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language and a questioning attitude about what they teach and translate in the foreign
language. (Contains 15 references.) (Author/SM)

ASSESSING THE DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL LANGUAGE AWARENESS

Assessing The Development Of Critical Language Awareness

In A Foreign Language Environment

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Abstract

Critical Language Awareness refers to how conscious people are of the ideologies hidden in the language. A study was carried out to determine whether such a critical perspective towards texts could be developed in an English-as-a-Foreign-Language context. The present paper evaluates the results of the application of methods of critical discourse analysis to a context where the "analysts" are non-native speakers of English who seem to take for granted the truth validity of the messages conveyed through discourse in the press. University learners' reflections on the implementation of methodology point to some drawbacks, but also provide evidence of the positive effect the experience had, for most participants evinced a growing level of critical language awareness, as well as a different attitude with which they now face texts from the British press. The results of the study also support the belief that these EFL learners need to be equipped with the necessary tools to take a critical stance towards the ideologies possibly hidden in discourse also because of their status of future teachers and translators of English. Their professions demand an objective view of the language and a questioning attitude to what they teach and translate of the foreign language.

Key words: discourse - awareness - ideologies - reading - the press - EFL

Assessing The Development Of Critical Language Awareness

In A Foreign Language Environment

<u>Reading authentic texts in a university course of English</u>

The study described in this article was motivated by my perception of an uncritical attitude towards reading in a group of Spanish-speaking university students at the English Teacher- and Translator- Training programmes. These students seemed to take for granted that the information in a foreign language text was true and objective, unaware of the fact that the linguistic choices in any text might not only imply a subjective evaluation of facts and people, but also assumptions and ideological beliefs that have acquired the status of "facts" or unquestionable truths (Hartley 1982, Fowler, 1991) because they are printed.

Looking for an explanation for this lack of critical perspective, I hypothesised that perhaps, since our students were consciously trying to improve their proficiency in the target language, they felt they could not afford to question or be critical of the contents of the linguistic input they were faced with, or that every piece of information in a text printed in the L2 was true by virtue of being both in black and white and in the target language. As Wallace points out when referring to a similar situation,

> Texts have not generally been selected for their potential to challenge. They
> are more frequently seen as either <u>vehicles for linguistic structure</u>, as
> general interest material usually of a fairly safe, bland kind or as functional
> survival material for some groups of L2 learners who are given material
> such as forms or official letters, thus suggesting an assimilationist model of
> literacy –one which <u>accepts rather than challenges the assumptions as to the</u>
> <u>future social and occupational roles of second language learners</u>.
> (Wallace, 1992:61/2) (emphasis added)

, a fact which might account for this group's reaction to L2 authentic texts, for this view of texts as "vehicles for linguistic structure" is the way in which texts are generally presented to learners of a foreign language. The fact that these EFL university learners were eager to take in every instance of language in use might have been caused by the traditional methods according to which English teaching through authentic texts has been approached. This reverential attitude towards texts in the target language could have a bearing on the degree of unawareness of the ideological stance of certain expressions, words, and structures in authentic L2 texts, and of the manipulative effect these devices might have on the reader's belief system.

Thus, I designed this study to evaluate whether it was possible to develop a critical linguistic awareness in these students of English by means of a series of critical reading workshops (Wallace, 1992), analysing both the propositional and ideological content of texts taken from the British press.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Reading

The experience was based on what Wallace (1992) presents as "critical reading" and the experiment this author carried out with three groups of students of English as a foreign language with the aim of discouraging them from approaching texts uncritically, and from taking them as examples or models to be imitated to achieve better proficiency in the target language. The model put forward by Wallace provides a systematic and formal pattern of critical analysis of texts in a context where the "analysts" are not native speakers of the language, and where readers' cultural and linguistic background is different from that of typical readers of these L2 authentic texts.

This model is, in turn, based on the ones put forward by the first proponents of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA, hereafter) - Kress y Hodge (1979), Fairclough (1989) and van Dijk

(1997), among others. CDA describes the process of production of discourse and attempts to account for it within "a social theory of the functioning of language in political and ideological processes" (Caldas-Coulthard 1997:24). Critical discourse analysts set out to analyse the relationships between society, ideology, and power on the one hand, and language in use, or discourse, on the other, working on the way discourse reflects, reproduces and creates ideologies of powerful dominant groups in society (Fowler 1991; Hartley 1982).

