Critical Language Awareness as a Tool to Enhance Language Instruction

Justin Charlebois

Abstract

The current paper illustrates the application of Critical Language Awareness (CLA) (Fairclough, 1989) to a unit focusing on *The Color Purple* (Spielberg, 1985). Specifically, it will demonstrate how Fairclough s (1989) four stages: reflection, systemizing, explanation, and developing practice can provide the foundation to teach students how to critically analyze texts. CLA is a tool which empowers language learners to become more critical and reflective readers.

Introduction

Throughout their formative years students engage with a wide variety of texts in multiple ways. This encompasses practices such as listening to a bedtime story and watching cartoons to reading academic texts and viewing films. In the process, they are exposed to ideas ranging from the roles men and women play in society to notions about happiness and love that are closely tied to the culture and various subcultures they belong to and the texts were produced in. Even the same text can be read in different ways. While a Japanese child may learn about reliance on others through Aesop s *The Ant and the Grasshopper* an American child learns about independence through the same text. Texts can be seen as one of many influences that contribute to our worldviews

A clear line cannot be drawn between a socio-cultural norm and an ideology. For example, in American schools, children learn from an early age that formulating and expressing an opinion is a crucial component of success. Consequently, much talk in American culture is in the form of an argument (Tannen, 1998). The pre-eminent issue is not whether we should classify this as an ideology or socio-cultural norm. What is more important is the ability to decipher how this idea has become part of the culture. This is where Critical Language Awareness can play a crucial role.

Critical Language Awareness (CLA) (Fairclough, 1989) is a tool that can be used to critically examine texts. CLA helps students become more analytical readers who question what the author presents as the status quo. The status quo presented depends on the author s background, message he or she attempts to convey, and place the text was produced.

The current paper demonstrates the application of CLA in a second language (L2) context. It will demonstrate how the four stages of CLA can be adopted to teach a unit using *The Color Purple* (Spielberg, 1985) as the text. Furthermore, it will argue that CLA is an important tool to equip students with as they compete in an increasingly

global society.

Multimedia-Based Instruction

Film has multiple uses in classrooms to support the language development of second language learners. Besides serving as a source of target-language input, it can be used to enhance pragmatic development (Washburn, 2001; Kite & Tatsuki, 2005) and sociocultural awareness (Carter & Miauchi, 2005). Therefore, the use of film can prevent language classrooms from becoming impoverished learning environments (Kasper, 1997) as many L2 learners lack exposure to authentic input. This is especially the case for those learners in foreign language contexts. Film studies is an emerging discipline with limitless possibilities in the language classroom.

While film has many advantages and can enhance classroom learning environments, it is still a text that was produced by a certain person during a certain time period which reflects certain ideas. Thus, teachers have a responsibility not only to teach language and culture through film but also teach students how to critically read it. We are at a point in time where this type of visual literacy is just as important as traditional forms of reading and writing since many students choose to watch a film in lieu of read a book.

Critical Language Awareness (CLA)

While educational institutions are traditionally seen as vehicles that foster greater opportunities for students, the institutions themselves are unfair. CLA (Fairclough, 1989) attests that education itself is entrenched in the problem of language and power in contemporary society. Education, according to Fairclough (1995), is not only a prime location of linguistically mediated power, but also a mediator of other key areas for learners, including the adult work world. Educational institutions are ideal contexts where the critical analysis of the relationship between language and power can occur through the analysis of discursive practices.

Discursive practice refers to the process of text production, interpretation, and consumption (Fairclough, 1989). Discursive practices must be understood at the social and individual levels. The social level refers to the larger economic, social, and political context in which they were created. The individual level references the reader s member resources. These include reader expectations about narratives and grammatical forms of sentences. Case, Ndura, and Righettini (2005) connect these to schema (Tannen, 1993); in other words, cognitively based assumptions about events and social situations. These schemata, in turn, are one of the influences on how readers interpret a text.

Ideologies can be so cunningly embedded in texts that readers interpret them as reality. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2004) define ideology as, the system of beliefs

by which people explain, account for, and justify their behavior, and interpret and assess that of others (p. 35). Ideology, then, is similar to a lens through which people view the world. The internalization of ideologies is not necessarily a conscious process. Like many aspects of socialization, they can be gradually acquired without even knowing it. Thus, an author s version of reality may reflect certain ideologies, yet he or she may be oblivious to this. For this reason, it is important to critically examine texts. Readers such as second language learners who lack crucial socio-cultural knowledge about the culture texts were created in face additional challenges in the interpretation process.

