some of these elements – such as the title ‘Boys are teacher’s pets’, the use of informal and emotive words like ‘taunt’, ‘sloppy’, ‘wreck’ and ‘the only answer’ – and saw how they were operating. The role played by students in leading others, less familiar with this mode of inquiry, underscored the importance in the early stages of whole class discussion.

I think that the students’ overall difficulty with this initial text, and their slowness as a group to correctly identify its context – the key to unravelling the other elements – could be due in part to the lack of practice in this skill. Most classroom texts would probably be introduced to students with the context explicitly stated (eg from the *Australian*, 12/4/96) or the context would be disregarded altogether. Students would not often be asked to infer the source and context from the language features contained therein – something that requires a distancing from the text to the ‘critical’ meta-level. Issues like those promoted by the worksheet, if wedded to a more conventional reading lesson, would develop practice in thinking critically. This is something I intend to do as a matter of routine with future classes. This also implies making more use of current media sources rather than textbook pieces.

**Using the worksheet with other texts**

The interdependence of the worksheet questions was further demonstrated by their use with another text we examined – a statement, published by the Queensland glass and packaging industry concerning the role of glass in litter (Text 2).

Students were not told who had written the piece, and it was essential to clarify this before the social purpose of the text could be clearly ascertained. Yet this in turn could not be determined until students had worked out exactly what the topic of the text was, that is, exactly what it was arguing for. Many initially saw it as a general appeal for improved disposal facilities and better recycling, and only after whole class discussion did some sharper readers convince the group that paragraph 10 gives the clue to the fact that the piece is essentially a disguised persuasive text arguing against deposit legislation. Once this had been determined we hypothesised about the authorship as we had done with the first text. Some thought that it had been written by an environmental group, while others thought that it might have been a Department of Environment text. Some, however, guessed correctly that the glass industry had produced it. The mistaken guesses are interesting as they revealed not so much a lack of linguistic resources but a lack of cultural knowledge – for example, knowledge of the dynamics of capitalism’s lobbying power. One student remarked that she had not considered the possibility that the authors were the glass industry because she would have expected them to simply pressure the government directly without needing to influence public opinion. Her experience and internalised paradigm of the top-down Chinese economic model were shaping her perceptions here.

Thus the role of context (*Where would you find this text?*), so crucial in the examination of the first text, was a very minor, almost irrelevant consideration, in the second.
Difficult aspects of critical analysis

As we progressed through an article on global distribution of wealth and another on the Olympic games – both from *Green Left Weekly* (a useful source of divergent opinion) – the same pattern emerged. Different questions held the key to unlocking other questions. The two questions that emerged quite definitely as consistently difficult for students to grapple with were ‘What other ways of writing about the topic are there?’ and ‘What sort of ideal reader has this text constructed?’ The first, designed to make the text explicit as a product of conscious choice, appeared to some to be pointless and to others as incomprehensible. The latter question was a very difficult concept to communicate, and despite several attempts at explanation and demonstration, I felt I had little success except with a small minority of the class. It may be that the entire concept is deeply predicated on cultural notions that many students just don’t share.

Reflections on the research

My research raised for me questions about the extent to which teaching critical literacy skills is a cross cultural issue. It could be argued that critical literacy is a Western construction involving implicit values and assumptions that are not necessarily shared by members of other cultures. If this is the case, there may be limits – apart from linguistic factors – to how far one can go with activities designed to develop critical literacy.
However, if we do want students to develop critical capacities, it seems to me that practice in adopting a critical ‘persona’ is a crucial element in the instruction. Classroom approaches need to orient themselves around the central notions of criticality on a regular basis. This should not mean discarding lessons that focus on conventional reading skills – the development of which is, in any case, an important component in the development of critical literacy.

**Suggestions**

This research has demonstrated to me a need to incorporate critical questions that relate to assumptions inherent in the text. This practice would help raise students’ awareness to a meta-level where text can be viewed as a socially constructed object. Activities to develop such awareness might include:

- hypothesising about the origins of the text;
- guessing the context;
- defining the possible audience.

Such activities need to become frequently practised strategies in the classroom if they are to assist students to develop a level of critical thinking and to assist students to internalise portable strategies.

**Discussion task**

1. John states: ‘...there may be limits – apart from linguistic factors – to how far one can go with activities designed to develop critical literacy.’ Discuss this issue with your colleagues. Note down some of the key points raised in the discussion.

2. Discuss how you would amend or extend John’s ‘portable’ list of questions for your students.

**Classroom task**

1. Choose a suitable text for the level of your students. Use the ‘portable’ questions suggested in this article. Did you find, as John did, that the questions are interdependent and some need to be answered before others can be addressed?