This is why Fairclough claims that "...given that power relations work increasingly at an implicit level through language, and given that language practices are increasingly target for intervention and control, <u>a critical awareness of language is a prerequisite for effective citizenship, and a democratic entitlement</u>".(1992:12)

To this purpose, to encourage learners to get involved in "the struggle to demystify social meanings as part of the effort towards more equal relations between people" (Hartley 1982: 10), the models mentioned above have been put forward. In this study the model presented by Fairclough (1989) in *Language and Power* has also been adopted. This research was also based on the work presented by Hartley (1982), Fowler (1991) and Reah (1998) to specifically study the discourse in the news, since these learners' main source of authentic texts was the British and the American press, and also since " [news] is analysed as a particularly important example of the power of *all* language in the social construction of reality" as Fowler (1991) himself states (p. 8).

The Study

The participants in this study consisted of 40 university students – between the ages of 20 and 30 - doing the English IV course, who analysed 11 texts taken from the British press using the tools in the critical models put forward by Fairclough and Wallace, together with those by Fowler, Hartley and Reah. The texts were grouped into 5 workshops, and, on the

basis of these models, materials were designed to analyse the texts. During seven weeks, these students worked both individually and in groups searching for traces of ideologies in five workshops whose topics were related to social problems.

The classroom tasks

Each workshop had its own particular objectives which depended on the linguistic features prominent in each text (as shown in Table 1.). Throughout the workshops learners were encouraged to work in pairs or groups to foster peer interaction so that they would be forced to use the L2 to convey meanings to actually *do* the tasks. Pair and group work were also intended to give support to the learners so that by pooling their impressions, and background knowledge in the group, they would be able to feel more confident and to share the responsibility among the group for the answers they came up with.

Due to the number of features and linguistic aspects learners had to focus on, group work also proved to be the most economic way of covering all these issues, without overloading individual students with too many tasks or issues to pay attention to. A genuine information-gap activity followed, for each group was to report to the rest of the class the results of the analysis they had each carried out. The whole class needed this information to venture a possible interpretation of the effects of the text/s dealt with based on the totality of features studied.

Classroom tasks consisted in identifying instances of certain linguistic devices, classifying them into categories and accounting for their use or the predominance of one category over another. Many of these activities explored the opinions the participants had about the texts and their reactions to them. In this way I tried to explore how aware they were of the ideologies hidden in the language of these texts. At no time were they explicitly informed of what was expected of them or which the ulterior aim of the study was, so that

they were not biased in their interpretations of the texts. This, in turn, enabled me to assess

any changes in their perceptions more objectively. With this purpose debates and opposing

views on the topics dealt with in the texts were welcome, as long as each party could support

their perspectives with evidence from the text and its analysis, following Wallace's policy:

> ... a range of interpretations were acceptable but [that] they would need to
>
> be argued through and defended against rival interpretations of the group.
>
> This is in line with a broad process view of reading where the means are
>
> seen to be as important as the ends.(Wallace, 1992:70)

The tasks for each of the workshops mainly depended on the different texts and the sets

of activities provided by Wallace in her "critical reading" approach and in Reah (1998).

Workshop 1 introduced learners to the linguistic devices used in headline writing, and the

effects they created on the reader, as well as some of the basic categories of analysis studied

in the critical analysis of a short text (voice, modification in the representation of groups,

words and meanings, types of processes, quotations). *Workshop 2* included the analysis of

features such as Modality, quotations, and exploring the issue of 'truth'. The third workshop

(*Workshop 3*) was concerned with the way in which different newspapers provided different

types of information, focusing on quotations, modification and the detailed analysis of the

information that had been included or omitted in the different printed issues. *Workshop 4*

contrasted two different newspapers as regards the way a piece of research on unplanned

pregnancies was reported, while analysing two different genres: a news report and an opinion

article. *Workshop 5* concentrated on the graphic as well as the linguistic devices in the text,

exploring representation of groups (the two characters in the story, in this case), accessed

voice, nominalisations, voice, and the types of processes each character was attributed.

