



## Learning language and critical literacy: Adolescent ESL students

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As one of eight states and territories in Australia, Queensland is responsible for its own educational policies and practices. Critical Literacy (CL) is now included in the state curricular design as a pedagogical platform (rather than an adjunct or optional course). This is a welcome initiative after years of a transmission style of literacy in which students have been encouraged to reproduce conventions of language in use (genres) without questioning the dominant assumptions and values underpinning texts. Once considered renegade and of suspect political association (Muspratt, Luke, & Freebody, 1997), CL has become part of mainstream documents such as the Queensland trial pilot syllabus in senior English (developed in November 1999). The version of CL endorsed in this trial syllabus and associated school-based work programs encourages senior English students (between 15 and 18 years of age) to explore varying reading and author positions and the social and cultural influence of Discourses (Gee, 1996). Gee defined the term *Discourse* as follows: "Discourses are ways in which people co-ordinate and are co-ordinated by language, other people, objects, times and places, so as to take on particular socially recognisable identities" (p. 131).

Within this current approach to literacy, assessment tasks involving the interpretation of set texts from a number of conflicting reading positions (e.g., the invited, author-centred view and the resistant, world-centred view) are becoming more commonplace. This is a positive step toward addressing the need to equip young people to

interrogate texts for their ideological positioning and to investigate how the language/layout/images of texts influence them as readers. Indeed, as Elkins and Luke (1999) suggested, in a culture where texts are designed to manipulate and sell and mould the thinking of a population, it would be an abrogation of our responsibility as educators not to promote a critically literate approach to the reading and viewing of texts.

What is of particular interest to me is that the mainstream English classes in Queensland schools, which will be using the new syllabus, include a proportion of non-English-speaking background students whose needs in terms of language learning and CL are quite distinct from those of their mainstream counterparts. By both pedagogical and policy design, these students in Australia are inducted into mainstream secondary education after attending limited (on average 3 to 6 months) intensive language-learning development courses. Many enter the system with limited language proficiency and require ongoing literacy support. From this angle, I read Moje, Young, Readence, and Moore's (2000) article with interest. While I was encouraged when they mentioned the English as a Second Language (ESL) learner as part of a marginalised group that could benefit from CL, I would like to suggest there are a number of problematic issues surrounding the use of CL with adolescent ESL learners in the mainstream education context. I will also suggest some strategies to address the issues.

Moje et al. (2000) stressed that "our existing secondary literacy research does not fully address the demands of the diverse groups of students and communities educators serve" (p. 405). Published research into the needs and experiences of ESL students engaging in CL in mainstream classrooms is indeed scant. It

## STANDPOINTS & VOICES

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(pp. 238-242)

is significant that those Moje et al. identified as marginalised to and by many current literacy education practices still include “those who have language or cultural practices different from those valued in school” (p. 405). Despite all the multicultural rhetoric, it is truly an indictment of literacy programs that second-language learners are still faced with such systematic sidelining.

It is widely argued that a CL approach has certain benefits for the marginalised second-language learner (Clark, 1995; Janks, 1999; Wallace, 1992, 1995; Wignell, 1995), and that drawing on these learners’ perspectives and interpretations can reposition these students away from the edges (Moje et al., 2000). Current thinking suggests it is not enough to instruct students in how to reproduce culturally and socially generated genres without questioning the way language is manipulated in these genres to construct particular versions of reality (Luke, 1995).

What is significant about Moje et al.’s article is that they attempted to flesh out how the marginalised (including the second-language) learner might be catered to linguistically and culturally in a mainstream classroom using a CL approach. They suggest strategies such as analysing textual and linguistic features including types of verbs used to describe male (typically action verbs) and female (typically passive voice) athletes, thereby highlighting the link between language choice and the social construction of masculine and feminine identity and Discourses. Moje et al.’s article can be expanded on to address some key factors influencing the marginalised ESL learner’s approach to CL. There are many such factors, but I will address two interrelated factors I believe need to be foregrounded and resolved at the commencement of any CL approach in the mainstream subject classroom (Alford, 2000). These

are the nature of the texts presented and the concept of resistance.

### **The nature and choice of texts under critical investigation**

Despite moves to incorporate popular culture and contemporary local literature into classroom practice, texts presented in mainstream education (in Australian schools) are largely representative of canonical Western literature. Students from non-Western cultures and language backgrounds may lack the necessary foreknowledge for critiquing these texts. Much of the published classroom research into using a CL approach to texts with ESL learners is based on situations where students can self-select the text to interrogate (Burns & Hood, 1998; Wajnryb, 2000; Wallace, 1995). This would naturally afford the student some sense of control over the topic of the text and therefore reflect his or her personal interest. Potentially, it would also reflect a degree of existing background knowledge of the subject matter. In the mainstream secondary context, however, students are given some scope to choose the text—an assessment item in one senior class involves selecting a film of one’s own choice to review critically—but the other texts are representative of established Western literature, such as E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1936) and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960).