2. Discuss the idea of ‘portable’ questions with your students. Note the feedback given on the questions. Ask students to reflect on the extent to which they bring similar questions to their first language reading.
6 Critical literacy for insights into Australian systems and culture

Sally Richards

Framing the research

The teaching context

I worked with 20 students from a wide range of professions including engineers, scientists, teachers, marketing and computer specialists, a statistician and a wine maker. These overseas-trained professionals were part of a government-funded, labour market program. It was a full-time 14 week course of which six weeks were work experience, and eight weeks took place in the classroom. Within this program I taught, for six hours a week, a module on Australian systems and culture. This module was included in the belief that an awareness of Australian culture would help in searching for a job and in orienting students to the Australian workplace. The profile of the group was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality:</th>
<th>European (11), from the Indian subcontinent area (6), Vietnam (1), The Philippines (1), Lebanon (1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level of English:</td>
<td>intermediate to advanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
<td>between 20 and 50 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of residence:</td>
<td>3 months to 3 years, except for one who had been in Australia for 12 years.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The research in brief

The focus question for my research was: Can developing critical literacy skills help in understanding Australian systems and culture?

As teacher of the Australian systems and culture module, my challenge was how to work with a very diverse group of learners to find a path between superficially scratching the surface with objective knowledge about the ‘culture’ and being overly interventionist in the individual’s personal and subjective experience of settlement. I was interested to know if critical literacy approach would provide a strategy to meet this challenge. In particular, I was interested to know whether:

- I could use this approach with texts that students would already be reading in their daily lives;
- these texts had potential to enhance understanding of Australian systems and culture.

Careful notes were kept of activities and of student responses.

Class goals

The explicit aims of the labour market program were not specifically related to language learning but focused on self-marketing and job search skills in the Australian context. Within the context of the overall course aims, my goals for the Australian systems and culture module were to:
familiarise students with Australian systems and culture;
• develop reading skills related to these systems;
• enhance skills in reading other texts of interest to students in daily life;
• motivate students to maximise time spent reading outside the classroom;
• encourage students to reflect on the texts they were reading.

The first four weeks of the program were very intensive and covered a wide range of topics. The second four weeks demanded considerable independent labour market research and activities outside the classroom. Because of the course goals, I had to minimise the time spent on reading in the classroom and motivate the students to maximise time spent outside the classroom on reading activities and on reflecting upon the texts they were reading.

Activities

Introductory activities

The group was introduced to some basic concepts of reading critically through classroom activities on easily accessible, everyday texts. Three texts were presented to the group on overheads:

Text 1: four paragraphs of a text from a guide book
Text 2: a page of a book on first aid for bushwalkers
Text 3: a supermarket advertisement for meat

The discussion focused attention on:
• purpose;
• social context/expectations;
• intended audience;
• position of the writer;
• possible vested interests;
• underlying values.

Two further texts (Texts 4 and 5) were shown on the overhead and given to the students to read as a handout. These two texts related to Pauline Hanson's maiden speech to Parliament and were taken from The Advertiser and The Australian. The students were asked to identify the sources by focusing on the headlines, and then to talk about the different styles of the two articles and their personal reactions to them. All the texts were briefly re-examined with a focus on the participants and processes and how the positioning of the author was expressed at the sentence level.

Students easily identified the purpose and audience of these texts and after some discussion also commented on the social context, positioning of the writers, vested interests and underlying values.

The meat advertisement created discussion of the male image with disagreement about how Australian in character it was; some claimed it was typically Australian while others felt it was international. Glancing at the headlines of the two articles about Pauline Hanson prior to reading the texts, the group was very quick to pick out the thematic positioning of ‘We’ in the headline ‘We’ll be swamped by Asians, MP warns’, and immediately identified it as being typical of the tabloid style of The Advertiser because it was more ‘subjective’, ‘personal’, ‘sensational’ than the headline ‘Hanson targets blacks, immigrants’ which appeared in The Australian.
Task-based activities

The students were given Worksheet 1 and worked through it with texts they had chosen themselves. Along with their answers, students handed in photocopies of the texts they had read. Table 1 contains a description of some of the texts students selected. Almost all the texts provided a basis for developing a greater awareness of the social context. In some cases the questions brought this to the surface (eg Pay rises as jobs axed…) in others they didn’t (eg Unholy Alliance). Some questions (eg ‘What assumptions does the writer make about the reader?’ and ‘What different roles/relationships/positions of power are reflected in the text?’) proved to be very appropriate for some texts but unhelpful for others. There were only a few texts for which all the questions seemed appropriate.