Data collection

Data was collected to record how learners approached the texts they read. Thus, learners answered two questionnaires: one at the initial stage (S_0) of the study, another before the workshops (Questionnaire I), and one at the final stage (S_9) of the study, after the five workshops (Questionnaire II). They were also asked to write a comment on three texts before analysing them in class so that their first impressions and reactions to the texts would be recorded (first-impression comments). Learners were also encouraged to keep a diary about the texts and tasks dealt with in each workshop (diary entries). Finally, the term-exam was designed in such a way that learners would have to analyse a text on their own and comment on its propositional and ideological content on the basis of this analysis (S_{10}). Table 2. shows the distribution of these data-gathering instances throughout the period covered in this study.

According to the minimum amount of data necessary per student - (a) three a-priori commentaries, where participants summarised the content of the texts before the critical analysis took place, (b) at least 5 entries in their personal diaries where students recorded their impressions on the work done in class, and (c) the two questionnaires – one previous to the sessions of text analysis and one after them-, only ten out of the forty students were selected as subjects in this investigation. The corpus analysed for this paper only consists of the diaries and the second questionnaire.

This corpus was analysed with two purposes: (1) to assess the degree of awareness of language as an instrument of manipulation, and (2) to gather comments which evaluated the procedures and the methodology of analysis. The present paper concerns only the second objective and the results obtained in this respect.

The Findings: advantages and disadvantages of critical reading

The analysis of the corpus obtained from the ten participants showed significant results as regards the effectiveness of the models used to develop critical reading strategies in the foreign language, since the students identified a number of problems and obstacles in the methodology applied.

Firstly, the implementation of the models by Fairclough (1989) and Wallace (1992) demanded too much classroom time. Carrying out each of the planned activities, the debate stirred by many of the topics in the texts, and the different possible interpretations ventured by the students turned what had been originally planned to take five weeks of 5-hour work into seven weeks of seven weekly periods of intensive analysis.

This methodology not only seems to take too much time for class implementation, but also for its application to daily life, since it demands a lot of effort from the readers who are constrained by the limited time they can devote to reading the news.

Secondly, the students mentioned the "routine" factor as regards the activities carried out in class. Due to the fact that the students were to become familiar with the analysing procedures of the models adopted, the tasks were repeated for the different texts across sessions. This produced a negative side-effect in the students, since after the second workshop, many of them felt that the activities were repetitive and tedious. Such comments were recorded in their diary entries:

> (2) "Perhaps the development of the work was a bit monotonous, but I never found it boring or useless." (A.,S_1)
>
> (3) "The tasks are too repetitive" (N., S_6)

These impressions coincide with the results obtained in one of the ranking items in the second questionnaire (S_9 in Table 1), where 50 per cent of the participants ranked the method as "not very boring", while the other 50 per cent characterised it as "a bit boring", thus

indicating that for all the participants the procedures of analysis were, to some extent, demotivating. This aspect, while irrelevant in other fields of linguistics, becomes extremely important in foreign language teaching and learning, as Ellis (1994 and 1997) and Skehan (1989) claim that the motivation factor is crucial in the learning process. The methodology adopted in this study seems to have brought about some negative consequences in this respect.

A third drawback is the overwhelming feeling of distrust of everything and everybody. Since they were constantly searching the texts from the press for traces of manipulating ideologies, the participants felt they had to challenge the truth of everything in the news. Although this is, in a way, one of the aims of CDA, as stated by Fowler (1991) and Hartley (1982), when taken to extremes, this attitude may become a drawback for the participants, as evinced in the following statements:

> (4) "Now I'm becoming a bit 'paranoic' (sic) and I don't really trust any
>
> piece of news." (L., S_9)
>
> (5) "...we are going too deep in the analysis of the articles, trying to find a
>
> hidden intention in almost every paragraph." (MD., S_4)

In this respect, Pennycook (1999) suggests a critical stance towards all applications of the critical theory, "a constant scepticism, a constant questioning about the types of knowledge, theory, practice, or praxis they [critical theories] operate with ..." (p.345). This means that –as a teacher and a researcher- it is necessary to keep an open and flexible mind to make sure that when we implement this kind of analysis, the discourse is not "forced" towards a particular interpretation. Despite my efforts to maintain such an attitude, these participants' comments may describe what they experienced as an obligation to analyse the language in

those texts in search of hidden ideologies, which they may not have been interested in discovering.