The definition of texts includes both written print and visual images. Therefore, discursive practices encompass acts of consumption which include reading a newspaper or novel, viewing a film, or reading a visual advertisement. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) for example lay out a framework for the analysis of visual texts.

Ideologies, then, often run through various texts. Goffman (1976) for example demonstrates how males and females are constructed in advertisements to reflect a view of the perfect couple. In her analysis of award-winning children s literature, Sunderland (2004) identifies both traditional and non-traditional depictions of male and female roles. Sunderland s study in particular demonstrates that one ideology is not necessarily pervasive across all domains. At the same time, in the process of consumption (reading or viewing a text) social actors have agency. Just because a text expresses a certain ideology does not mean that a reader must internalize it; he or she can also resist and question that ideology. In the case of students, it is important that they receive training in the critical analysis of text so that they can adopt various positions (i.e., resistant, supportive, or somewhere in between) in relation to texts.

CLA is a resource learners can draw from to confront discursive practices and power relations. This is particularly important for learners who are not accustomed to critical reading as may be the case for some second language learners. This type of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1992) may not be part of the educational system in many cultures for various reasons, one being that it might not reflect the goals of the educational systems. For this reason, CLA can be seen as an additional resource that can be used at the appropriate time. In this way, educators can also answer Fairclough s (1992; 1995) call to equip students with dialogical capacities through the development of language skills. In sum, CLA is a tool that students can utilize to critically examine texts.

Rationale

In recent years language classrooms have become places where discussions related to so-called non-language issues occurs. This has resulted from the

acknowledgement of the inseparability of language and culture in this rapidly developing global society. These issues are related to gender (Charlebois, 2006), feminism (Yoshiharu, 2005), and AIDS (Haynes, 2003). One could argue that the purpose of language classes is to teach language and not indoctrinate students with ideology. In other words, language teaching in its true form, whatever that may be, should remain the focus of classrooms.

CLA, however, asserts that the teaching of language in and of itself is inseparable from ideological processes. This is seen in something as basic as classroom materials. Case, Ndura, & Righettini (2005), adopting a CLA perspective, demonstrate the presence of ideologies through the analysis of stories included in two textbooks. In the stories there were assumptions made about ethnic minorities that reinforced certain stereotypes. While the textbook authors could have avoided the controversy all together through the selection of other stories, the inclusion of these stories in the textbooks could have provided an opportunity to address these stereotypical depictions in essence a teachable moment. The textbook authors, however, did not make any effort through the chapter questions and activities either to highlight these discursive acts or address these ideologies, thus an unsuspecting reading could consume them as truths. This is especially dangerous when textbooks such as these are adopted in second language contexts where learners ostensibly have limited socio-cultural knowledge about the texts.

While Hymes (1974) extends the definition of communicative competence to include pragmatic competence, attention has not been devoted to the importance of the ability to critically examine and deconstruct texts. Clearly, the texts produced by writers and film produces become part of the culture and can exert an influence on society. This is demonstrated by the popularity of various television series. Therefore, more recent research has suggested that communicative competence should extend beyond an understanding the rules governing a language in a particular society to an understanding of how those rules support the interests of a dominant group (Norton Pierce, 1995).

The Color Purple and CLA

The next part of this paper will focus on illustrating how CLA can be utilized in the development and execution of a film unit on *The Color Purple* (Spielberg, 1985). Fairclough s (1989) four stages of critical language awareness form the base of this unit.

The first stage reflection asks students to reflect on their own discourses and share them with the class. This refers to pre-reading or in this case pre-viewing activities.

Students are asked to reflect on two questions in class. These questions include

(1) how are the speech styles or conversational styles (Tannen, 1984) of men and women different; and (2) what does it mean to be free or oppressed ?

Students often cite that men and women orient to different aspects of conversation in response to the first question. For example, men are said to have greater interest in the referential function of talk while women are more oriented to its affective function. This is a view of gender and language that has been popularized by Tannen (1990). For men, conversation is generally a way to relate information while for women it is a way to share emotions and build solidarity. Tannen (1990) uses the terms report talk and rapport talk respectively. Report talk is frequently used by men and focuses on conveying information and negotiating status with other speakers. Rapport talk, on the other hand, is frequently utilized by women and focuses on conveying emotions and building solidarity with others. The usage of these two terms is in no way meant to suggest a rigid dichotomy. Tannen points out that these styles exist on a continuum.