These texts could be considered a good starting point for CL, in that they are obviously ideologically transparent in their intention (Eco, 1992, in Wallace, 1995), and invested with sharply delineated power relations (Wallace, 1995); for example, between Atticus Finch and Bob Ewell in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This makes the analysis of the various Discourses in the novel easy to access. However, such analysis is greatly enhanced, as is any second-

language learning episode, if some prior knowledge schema can be activated (Finnochiaro, 1989; Gibbons, 1991). In the case of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, this prior knowledge could include issues of race, class, and gender relations in Alabama in the early 20th century. For many ESL students in Australia, it may also require greater background knowledge of historical and contemporary race-relation issues pertinent to Australia. It is unlikely that many recently arrived ESL students in Australia would possess much of this knowledge. Therefore, if we view the field (subject matter) as a necessary backdrop to understanding language in context, using a sociolinguistic perspective of language use, then these students could be disadvantaged from the outset. In fact, Nunan (1989) found that “the lack of appropriate background knowledge was a more significant factor in the ability of second language learners to comprehend school texts than linguistic complexity as measured by various readability formulae” (p. 103). In accordance with contemporary second-language teaching and learning pedagogy, the field would need to be made explicit to the ESL learner and not assumed as a given (Gibbons, 1991; McKay & Scarino, 1991). It should not be assumed that this will occur in the mainstream classroom without the intervention of a trained ESL specialist or a mainstream teacher skilled in knowledge of the language in use.

Some useful strategies that may help to build background knowledge include the following:

1. *Activating existing prior knowledge:* Brainstorm to elicit the knowledge students already have about the time period (events that happened in their country of origin at that time as well as in Australia and the U.S.); the location of the story (e.g., Alabama); and the various Discourses evident in the novel (e.g., race, gender, class, age, family relations, or love). Find

pictures of people and objects and examples of language in print that might fit one or more Discourses and discuss how and why they belong. The teacher can then fill in some of the gaps in students' knowledge with maps, news clippings, film footage, short biographies, reference material, realia, or vocabulary.

2. *Building on that knowledge from a contemporary localised perspective*: Students can choose one of the Discourses (to be explored more fully later when reading the novel). They can then find a short contemporary newspaper article dealing with a related issue and discuss the position the author takes, the way he or she portrays the participants, the types of language used, and their own response. They can then compare their findings with those of others in the class. This allows students to deal with one topic (which is not an option when studying a novel that has many Discourses operating simultaneously), explore it in some depth, and experiment with analysing reader and writer positions. It has the added advantage of being a locally situated, current, student-generated text. Consequently, the student will most likely have some knowledge of and a natural interest in the topic, which will enhance motivation for investigation. The emphasis on talking—oral language use—in these two strategies reflects the view that discussion prior to reading provokes recall of the learners' existing understanding of the topic, which prepares them to “take in” new data, including language (Gibbons, 1991; McKay, 1993).

3. *Adding new information during reading*: Students can then use the previous activities as a framework to add to their list of Discourses (including vocabulary and other language features) as they read the novel. This can be extended as their knowledge of the Discourses and language as social practice grows.

Activities like these can aid ESL students' chances of success when they are asked, as they invariably are, to choose a Discourse in the novel and comment on the way it is constructed by the writer. This is particularly true if we ask our students to respond to canonical texts from an author-centred perspective. To draw conclusions about the intention of the writer, the student must have a reasonable knowledge of the topic and possible positions on it. This is frequently not the case when the text is written in a second (or even third) language, set in a secondary foreign context, and in a period of time long past. This leads us to the next area of discussion that equally determines the ESL learner's approach to CL tasks—the cultural appropriateness of the notion of resistance.

### **ESL learners and resistant reading**

Many mainstream ESL learners come from cultures of learning where the authority of the text is unquestionable. Resisting the power of print/images (Janks, 1993) is one of the hallmarks of CL, and adopting a critical stance ostensibly means questioning the traditions and accepted practices of a culture and its history. While this may appear emancipatory to many of us who work with critical literacy, to many ESL learners this is an inappropriate response to written text (Wallace, 1995). The point is often made that being critically literate is not a matter of changing or denying a position but one of considering multiple meanings and constructions of social identities and Discourses (Janks, 1993; Moje et al., 2000; Morgan, 1997). However, students from language backgrounds other than English may find it difficult not to position themselves alongside the ideological assumptions of the text, having experienced socialisation through another cultural and education system that actively requires

and rewards memorisation and reproduction of culturally and historically endorsed texts and thought.