One last obstacle was that these English students' socio-political and cultural background did not seem to be thorough enough for them to fully comprehend the issues discussed in the pieces of news analysed. Although great care was taken when selecting the texts so that this problem would not interfere with comprehension[1], many participants confessed that they had found some texts more difficult than others due to their lack of the necessary background knowledge on the topic, as G. claims:

(6) "[The texts which were difficult] were the ones about neo-nazis ... I don't

know much about politics and all that stuff." (G., S_9)

A related aspect to this background knowledge is the metalanguage these students were assumed to have because of the theoretical courses they had attended on Syntax. Wallace (1992) believes that this metalanguage could help learners of English as a foreign language to manage the methodology and the linguistic features her model studies. However, some participants in this experiment, like M.D., complained of not having the specific necessary "*jargon*" to understand the method of analysis, while others confessed that they had actually learned of a great number of the categories of analysis they were not aware of – different types of modality, types of processes – during the sessions of in-class analysis. This seems to indicate that the students in this piece of research may have had to face too many difficulties simultaneously: understanding the messages and ideas in each of the texts, dealing with the tools of analysis, and realising what the objectives of the study were and trying to fulfil them.

In spite of the disadvantages identified and described above, the participants also referred to important advantages when evaluating the procedures of analysis and the work in class. Firstly, all the students claimed that they had become aware of the different ways in

which the discourse in the texts analysed masks ideologies related to social and political

issues, as exemplified in the following quotations:

> (7) "I have discovered that I was <u>very easily manipulated by newspaper</u>
>
> <u>articles and writer</u>. Now (after these sessions) <u>I am more aware of the</u>
>
> <u>strategies</u> that <u>writers use</u> to bias an opinion and I am not so easily
>
> manipulated by <u>journalists</u>." (A., S_9)
>
> (8) "At this stage I think <u>I am starting to get aware</u> (*sic*) <u>of the choices the</u>
>
> <u>writer does to make us feel or think what he/she wants.</u> (G., S_7)
>
> (9) "[I've discovered] how everyday elements (such as modals, quotations,
>
> connectors, words, etc.) used in different ways lead to very different
>
> messages and effects on the reader, depending on the author's intention."
>
> (L., S_9)
>
> (10) "YES, I have discovered the power <u>the Mass Media</u> have over our
>
> society, and that it is very easy to cheat people<u>. There are many linguistic</u>
>
> <u>devices that can be used to manipulate the readers</u> and unfortunately most of
>
> the people are not aware of the terrible consequences it may have."(S., S_9)

These students claim to have learnt or discovered something positive in the experience,

thus fulfilling the first objective of the study: the implementation of the models of CDA

helped them become aware of the manipulating power of language, and thus start to develop a

critical language awareness. However, it is important to observe that, as shown in many of the

quotations above, the participants placed the intentionality, the ideological load, solely on the

texts' authors. It would be necessary to correct this mistaken concept since, to critical

linguists, it prevents students from realising that this ideology could already be embedded in

the writer's discourse, who innocently reproduces the values and beliefs that others have tainted it with.

Another advantage of the application of this methodology is related to the status of foreign language learners the students in this experiment have, as highlighted by two of them:

(11) "I realised the terrible fact that <u>as a foreign language learner I can be manipulated easier (sic) than a native speaker</u> because I don't know lots of collocations or idiomatic expressions which have a special meaning (I mean CULTURAL meanings). Moreover, I can't identify myself with some pronouns such as we , so I have a different reading in some occasions because of that." (EQ., S$_1$)

(12) "We, students of English, live [...] out of reality,<u> reading and writing just for the sake of discovering structures and using them in a correct way</u>. But we don't pay attention and perhaps <u>we don't want to get engaged in ideology</u>. WE tend to take all written English that comes to our hands as good and truthful and perhaps we don't realise that via beautiful words we can be attacked as readers or manipulated" (L., S$_8$)

These testimonies seem to lend support to the explanation that I had found for these students' reverential attitude towards authentic texts in the L2. In the English teaching tradition, texts have always been considered models to imitate, and the English language has always been presented as universal and necessary for people to cope with life in our day and age. According to Pagliarini Cox et al. (1999), teachers of English should be "aware of the political dimension of ELT and mistrust underlying ideologies that construct the nature of English as neutral. They should critically evaluate the implications of their practice in the

production and reproduction of social inequalities." (p.434). The participants in this study seemed to initially lack this awareness, which, as the author points out, is crucial to their future professions and the role they will play in other people's lives.

