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***Critical Literacy in high school preparation language programs:
challenges and possibilities.***

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Internationalisation of the high school student body is firmly on the agenda in state education in Queensland and many other states in Australia. Fee-paying students from overseas, principally neighbouring Asian countries, have long been finding their way into mainstream high school classrooms via private language colleges that provide intensive language and content high school preparation courses. Recently, such students have been actively recruited as a result of advancing international policy at the macro state level. This new strategy to enroll overseas students in high schools means that there is a growing demand for language preparation courses to introduce those students, whose language proficiency is lower than the level expected by high schools, to the language, content and cultural requirements of the high school curriculum. Inevitably, this raises questions about the relationship between the nature of high school preparation (hereafter HSP) courses and the constantly evolving mainstream high school curriculum itself. At a recent teachers' conference, a group of secondary English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers remarked that those students who come to high school via HSP are disadvantaged if they are only 'prepared' in traditional language education ways for a system that now requires a more critical approach to language study. This paper outlines some of the issues and difficulties surrounding the incorporation of critical literacy into HSP course design and presents one example of how a HSP course has begun to integrate a critical perspective on language study into an existing program.

A typical HSP program

A typical high school preparation program, offered by a private language college, is marketed as a course that will make students ready for entry into regular Australian high school classrooms. Fee-paying, overseas students attend HSP courses for 10-20 weeks on average and study school curriculum related areas like science, maths, social science and subject English via novels, plays, poems, and films. ESL teachers, usually with a primary or secondary school background, teach the

language of these curriculum areas as well as more general survival English through a commercial ESL course-book.

Defining Critical Literacy in the high school.

As an approach to language study, critical literacy has been defined in various ways according to the context of its use. In general terms, critical literacy (CL) can be defined as –

the ability to continually ask questions of a text (talking back to the text) in ways that enable us to look below the surface meanings to see how we are being influenced and affected. This critical ability helps us examine our values and attitudes and to consider alternative positions and points of view (Lohrey 1998:9).

Closer to the Queensland context, Freebody and Luke (1990) define the literate critical or analytical ability, as demonstrated by fluent users of a language, as being able to identify discourses evident in the text; being able to note the author's position and gender and cultural/racial bias and to articulate the effect of all this on the self as reader. Such understandings appear in mainstream high school Queensland English Syllabuses, and should serve as a guide for teachers preparing non-English speaking background students for the mainstream experience. For the past ten years, these documents have included such statements as, "The English Syllabus for Yrs 1- 10 includes aspects of a critical approach to literacy. References to critical practice occur throughout the Syllabus. The Syllabus views critical practice as one element necessary for effective language use" (Queensland Dept. of Education 1994:2). Similarly, the 1999 Queensland School Curriculum Council English Curriculum Development Design Brief also identifies critical literacy as a key component in the study of English:

The focus of English as a key learning area in schooling...lies in the alignment of **textual studies**, language as a meaning-making system in cultural and social contexts and *literacy as a social practice* - the study of literate practices of reading and writing in a range of contexts, integrated with speaking and listening, viewing and shaping and the critical thinking involved in these practices (Ludwig 1999:39, my italics).

The new Senior Syllabus for English (2002), now implemented in all Queensland high schools from 2003, places considerable emphasis on critical discourse analysis. The syllabus defines discourse as "the cultural and social practices through which individuals and groups use language to establish their identities and memberships of groups" (Qld Studies Authority, English Senior Syllabus 2002: 3). This approach assumes that all texts use a range of textual devices to construct a version of the world – a particular reality – and to position readers in relation to this possible reality (Luke 2000). Analysing language in this way requires a distinct focus on the cultural assumptions about individuals, groups, places and concepts that underpin texts and awareness that discourses function concurrently in texts and compete for attention (Gee 1996). To illustrate, within Marchetta's (1991) *Looking for Alibrandi*, there are several discourses

operating simultaneously – the discourse of traditional immigrant Italian culture, evident in Nonna's over-protective language, behaviours, thoughts and values; the discourses of Australian youth and the discourses of class, evident in John's upper-middle class behaviour and aspirations.

The case for CL in high school preparation programs:

Critical literacy (CL) has been viewed, by a range of stake-holders in this sector (fee-paying parents, students, agents based overseas, college administrators who may or may not be trained in second language teaching), as being unnecessary, too difficult, contentious or at best, an adjunct to the real business of language learning. CL has, after all, only recently been brought in from the margins of literacy activity to a position of mainstream endorsement in state education (Luke 2000). This situation presents a challenge to HSP providers to engage with the debate around critical literacy instruction and urgently consider the linguistic and cultural requirements of critical engagement with language in the HSP classroom if they aim to adequately prepare their adolescent clientele as their marketing brochures pledge.

