

**“Well, hang on, they’re actually much better than that!”:
Disrupting dominant discourses of deficit about English language
learners in senior high school English**

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores how four English teachers position their English language learners for critical literacy within senior high school curriculum in Queensland, Australia. Such learners are often positioned, even by their teachers, within a broader “deficit discourse” that claims they are inherently lacking the requisite knowledge and skills to engage with intransigent school curricula. As such, English language learners’ identity formation is often constrained by deficit views that can ultimately see limited kinds of literacy teaching offered to them. Using Fairclough’s (2003) critical discourse analysis method, analysis of 16 interviews with the teachers was conducted as part of a larger, critical instrumental case study in two state high schools during 2010. Five competing discourses were identified: deficit as lack; deficit as need; learner “difference” as a resource; conceptual capacity for critical literacy; and linguistic, cultural and conceptual difficulty with critical literacy. While a deficit view is present, counter-hegemonic discourses also exist in their talk. The combination of discourses challenges monolithic deficit views of English language learners, and opens up generative discursive territory to position English language learners in ways other than “problematic”. This has important implications for how teachers view and teach English language learners and their capacity for critical literacy work in senior high school classrooms.

KEYWORDS: Critical discourse analysis, critical literacy, deficit discourse, English as an additional language/dialect learners, learner identity, refugee-background learners.

INTRODUCTION

Despite over a decade of work by researchers and teachers decrying deficit discourses, many teachers still find themselves inducted into a broader deficit discourse within education (Comber, 1997; Comber & Kamler, 2004; Dooley, 2012; Gutierrez, Zitali Morales, & Martinez, 2009). It is a ubiquitous discourse that serves the interests of dominant cultures and what they value as “normal”, and is problematic for any learner on its receiving end, including learners of English as an Additional Language (EAL/D)¹. “Deficit” refers to talk of student lack (Dooley, 2012) and is common among many teachers of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Luke, Cazden, *et al.*, 2013), even among well-meaning teachers (Lam, 2006). A deficit discourse “locates its explanation of the underperformance or underachievement of non-dominant students in the nonalignment of the cultural practices of the home and school” (Gutierrez *et al.* 2009, p. 218). Attributing failure to individual students’

¹ EAL/D is the acronym used in Australia to refer to learners whose home language is other than Standard Australian English (SAE) and who are learning SAE as an additional language or dialect. English Language Learners (ELLs) is used in the US.

traits, including their cultural backgrounds and home languages, has led to labelling students as “at risk” and “low achievers” (Gutierrez *et al.* 2009) and “problems” (Cummins, 2001; Gutierrez & Orellana, 2006a, 2006b; Sharp, 2012). It assumes that access to and participation in high-quality education programs is available for all, but that learners’ own characteristics and backgrounds preclude them from taking advantage of these (Valencia, 1997).

At the core of this problematic deficit view is a particular uptake of the notion of “difference”. Difference refers to biological and social variation among people including sex, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, (dis)ability, socio-economic status, geographical location and other large-scale demographic categories (Kalantzis & Cope, 2005). This approach to difference “highlights what students from non-dominant communities are not” (Gutierrez *et al.* 2009, p. 222). Student failure or struggle at school is therefore assigned to the fact that they are “different from” the dominant norm.

In their review of international literature that reports on the ways in which literacy educators respond to the literacy practices of diverse learners, McLean, Boling and Rowsell (2009) conclude that teachers “need to ...value literacy learners’ funds of knowledge and the ways in which they can inform literacy teaching” (p. 169, my emphasis). “Funds of knowledge” refers to the abundant knowledge diverse learners’ families possess, and which can be accessed through social networks of exchange (Moll & Gonzales, 2004). The recently devised Australian Curriculum maintains that EAL/D learners’ knowledge and experience should be viewed as resources that can inform other learners and the teaching of aspects of the curriculum. It states:

It is important to recognise that EAL/D students (and all students) bring a range of cultural and linguistic resources with them into Australian classrooms. These resources can be:

- used to build EAL/D students’ English language learning and their curriculum content knowledge
- shared in the classroom for the benefit of all students; when the curriculum directs teachers to consider cultural and linguistic knowledge and attitudes, teachers should look first to the students in their classrooms to make use of the cultural and linguistic resources already present. (ACARA, 2013)

This view represents a positive shift in the ways in which learner identity is officially constructed and how learner difference is viewed in policy, and has significant implications for teaching the growing numbers of EAL/D learners in Australian schools. However, without evidence from classroom practitioners, such statements can remain at the level of rhetoric alone.