Conclusion

Although generalisations are not valid since the results described in this study correspond to a limited number of participants, I may conclude that the experience had positive effects, suggesting that this methodology should be systematically applied in training schools for English teachers and translators. This is proved by the participants' comments as regards what they learned about the ways in which discourse reproduces ideologies, and their reflections on their status of learners of a foreign language.

This is why I believe that the necessary adjustments should be made in order to adapt the models and the methodology to correct the problems identified by the participants in this study, mainly as regards time, motivation, and background knowledge, to later implement these tools of critical analysis on a larger scale. This full-scale implementation would make it possible to better assess the impact of this methodology on the development of critical language awareness, while encouraging L2 learners to discover the ideologies embedded in the texts they read, to question their hidden messages, and to gain control over the language they themselves use and will continue to use in their future professional lives. In this way, they may become better-equipped to fight for their own ideologies, since they will have become aware of how to convey the message they intend to when speaking the foreign language. As professionals -teachers and translators of English- this critical awareness might also help them realise the responsibility that lies in transmitting the L2, thus encouraging

them to teach and translate the foreign language in a more objective way, in turn, helping

others to realise of the political and ideological dimensions of language.

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[1] The initial letter corresponds to the abbreviation of the participant's name, while the S stands for the stage of data collection, identified by a subindex.

[2] Wallace (1992) suggests that the students themselves should choose the texts to be analysed. However, this was not possible in this experience since it would have been an obstacle to the general objectives of the study.

Table 1

<u>Aims of the five Workshops within the Series of workshops.</u>

	AIMS	TEXTS	SOURCE
Workshop 1	- To present learners with some of the linguistic devices used in headlines - To raise learners' awareness of the effects created by means of these devices - To introduce learners to the methods of critical reading (parallel discourses) (part B)	a) 26 headlines b) EMBASSY 3 KNIFED	The *Sun*
Workshop 2	- To help learners identify the differences between two genres within a newspaper (news report/ features report and editorial) - To help learners become aware of the devices (modality, quotations and modification) that help to manipulate the audience's opinion.	a) POSH WILL GO HOME TO MUM b) SPÍCE 'N EASY	The *Sun* The *Sun*
Workshop 3	- To raise learners' awareness as to the differences in amount and type of information included in different newspapers about the same piece of news - To focus on quotations as a means of influencing the readership - To raise learners' awareness as to the effect achieved through the combination of a news report and an editorial	a) THREE HELD IN PROBE OVER NEO-NAZIS IN THE ARMY b) SOLDIERS HELD IN RAID ON NAZIS c) SOLDIERS HELD OVER NAZI LINK d) RACIST SUSPECTS ARRESTED IN RAIDS e) NO PLACE FOR THIS EVIL GROUP	Daily Mail The Guardian The Times Eastern Daily Press Eastern Daily Press
Workshop 4	- To focus on the different types of modality (relational and expressive) and the effects they create - To help learners become aware of how information is manipulated in text - To help learners spot 'facts' which are taken for granted	a) SUBCONSCIOUS PLANNING OF 'UNPLANNED' PREGNANCIES b) IS THERE SUCH A THING AS UNPLANNED PREGNANCIES? YES, SAYS MAUREEN FREELY	The Guardian Daily Mail
Workshop 5	- To draw learners' attention to the immediate textual context of the article - To encourage learners to account for the use of linguistic choices from a critical perspective - To formulate hypotheses on the ideological positioning of the text based on the evidence gained through the analysis - To help learners become aware of the other choices the writer could have made use of and the possible reasons for them.	WIFE CRIPPLED IN CRASH SUES HUSBAND AND WINS £1,5m	The Guardian

Table 2

Chronological Sequence of Data-collection instances

Stages in the study	Date	Method of data-collection
S_0	April	Questionnaire I
S_1	April	Comment 1: (W1) EMBASSY 3 KNIFED
S_2	April	Diary Entry (1): Workshop 1
S_3	May	Diary Entry (2): Workshop 2
S_4	May	Diary Entry (3): Workshop 3
S_5	June	Comment 2: (W3) NO PLACE FOR THIS EVIL GROUP
S_6	June	Diary Entry (4): Workshop 4
S_7	June	Comment 3: (W5) WIFE ....
S_8	June	Diary Entry (5): Workshop 5
S_9	June	Questionnaire II
S_{10}	July	Term-Exam

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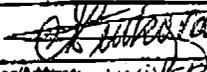| The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 1 documents	The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2A documents	The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2B documents
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