Fairclough, a leading UK proponent of critical discourse analysis, suggests that one of the aims of education, from school to university, should be to "provide a framework for systematically linking properties of ... interactions and texts with features of their social and cultural circumstances" (Fairclough 1999:75 and 79). Such an approach asks questions such as: *whose representations are present in the text?; who gains what from them?; what social relations do they draw people into?; what are their ideological effects?; and what alternatives are there?* (Fairclough 1999:75). Analysis of texts at this level requires high-school ESL teachers in both preparation and mainstream-support contexts to contemplate how this might be addressed in their curriculum and classrooms.

Many ESL teachers have, until recently, employed methods of text analysis that allow for global understanding of the schematic structure and language features of a given genre without necessarily asking questions of the text to see what ideological assumptions are being presented through the discourses drawn on by the author. Morgan (1997) states, and it is evident from the aforementioned syllabus documents (2002), that the genre approach and functional grammar have achieved widespread endorsement within English and ESL instruction in Queensland and that this is generally affirmed as compatible with CL (Morgan 1997:94). However, traditional approaches to reading skills that are typical of HSP programs, for example, neutral information processing (Luke and Walton 1994), the construction of reading as a set of technical skills (Luke 1995) or even the genre approach, are not enough to equip students for the linguistic demands of their immediate educational future in high school or university, their ensuing employment situations and potential participation in broader cultural and political arenas.

Many HSP language programs are not yet addressing the critical study of language which demands drawing attention to the ideological bases of discourses as they circulate both in everyday life and within particular texts (Wallace 1999:98). Hammond et al. (1992:12) argue that "the aim of all literacy (including English as a second language) programs should be the development of a critical literacy where learners focus not just on the mechanics or content of the...texts, but on the construction and the way the readers are positioned within the texts." This can be applied to all forms of interacting with text – reading, viewing, listening and responding in written and spoken form. An even more strident critique of language and literacy teaching, both first language and second language, is offered by Fairclough who asserts that reducing language study to formulas or techniques is a misuse of power on the part of teachers. It becomes the imposition of our favoured social practice that promotes literacy as merely a set of skills which are uncontestable and determinate (Fairclough 1999:81).

In the high-school preparation context, such curriculum issues become a political and ethical issue given that it is our job description (and business mission statement) to *prepare* students as their social and academic language needs dictate. We now have an obligation to go beyond the conventional literacy that so often appears in ESL text-books (eg true/false questions; gap-fill exercises) that limits our scope for training students to 'decode the subtle ideologies of social relationships in texts and to interpret them from their own ideology' (Lindsay in Morgan 1997:94). Although CL awareness has presently gained status at the state education document level, the decision often rests with individual high school preparation coordinators and teachers whether or not to commit to the process of language education for and with critical thinking. There are, however, considerable dilemmas facing HSP practitioners who are considering a CL approach.

Challenges to using CL in High School Preparation Courses.

As signalled above, for CL to be used in a comprehensive manner in a curriculum it needs to be considered at every step of the curriculum development process. Yet there are reasonable concerns about employing CL in various ESL contexts (cf. Alford 2001), including high-school preparation. The following section highlights various perceived impediments to using CL in relation to various aspects of course design and implementation. Some counterarguments to these commonly perceived obstructions are also offered.

Assessing student needs/backgrounds and determining goals and objectives:

Students' previous experiences of education systems and previous attitudes to learning may be largely shaped through a transmission style of learning. This may be deeply embedded in L1 culture based on a high collective regard for historic perspectives and traditional authority. CL can therefore be seen as unimportant or subversive and offensive (Wallace 1992:62) and critiquing is often equated with finding fault. Students may possess a very limited subjective need for CL,

even though the teacher may perceive it as an objective need knowing the critical literacy skills the students will require in the mainstream high-school setting. Students may, however, welcome the opportunity to actively process texts in relation to their values and ideas. This is particularly pertinent to CL as it is based on an assumption that L2 learners are also in the process of rediscovering their own national and ethnic identity through a foreign language (Janks 1999:122).