In senior high schools in Queensland alone, approximately 8,000 EAL/D students appear in the official data sets as requiring some level of language and literacy support. These learners are a combination of: literate international students from various Asian and European countries; students who have migrated to Australia on skilled migration programs with their parents; and refugee-background students whose educational backgrounds may have been seriously disrupted and who may or

may not be literate in their first language/s². The EAL/D student body is far from homogenous and teachers need to continue to explore ways of enabling these varied learners to succeed in schooling. One way of doing so is to be more conscious of the discourses teachers draw on to talk about EAL/D learners.

CRITICAL LITERACY AS A SPACE FOR DISRUPTING DEFICIT VIEWS

This paper reports on the ways teachers position their senior high school EAL/D learners in relation to critical literacy in their senior English classes. In the past, education programs for EAL/D learners have been characterised by functional language and literacy approaches that require little critical thinking about language and its relationship with power. These restricted programs have contributed to the deficit discourse around EAL/D learners in that they delimit the scope of language study to literal meaning making and basic skills development. More recently, however, approaches that demand higher order critical thinking, such as critical literacy, are being operationalized with EAL/D learners (see Alford & Jetnikoff, 2011; Lau, 2013; Locke & Cleary, 2011; Huang, 2011; for accounts in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Taiwan respectively). Critical literacy requires intellectually rigorous work and when taught effectively with EAL/D learners, can help dispel dominant deficit views about their capacity for learning. Luke, Comber, and O’Brien (1994) define the “critical” part of literacy education as:

ways that give students tools for weighing and critiquing, analysing and appraising the textual techniques and ideologies, values and positions. The key challenge...is how to engage students with the study of “how texts work” semiotically and linguistically, while at the same time taking up explicitly how texts and their associated social institutions work politically to construct and position writers and readers in relations of power and knowledge (or lack thereof). (p. 35)

Due to its emphasis on ideological critique, critical literacy has been the subject of media-fuelled political and educational debate in the past ten years in Australia. However, it remains evident in current national curriculum documents, though in much less visible ways than in previous syllabuses (Alford, 2014). For example, the Senior English as an Additional Language or Dialect Curriculum (ACARA, 2014) aims to develop “critical analysis skills” (ACARA, 2014 Rationale and Aims), and three of the four senior English units to be taught over the two years of senior schooling involve some critical orientation, for example, “identifying and analysing attitudes, values and culturally-based assumptions within texts” (Unit 2); exploring the ways in which “language choices shape meaning and influence audiences”, and analysing “the representation of ideas, attitudes and values and how these vary across cultures and within different contexts, particularly the Australian context” (Unit 3). Critical literacy has largely been understood as rationalist intellectual work (Misson & Morgan, 2006)³ and has been resisted by some teachers of EAL/D predominantly due to deficit discourses that circulate in and constrain their everyday fields of work. What are needed are counter-discourses to disrupt the limiting effects of deficit views

² See Creagh (2014) in this journal for a discussion of the problematic nature of the Language Background Other than English or “LBOTE” data category for EAL/D learners in Australia.

³ Recently, critical literacy has begun to incorporate a greater focus on aesthetics in order to explore the connection between the emotional and ideological power of texts. See Janks, (2010); Misson & Morgan (2006)

(English, 2009) on the incorporation of critical literacy programs with English language learners.

In the following sections, I first present an overview of literature that demonstrates challenge to simplistic deficit notions and which positions EAL/D learners in more favourable ways in relation to the teaching of critical literacy in required schooling. This is followed by an explanation of the theoretical framework used in my study, the design of the research project and the context, and analysis and discussion of five competing discourses evident in the interview data. I conclude with discussion of implications for teacher practice and education policy.