Personal reactions to the texts were generally expressed as opinions which sometimes included quite emotive language (eg disgusted). In general, the texts seemed to have been understood at some level. In order to investigate students’ understandings further, I needed to speak to them individually. Unfortunately, I was able to talk at length to only three students about their reading the texts and their responses to the task. However, this was enough to demonstrate how useful such an exercise would be if time permitted.

Worksheet 1

Australian systems and culture: critical literacy
Objective: To increase awareness of the social context in which texts are written

Choose two texts. These should be texts that you are reading in your daily life anyway. They do not have to be related to job seeking. Please attach photocopies of the texts and your reflections on them as follows:

1. Topic / Title
2. Where did you find this text?
3. To what audience is it addressed?
4. What is the position/job of the writer? Can you identify a particular institution or interest group that he/she represents?
5. Identify:
   a) the main participants
   b) the main processes
   c) words/phrases expressing the writer’s feelings/attitude/opinion
6. What information/knowledge is assumed?
7. What assumptions does the writer seem to make:
   a) about the reader (eg the reader’s beliefs/attitudes)
   b) about the Australian social context (how things work/trends)?
8. What different roles/relationships/positions of power are reflected in the text?
9. What is the purpose of the text?
10. Is there a hidden meaning?
11. How do you relate to this text?
Text 1

Orientation

The city centre is laid out in a grid pattern bounded by broad terraces, with several park-like squares. The main street is King William St, which has Victoria Square at the city's geographical centre; most cross streets change their name at King William St. Walk north up King William St and you'll come to the South Australian Tourism Commission (SATC) on the corner of North Terrace.

Rundle Mall is colourful, with flower and fruit stalls; it's always a hive of activity (even on Sunday) and most of the big department stores are here. There are several busy arcades and food halls linking the mall with North Terrace to the north and Grenfell St to the south. The Royal Automobile Association of SA (RAA), Natural Resources Information Centre and State Information Centre are on Grenfell St. Cross King William St at Rundle Mall and you're in Hindley St, which has plenty of reasonably priced restaurants as well as glitzy bars and nightclubs. These days, however, Hindley St looks decidedly weary, and Rundle St (the eastern extension of Rundle Mall) has become Adelaide's cosmopolitan heart. In Rundle St are the big East End Markets, a couple of good pubs and bars, and some of the city's best in alfresco dining, camping and outdoor gear, boutiques and haute grunge.

The next street north of Hindley and Rundle Sts is North Terrace. This is one of Australia's heritage jewels: a 1.6-km-long grand boulevard lined on the north side with a string of magnificent public buildings. They include the state art gallery, museums, state library and universities to the east, and the old parliament house and suburban railway station to the west.


Text 2

2.9 BITES & STINGS

The great majority of bites and stings inflicted in the Australian bush are certainly not serious or life threatening, and would therefore more properly fit into Category 3, but because of the few that are potentially lethal, and for ease of reference, all bites and stings will be dealt with here.

2.9.1 SNAKE BITE

Snake bites are largely preventable:
1. Do not attack snakes unless they are near houses, playgrounds etc. Apart from the fact that they are protected (and delightful) creatures, they are quite likely to counter attack.

2. Wear sensible footwear and gaiters in snake country, particularly around dusk or at night. Most snakes are nocturnal, and many bites occur at night.

3. Discourage snakes from living around settlements by keeping rodents and long grass under control.

I was particularly interested in misinterpretations which related, not to language knowledge, but to knowledge of Australian systems and culture. This was demonstrated in a discussion with a student from Poland who could not believe that local Community Hospitals treated private patients. He reported that he believed he had completely understood the text on first reading, but woke up the next morning wondering. On reading the text again, he questioned his own understanding and discussed his misinterpretation at length. My discussions with students raised some of the fundamental questions of critical literacy, such as What constitutes a misinterpretation? Who is to be the judge? What constitutes evidence? Is the teacher to set him/herself up as the ideal interpreter of texts?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pay rises as jobs axed $4m</td>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>The Advertiser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETSA, salary bill for bosses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ninio wants mayors to step out for city</td>
<td>Replacement of city council</td>
<td>The Advertiser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A beauty's secrets</td>
<td>Nicole Kidman</td>
<td>The Advertiser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unholy Alliance</td>
<td>The Pope and the CIA</td>
<td>Sydney Morning Herald</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community hospitals face dilemma: adapt or shut</td>
<td>Crisis in health system: financial difficulties of small private hospitals</td>
<td>The Messenger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service stations switch, refineries admit</td>
<td>Sales of sub-standard fuel</td>
<td>The Australian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buy-back of guns ‘may fail’</td>
<td>Differences in state participation in buy-back</td>
<td>The Advertiser</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Examples of texts selected by students for analysis