Conceptualising content:

ESL Teachers are often concerned that only controversial content can be used in a CL approach. Luke states that we should include all manner of texts, even if not polemic, as they are reflections of social reality and ideology in all its forms (Luke 1995). Teachers' decisions to edit/omit provocative texts, driven by a possible sense of protectionism -especially in younger learners- actually marginalises learners and prevent them from utilising a methodology for interpreting texts both propositionally and ideologically (Wallace 1992:50). CL is not so much concerned with the subject matter but in a critical approach to interpreting its social meaning (Burns and Hood 1999).

Teachers' perceptions of their role and their students' roles:

As teachers, we are often unprepared or unwilling to use CL as an integral part of our curriculum and methodology as it calls into question our culturally dominant position and requires challenging and sobering self-analysis as well as the willingness to acknowledge and suspend our own cultural bias. The fear of alienating students or the institution from its market, particularly if the teacher's own ideology becomes dominant (Luke and Walton 1994), requires the teacher to be very aware of his/her own beliefs and to develop a sense of detachment from them. This is not an easy task and so CL is avoided or treated sketchily. HSP teachers also often feel the need to maintain a sense of authority in the classroom for our own sense of security and, frequently, for the security of our foreign students. To admit there is no definitive answer but great subjectivity, as is the case when interrogating language for its assumptions, makes us uncomfortable (Morgan 1997:103). This raises the related issue of the role of students in the learning process. CL is a more learner-centred approach as it depends less on the teacher as the provider of knowledge and more on each individual student using the tools of enquiry to respond to texts from their own position.

The idea that CL is not appropriate for elementary proficiency level also prevents teachers from employing even simple CL techniques that can set the learners in motion for more complicated CL tasks as their proficiency allows. The view that NESB learners could never be text analysts or critical readers until they reached late adolescence/adulthood or near-native-like proficiency, is contested by Burke, Campbell and Green (2000:187). They report that success has been achieved, through a well-paced, deliberate process, even with young, limited proficiency learners. The average HSP student has the conceptual readiness but has limited time in the second language classroom before being thrust into the mainstream. This creates an even greater urgency to introduce CL earlier in appropriate ways. Burns and Hood (1999) suggest that oral activities where students share different socio-cultural practices are particularly relevant to this

level. Developing critical *oracy* and a system of text analysis using basic CL questions from the outset may provide a framework for HSP learners to approach learning the language critically. Written explication of discourses in texts, currently a common feature of high school critical literacy assessment, may then come more easily for such students later.

Considering resources and restraints:

Designing for CL is initially time consuming in the planning stage and can require/stimulate lengthy discussion that the average teacher is not prepared to allocate time for alongside other aspects of a demanding curriculum and within a limited time frame. In addition, the fear of getting bogged down in ontological debate about perspectives and 'truth' deters some teachers from raising questions about ideology in 'language' classrooms. Many teachers feel ill-equipped to facilitate such debate. Perceived (or real) time constraints also make it difficult for teachers to embrace CL as an everyday activity. It is viewed unfavourably, as an extra thing to do rather than a fundamental approach underpinning regular practice and a tool to equip students for independent learning. Brown suggests that a CL approach cannot be random and irregular but an well-established part of classroom practice (Brown 1999:25).

In terms of available resources, many materials do not reflect accurately any real sense of the broader cultural context. Textbook materials are often simulations or simplifications of authentic language and are difficult to use in a CL approach. College coordinators, who are ostensibly running a business, may not be prepared to outlay capital for authentic texts that reflect the local context and/or the types of content areas represented in schools. The onus is often on teachers either to develop supplementary resources or more appropriately, seek student generated/selected materials as more engaging catalysts for CL work.

Many teachers also feel constrained by the requirements of a syllabus designed around a set language course-book. Teachers who aren't prepared to deviate from the set text-book - perhaps through inexperience - may find CL difficult to implement. Yet this is one situation where CL can provide a welcome change to routine text-based activities. CL questions can be substitutes for the often irrelevant and limiting comprehension questions which abound in ESL text-books and mainstream high school texts. However, many institutions that offer HSP courses (along with general English and international exam preparation courses) are marketed overseas conservatively and do not wish to risk identifying with things 'political', even if being 'political' only means identifying ideologies and assumptions in real language use. Choosing *not* to promote CL, in contrast, is an equally political decision. As Pennycook (1994) suggests, *all* English language teaching bears social, cultural and political messages. Fairclough challenges the contemporary tendency to narrow the purposes of education to serve the needs of the economy and asserts that CL serves an alternative vision (Fairclough 1999:81). CL and HSP language education as an 'industry', seem, in this way, to have conflicting objectives. Yet HSP courses would not exist if not for the high school curriculum itself – a curriculum that is undergoing rapid and radical change.