Furthermore, asking them to consider the words free and oppressed, which are in direct opposition to each other, encourages them to think about the interrelationship between discourse and ideology which is framed in a larger discussion of race and gender. This sets the stage for the unit as it gets them thinking about the power of language and its relationship to ideologies.

The second stage systemizing asks that students develop a systematic understanding of the use of language to index specific discursive acts within texts. Discursive acts are specific features of language utilized to advance a certain ideology (Fairclough, 1989). This stage can be equated with during-reading or in this case viewing activities. Time constraints do not allow for viewing the entire film in class, so students are expected to see it outside of class and answer a list of questions as homework (Appendix A).

The third stage explanation asks that students view texts critically. It is here that stage two s questions are discussed coupled with my explanations. This is an essential component of the model because the instructor provides students with necessary social knowledge they lack. Thus, discursive practices are analyzed at the social level.

During this time, we review the pertinent scenes from the movie as a class, and I provide them with critical social knowledge to further aid in their interpretation and understanding of the film.

The first question targets the power of referring terms (Schiffrin, 2002) to index power relationships. Schiffrin (2002) defines referring terms as, noun phrases that evoke a referent a person, place or thing that the speaker has in mind in such a way that a hearer may interpret (roughly) the same referent (p. 316). We view a scene

set in a country store where the shop owner s treatment of an African-American and Caucasian customer is strikingly different. While the shop clerk is very polite to the Caucasian customers, he refers to the African-American ones with gal. Many students are unaware of the pragmatic force (Austin, 1962) of this referring term. However, when my explanation accompanies multiple viewings of the scene, they begin to understand the severity of the racism that African-Americans directly experienced during this time period. This is extended to a general discussion of referring terms and how they index relationships among people. An example taken from Lakoff (2004) is the collocation of eligible with bachelor when a similar collocation does not exist for spinster and old maid. In addition to this, the latter pair has a very different connotation than the former. Other examples include female doctor and male nurse.

The referring terms used in this film provide multiple possibilities for additional pedagogical applications beyond those suggested above. In reference to this first question, a mini-lesson targeting appropriate ways to address people could follow. For example, how customers were addressed during the time period the movie was set in versus now. Due to the gradual breakdown of the hierarchy that once defined relations in the United States, it is now very common for salesclerks to address customers less formally which sharply contrasts with the norms prevalent in Japan. Students could explicitly be taught these different address terms. It is essential that they, too, understand currently accepted ways to address different people.

The second question focuses on racial oppression. In this scene, Sophia, one of the main characters in the film, is asked to be the mayor s maid, which she flatly refuses. In that scene the mayor s wife, Miss Millie, says, Oh, your children are so clean. Would you like to work for me? Be my maid? The speech act (Austin, 1962) involved here is that of an offer, but it is different from an ordinary one. While the illocutionary force (communicative intention) of this utterance is that of an offer, the perlocutionary effect (the effect the illocutionary force has on the hearer) intended is that Sophia will recognize the great honor that is being bestowed on her and gladly accept. In other words, while Miss Millie s speech act appears to be an offer, she does not expect a refusal. This indexes the inequality of African-Americans during that time. Although an acceptance is usually the preferred response (Sacks, 1987) to an invitation, hearers usually have a choice to either accept or refuse. It is only in a situation such as when there is a power or status difference that a hearer cannot easily refuse an offer. Having said this, Miss Millie s shocked reaction to Sophia s refusal suggests that she presupposes (Grice, 1989) a status or power difference between them. Moreover, the addition of like to implies (Grice, 1989) (conversational implicature involves

communicating more than is said) her request is a desirous one. Students are asked to consider what specific assumptions about African-Americans this request suggests.

This initial discussion opens up a wide array of opportunities to teach language learners a variety of speech acts and their various functions. Also, it provides a context to discuss important pragmatic aspects of language such as referring terms, presuppositions, and conversational implicature. Learners are not only being provided with a large amount of input but also thinking and engaging in discussions. This type of academic environment is a far cry from the impoverished learning environments that Kasper (1997) cautions teachers to avoid.