Reflections

A key aspect of the task was that the participants chose the texts themselves. This is very important for motivation and for stimulating awareness of the possible rewards of developing reading skills further. However, there are obviously considerable logistical problems for the teacher! It is difficult and time consuming for teachers to read all the texts, consider all the responses and discuss all the different aspects on an individual basis. Despite this, the importance of letting the learners choose their own texts should not be lost. If time had permitted, follow-up group activities based around some of the chosen texts could easily have been devised. Nevertheless, there was a 50 per cent positive response to the activity and I believe a bit more time invested in the introduction to the task would have produced a higher participation.

I wanted to create an activity that was self motivating. The task was a step in the right direction, although more time was needed to introduce the concepts in class. We may assume that most adults who have tertiary qualifications have already developed critical literacy skills in their own languages, yet there is always room for the kind of reflection that this kind of reading in depth requires, and it has the potential to increase awareness of Australian systems and culture. Students at this level may not believe that they need to improve their reading skills but are often reading articles in their daily lives which they are misinterpreting or only half understanding. Efforts should be made, therefore, to further develop the reading skills of advanced students.
It takes a real tough butcher to make sure you get tender meat.

John Kingdom, Woolworths State Meat Manager, is one tough guy. He knows quality and will settle for nothing less.

John ensures Woolworths meat is bred to our specifications. That way, John knows our customers get exactly what they pay for.

Now we're the first to admit it isn't easy to tell the difference between the best quality and cheaper cuts, so here are a few tips.

Basically, there's one very simple rule. And it's all to do with colour. "Light is Right". The lighter the meat and the lighter the fat, the better the quality.

- Quality beef should be pink to red with creamy white fat.
- Tender lamb is deep pink with white fat.
- Quality pork is pale pink, and finely grained with firm, white fat.
- The best veal is pale pink with little or no fat.

Woolworths

A.C.N. 087 879 118
Suggestions

I had planned to present a further activity in which I would present the group with three of their own selected texts and work on them in small groups, getting the groups to say how these texts represented Australian systems and culture and how they would have been written differently if similar topics had been dealt with in their own countries of origin. Time and circumstances prevented me from carrying out my plans, but I believe the activity would be useful.

Other suggestions arising from this research are:
• Find ways of allowing students to choose their own texts.
• Give opportunities for both independent reading and reflection and for group discussion.

Discussion task

1. Sally writes:

My discussions raised some of the fundamental questions of critical literacy, such as What constitutes a misinterpretation? Who is to be the judge? What constitutes evidence? Is the teacher to set him/herself up as the ideal interpreter of texts?

What do you think? Discuss these issues with your colleagues.
Sally suggests that the difficulty of giving student feedback on individual tasks could be overcome by devising follow-up group activities. With your colleagues brainstorm ideas for such group activities.

Classroom tasks

1. Review the questions that Sally used. Would such questions be suitable for your class? If not, can you select from them and/or adapt them to come up with a list of suitable questions to help your students to read critically. Try out the questions in class as a whole group. Revise them as seems helpful, then ask students to choose their own texts to read independently and apply the questions to. Get feedback from the students on what they found.

2. Randomly select eight to ten newspaper articles from a variety of locally available newspapers. Critically read the articles yourself, with the aim of identifying the assumptions about cultural knowledge and awareness they contain. Choose one or two to use in class as texts in a critical reading lesson. Discuss with your students their interpretations of relevant passages. Did they understand the text in the same way as you did? Were there issues of shared and unshared cultural knowledge and awareness impacting on the different reading of the texts?

---

Text 5

Hanson targets blacks, immigrants

By GEORGINA WINDSOR and ANDREW MCGARRY
OUTSPOKEN Independent,
MP Ms Pauline Hanson yesterday launched a scathing attack on Aboriginal welfare and multiculturalism in her maiden speech to Parliament. She also called for a return of compulsory national service.

Ms Hanson called for Australia’s immigration policy to be reviewed and multiculturalism abolished as she feared the country was “in danger of being swamped by Asians”.

“They have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate,” Ms Hanson said.

She also called for the introduction of compulsory 12-month national service for males and females when they turn 18.

Ms Hanson, who won the Queensland seat of Oxley as an Independent in the March election after being disendorsed as a Liberal candidate, attacked the Family Law Act, saying the Child Support Scheme created by “that disgraceful Senator Lionel Murphy” should be repealed as it was “unworkable.

---

The Australian, 11 September 1996, page 2