Despite the above constraints and dilemmas, teachers in HSP contexts *are* experimenting with critical language study in small but inspiring ways. The following section exemplifies how one teacher at a private language centre in Brisbane incorporated CL into her unit of work for a high school preparation class. Such accounts are not major shifts in curriculum design and implementation but are significant, localised interpretations of new priorities in teaching and learning language; they are ‘ruptures of the current pedagogy’ (Lin 2004:284) whereby new teaching visions and alternative practices can develop organically (See also Gore 1993).

Possibilities – From reading the word to reading the world in one high school science preparation class.

Linda ¹ is an experienced HSP teacher and has a class of 15 students from Taiwan, Colombia, Japan, Korea and Indonesia aged between 14 and 16. She is teaching a science topic about the nature versus science debate and finds a controversial newspaper article about parents choosing the sex of their baby. Linda decided that this reading text would be a good way to introduce the topic and would also act as a vehicle for building ‘technical’ reading skills and for developing higher order/critical reading skills. Linda and her class are familiar with ‘3 Level Guides’ (Morris and Stewart-Dore 1990), a popular and effective three step strategy for reading at the literal, interpretive and applied levels so she decided to use this as a framework for some critical investigation.

Linda started with some pre-reading vocabulary building exercises to focus the students’ minds on the kinds of words they would come across in the text (a common language teaching exercise) and then asked some leading questions about the students’ views on ‘interfering with nature’. She then asked students to do the literal level of the 3 level guide where students had to respond the true/false (T/F) statements using the information provided in the newspaper text. So far, it was language learning business as usual for both teacher and students. As students worked through the remainder of the T/F statements in the 3 Level Guide, they found themselves thinking about the newspaper text differently – no longer just about ideas and issues alone but about how such content is presented to readers (via language) and how language positions or manoeuvres readers to take up certain views. When preparing the 3 Level Guide, Linda had included in the interpretive and applied section some statements that steered her students toward critically interrogating the text for the values it was presenting on biological engineering. To do this she used the following kinds of questions as her tools of critical inquiry: *What does the writer of the text want us to know? Who benefits from the text? What view of the world is the text presenting? What kinds of social realities does the text present? Whose views are excluded or privileged in the text?* ² Linda formulated T/F statements for the interpretive and applied levels based on the kind of higher order thinking such questions promote.

A final question - *How might the text be different if it were told in another time, place or culture?* - posed after the 3 Level Guide, generated discussion about how texts (in this case, mainly their

topics/issues) are situated in history and that texts and their language reflect and construct world views that change over time. Linda also modelled for her students how they might formulate their responses into complete coherent sentences, paying attention to things like syntax and spelling, thereby returning to a more traditional language teaching activity.

Linda's subtle and well –scaffolded foray into critical language study made it not only manageable for herself as a busy classroom teacher with institutional constraints and expected practices, but also palatable to her students. It allowed them a measure of success with critical language work and demonstrated that critical language study concepts and processes can be introduced alongside other higher order thinking procedures that are already endorsed by institutional practices.

Conclusion

Providing critical pedagogy in programs driven largely by a business agenda makes for a complex debate that this paper has only partially addressed. However, if we believe, as mainstream high school syllabus documents now do, that language is a socially driven phenomenon (Mangubhai 1992), then the process of HSP course design and the classroom techniques we employ to realise that curriculum need to reflect this conviction. As suggested in this paper, a CL approach to language study can equip learners to deal with language as social practice - highly variable, representative of and, in turn, constituting discourses and their inherent assumptions, and also open to multiple interpretations. In my experience, HSP ESL teachers negotiate challenging pedagogical terrain with limited time and resources. They are often confronted by industry pressure to 'keep their customers satisfied', by competitive market forces vying for enrolments and by tenuous employment conditions. Pedagogical choices (i.e to do CL or not) are clearly influenced by such external factors. Without addressing the full range of literate practices required of high school age learners, HSP providers may find it difficult to keep pace with the types of curricula for which they are aiming to make their students ready. Until then, it seems that teachers like Linda are left to make isolated and sporadic attempts at drawing on the pedagogies for which their students are now bound.

- Notes: 1. Linda is a pseudonym.
2. For a useful list of questions used in critical language study, see <http://www.education.tas.gov.au/english/critlit.htm>

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