The third question targets gender oppression as portrayed in the film. In this scene, Celie, the protagonist who is trapped in an abusive marriage, disagrees with her husband. Her husband, Albert, says, Shut up. Don t talk back to me. You do what I tell you. From the onset of their marriage, power relations are clearly defined.

While the previous scene provides an obvious example of the domestic abuse and gender oppression experienced by Celie, there are other scenes where this oppression is not overtly portrayed; in fact, it is concealed by comedy. In one scene, Albert is getting ready to go and meet his lover, Shug Avery. The scene is comical on the surface: Albert runs around looking for the right clothes to wear, the whole time ordering Celie to locate them. However, hidden behind this seemingly light scene is continual emotional and physical abuse directed at Celie. For example, he says, I am going to get you if you make me late. If Celie could not locate Albert s clothes at that moment, she would later receive physical abuse. Without specifically drawing their attention to what this statement means, many non-native English speakers would not notice it themselves. The fact that the director chose to portray this very serious issue in a lighthearted manner is important to discuss. This opens up the floor for discussions about the kinds of decisions movie directors must make in order to retain the interest of their viewers; however, his decision to do this deemphasizes the issue of domestic violence which was central in Walker s (1982) novel. It is important that students realize texts such as novels and films not only reflect the views of their writers but also the desire to sell their product to a specific audience.

Furthermore, this particular scene illustrates Fairclough s (1989) point that language resides in an internal and dialectical relationship with society. While it could have provided another example detailing the desperate situation of many impoverished, African-American women during that time period, a serious situation was portrayed in a lighthearted way. This says nothing of the whole context the scene was embedded in: Albert was getting ready to meet his lover and demanded the assistance of his wife.

A criticism directed at Walker upon the book s publication was her harsh portrayal of African-American men. At the time much controversy surrounded both the novel and later the film related to this. I raise this issue because one possible explanation for Spielberg s insertion of comical scenes such as I previously described was to soften this effect and appeal to both men and women. Many students lack this kind of background knowledge about the larger social context that surrounded the release of the film.

The fourth question provides a further opportunity to discuss Celie s gender oppression. The referring term Celie uses, Mister, reflects much about their relationship. In class, we discuss the different situations where one would use mister, and more importantly, the implications behind Shug being allowed to call him Albert while Celie is not.

The fourth stage developing practice calls for students to challenge the ideology portrayed in the text, thus placing them in a more powerful role. This can be equated with the post-reading or in this case post-viewing activities. Fairclough (1989) refers to this as emancipatory discourse. In this stage, students are asked to apply what they learned by writing a paper (Appendix B).

Conclusion and Implications

This paper has demonstrated how CLA can be integrated into a unit on *The Color Purple*. Furthermore, it has called for language teachers to instruct their students in CLA so they, too, can become more empowered to challenge existing ideologies that exist behind texts and become more informed readers and viewers. Equipping students with the tool of CLA is one way teachers can respond to Grady s (1997) challenge that instruction and curriculum for second language learners incorporate discussions of how to confront racial, social, and educational inequities in their lives.

The above suggestion has not meant to imply that CLA can or should be adopted in every educational context. This is especially the case for foreign language environments where this western construct may not suit the values and norms of that particular culture. On the other hand, the goal of education should be to expose students to a wide variety of information and the necessary skills to process it. Now more than ever, as traditional boundaries between nations are diminishing and new forms of communication are continually developing, the ability to critically examine these texts is crucial. CLA is an example of one type of critical skill that learners can use to interpret various forms of text which they will encounter in a rapidly globalizing society.

Appendix A: Discussion Questions

(1) In the store scene, the Caucasian shop clerk addresses the African-American customers with gal. How does that differ from the way he addresses the Caucasian customers?

(2) In the scene involving Miss Millie and Sophia, Miss Millie says to Sophia, Oh, your children are so clean. Would you like to work for me? Be my maid? Why is Sophia so offended by this offer? What response does Miss Millie expect?

(3) In the scene where Celie is combing Albert s daughter s hair, he orders her to stop the child from crying. She protests that she cannot because it hurts her. After hitting her Albert says, Shut up. Don t talk back to me. You do what I tell you. What does this reflect about their relationship?

(4) It is not until Shug Avery, Albert s lover, visits that Celie learns her husband s first name. What does Celie s lack of referring term for her husband indicate about their relationship? What referring terms do husbands and wives usually use for each other?