It may be that such reproduction furthers the interests of some and not others (Fairclough, 1992), but unless ESL learners can see the value in resisting text in the first place, they may resist attempts to become critically literate and instead prefer a “transmission” style of literacy (Luke, 1995) that is more aligned with their experience of the literate practices of their culture of origin (Pratt, Kelly, & Wong, 1999). Wallace (1995) suggested that overdeference to text is a general tendency amongst ESL learners. To learn to challenge the “obvious” ideological assumptions and propositional knowledge in texts requires explicit instruction and a process that takes into account language learning and acculturation (Clark, 1995; Wallace, 1995; Wignell, 1995). What is “obvious” to the student from an English-speaking culture and language background may not be so to the second-language learner.

This is not to say that the West has a monopoly on higher order thinking and that non-Western cultures do not have a system of critique. In Hong Kong Chinese culture, for example, critique is the domain of the master, once mastery of the field has been established. This honour is bestowed after one's dues to the culturally and socially determined corpus of knowledge have been paid (Pratt, Kelly, & Wong, 1999). By virtue of their age, adolescents are in no position to do this. However, it would be unwise to assume that deference to text is normative amongst all non-English-speaking students. Each student must be treated according to his or her specific culture of learning and personal orientation to the authority of texts. Yet the adolescent ESL learner in the mainstream, standing astride two cultures of learning, faces the daunting task of negotiating new

multiliterate demands in the target culture and language, while trying to pay respect to a previously acquired culture of learning where submission to text may have been the preferred learner response (Wallace, 1995).

On the other hand, Wallace (1995) noted that ESL students may in fact have an edge on mainstream students in responding to texts from the world-centred perspective. She suggested they may have an “over-hearer’s advantage” in not belonging to the intended readership of the text. From their outsider’s position, they are not invited to collude or align themselves with the text’s presuppositions (Wallace, 1995). With limited cultural inculcation, they are free to resist. Similarly, Australian-born (or American) students reading a text translated from Chinese may easily resist the intention of the author as they are not part of the predetermined readership. This is good news for the ESL student in the mainstream class.

There are several strategies worthy of experimentation in order to explore this phenomenon. For example, a dialogue can develop between the mainstream (non-ESL) student, who may find it difficult to resist dominant assumptions in a Western text because of implicit cultural mores, and the ESL student, who can resist it from a world-centred view. Conversely, the mainstream student, who will share some, if not all, of the cultural knowledge of a Western text with its author, can help the ESL student to understand the text from the author-centred view. This serves to include ESL learners more fully in the process of investigation and can reposition these students away from the edges of the literacy education experience. The fact that they don’t belong to the intended readership becomes their advantage. The astute teacher will include texts that represent a range of cultural and language back-

grounds (on the same topic as the set text) to illustrate the potential of this learning process. CL is the ideal platform from which to embrace cultural inclusivity, and opportunities such as this should be maximised.

For all its complexity, I remain convinced that without the implementation of a curriculum strategically underpinned by a critical literacy approach we run the risk of making our second-language learners just literate enough (through decoding, semantic skills, and pragmatics) to get themselves “badly in debt, exploited or locked out” (Luke, 1995, p. 111). If ESL students can resist the dominant assumptions in a text generated by their target culture and language, then the possibilities for validating their perspectives and hearing their voices are enormous.

There is a range of other language challenges facing the mainstream ESL learner engaging in a CL approach to literacy, including the following:

1. The complex language demands of expressing higher order abstract thought, such as the use of nominalisation (making verbs into nouns and using them appropriately, e.g. I interpret.../My interpretation of...) (McKay, 1993).

2. A degree of control of the schematic structure of conventional genres and the grammatical and textual features of these genres (Hammond & Macken-Horarick, 1999; Wallace, 1995). Students are frequently asked to express multiple reading positions through various genres for assessment purposes. Without control over the conventions of these text types, the ESL student is disadvantaged.

3. A degree of assumed knowledge of texts and their accompanying social purposes (Hammond & Macken-Horarick, 1999; Wallace, 1995). An understanding of the purposes of a text—to inform factually, to entertain, to express opinion—is

largely presupposed in a CL approach. ESL students need to be aware of these culturally generated and socially agreed-upon aspects of genre before they can critique them.

4. A metalanguage with which to discuss textual features. Wallace (1995) spent a good deal of time in a CL course with ESL adults building a shared metalanguage before beginning critical investigation of texts. This opportunity is rarely possible in the mainstream adolescent classroom due to time and curriculum constraints. It is clearly a complex issue worthy of greater rigorous research into ESL learners’ experience of CL as an approach to mainstream literacy education.

In continuing to advocate for more widespread critical literacy practice, it would be advantageous for mainstream educators to be mindful of the linguistic and cultural demands this approach places on the second-language learner. Steps can then be taken to cater to their needs, without reverting back to the safe ground of functional literacy instruction that, from a critical perspective, serves only the interests of those in power by perpetuating socially constructed Discourses (Fairclough, 1992; Luke, 1995). The ESL learner, as a constituent of the adolescent mainstream body, must be taken into account in any literacy initiative. Their perspectives matter and, as Moje et al. (2000) suggested, their experiences must inform best practice to benefit a range of our marginalised adolescent learners.

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