Appendix B: Writing Assignment

Directions: Choose one of the questions below and write a paper. If you prefer to write on another topic, it needs to be cleared with me in advance.

(1) Imagine that you are living in Japan during the 1900 s. In the form of a diary, write about daily life as a Japanese woman.

(2) Imagine that you were an eyewitness to the scene where Sophia refuses Miss Millie s offer and the subsequent brutality directed at Sophia. Write a letter addressed to the president expressing your feelings about what happened.

(3) Imagine that you are Celie and decide to write a diary entry entitled What I would change if I could. Write that entry.

(4) Select another book or film that deals with the theme of racial or gender oppression. Write an essay where you compare and contrast that book or movie with *The Color Purple*. Be sure to consider the time period it was set in.

(5) There are societies in the world where gender inequalities still exist. This was addressed in *The Color Purple* through Nettie s descriptions of life for Olenka women in Africa. Choose a social issue facing women in a particular society. Write a position paper where you address the issue, indicate your position on it, and propose a solution to it. In designing a solution, do your best to make it relevant to that particular society. Do research as needed.

(6) Write a comparison-contrast paper of the novel and film.

(7) Choose an issue addressed in the film and write an I-Search (Macrorie, 1988) paper.

References

Austin, J. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Carter, P. & Miauchi, H. (2005). Sounding Harry out: Sociocultural aspects of teaching English through movies. *ATEM Bulletin, 10*, 29-38.

Case, R., Ndura, E. & Righettini, M. (2005). Balancing linguistic and social needs: Evaluating texts using a critical language awareness approach. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 48*, (5), 374-391.

Charlebois, J. (2006). Sometimes I just need you to listen: A gender studies unit. *The Language Teacher, 30*(5), 13-16.

Eckert, P. & McConnell-Ginet, S. (2004). *Language and gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and Power*. London: Longman.

Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and Social Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Longman.

Giroux, H. (1992). *Border crossing: Cultural workers and the politics of education*. London Routledge.

Goffman, E. (1976). *Gender advertisements*. New York: Harper Collins.

Grady, K. (1997). Critically reading an ESL text. *TESOL Journal 6*(4), 7-10.

Grice, P. (1989). *Studies in the way of words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Haynes, L. (2003). The global and local issues of AIDS. *The Language Teacher, 27*(3), 25-28.

Hymes, D. (1974). *Foundations in sociolinguistics: An ethnographic approach*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Kasper, G. (1997). *Can pragmatic competence be taught?* Retrieved August 25, 2005, from the University of Hawaii, Second Language Teaching and Curriculum Center Web site: http://www.nflrc.hawaii.edu/networks/NW06/default.html

Kite, Y. & Tatsuki, D. (2005). Remedial interactions in film. In D. Tatsuki (Ed.), *Pragmatics in language learning, theory, and practice* (pp. 99-118). Tokyo: JALT.

Kress, G. & van Leeuwen (1996). *Reading images*. London: Routledge.

Macrorie, K. (1988). *The I-Search Paper*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Norton Pierce, B. (1995). Social identity, investment, and language learning. *TESOL Quarterly, 29*, (1), 9-31.

Sacks, H. (1987). On the preferences for agreement and contiguity in sequences in

conversation. In G. Button & J.R. Lee (Eds.), *Talk and social organization* (pp. 54-69). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.

Schiffrin, D. (2002). Mother and friends in a Holocaust life story. *Language in Society, 31,* 309-353.

Spielberg, S. (Director). (1985). *The Color Purple* [Motion Picture]. United States: Warner.

Sunderland, J. (2004). *Gendered discourses.* Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave.

Tannen, D. (1984). *Conversational style: Analyzing talk among friends.* Westport, CT: Ablex.

Tannen, D. (1990). *You just don t understand: Women and men in conversation.* New York: Ballantine Books.

Tannen, D. (1998). *The argument culture: Stopping America s war with words.* New York: Ballantine Books.

Walker, A. (1982). *The color purple.* New York: Pocket Books

Washburn, G. (2001). Using situation comedies for pragmatic teaching and learning. *TESOL Journal, 10*(4), 21-26.

Yoshihara, R. (2005). Beyond language teaching: Teaching feminism in EFL. *The Language Teacher, 29,* (9), 7-11.