POSITIONING EAL/D LEARNERS FOR CRITICAL LITERACY

A growing body of empirical research into how teachers might reverse the focus from the “EAL/D learner as problem” to the “curriculum and pedagogy as problem” is emerging (cf. Dooley, 2012; Hammond, 2008, 2012; Miller, 2009; Miller & McCallum, 2014; Stein, 2008). It demonstrates pedagogy that scaffolds students for intellectual engagement, taking into account their life world differences, rather than making them go away (Gutierrez et al., 2009). Such pedagogy can disrupt deficit discourses, but this requires intellectual engagement by the teachers and recognition of teacher agency over extended periods of time (Comber & Kamler, 2004). However, only a small body of research exists showing how teachers can position EAL/D learners more positively for critical literacy, which is intellectually engaging, can be challenging work within senior English, and which is often considered “too difficult” for EAL/D learners (Alford, 2001; Alford & Jetnikoff, 2011; Locke & Cleary, 2011).

Two recent studies, though, show important interruption of deficit discourses. Lau’s (2013) year-long action research study of critical literacy with recently-arrived immigrant English language learners (ELLs) in middle school in Ontario, Canada, documents practice that positions ELLs as competent and that facilitates their gradual deployment of critical literacy skills. Based on the learners’ concerns about cultural adjustment and discrimination, Lau developed a four-dimensional, integrated instructional model for critical literacy that included four inter-related textual, personal, critical and creative dimensions. Lau was particularly interested in three aspects: the curricular choices, power relations and subjectivities the teachers and students could avail themselves of using the model; the obstacles or constraints the teachers and students faced using the model; and how, if at all, the students’ critical literacy was developed by the model. The findings showed that the teachers and students moved from being passive players to active agents in designing and engaging in learning in the classroom community. The students took on social positions of agents of change by re-imagining a school bullying incident, even if only on a personal level rather than societal. Drawing on Kamler’s (2001) work, Lau (2013) calls this a “momentary rupture in the deficit discourse of ELLs” (p. 22).

Similarly, Locke and Cleary’s (2011) New Zealand study documents practice by a teacher who prioritised her diverse learners’ background knowledge, rather than curriculum content, as the starting point from which critical literacy activities were developed. This approach demonstrates a significant departure from curriculum-

driven programs, to ones that start with the particular mix of knowledge, experience and identities with which learners present.

The studies presented above document practice that can, in turn, mobilise new discourses more broadly about EAL/D learner capability and can challenge deficit discourses. I now turn to the study I conducted and discussion of the complex of discourses identified, and what this might mean for teachers in Australia at least.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Fairclough’s (2003) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framed this study. This approach to CDA understands discourse to be whole fields or domains within which language is used in particular ways. Texts are therefore generated by discursive formations, each with particular ideologies and ways of producing and distributing power. Texts, spoken or written, are properties of any given discourse and therefore open to analysis. Language is “dialectically interconnected” with other parts of social life so that any social analysis must take language into account. The study of language alone is insufficient. Once described, language needs to be interpreted as the product of the process of production, and finally explained in terms of its relationship with the social context.

Discourses are understood to overlap and compete for positioning within institutional practices. Fairclough (2003) argues that “when different discourses come into conflict and particular discourses are contested, what is centrally contested is the power of these pre-constructed semantic systems to generate particular visions of the world which may have the performative power to sustain or remake the world in their image, so to speak” (p. 130). Schools and teachers are circumscribed by powerful discourses that have material effects. Therefore, documenting emerging, positive discourses offers the potential for transformative teacher talk, about learners who are frequently marginalised through negative talk, to be acknowledged and extended.

Integral to Fairclough’s model (2003) is the work of Halliday (1994) and Martin (1992) in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). In analysing the linguistic features of the teachers’ interview talk in this study, a potentially transformative picture of discourses jostling for discursive space comes into view. I argue this jostling causes a kind of friction that can push the boundaries of how teachers view EAL/D learners’ engagement with the intellectually stimulating work of critical literacy in senior English.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The analysis presented here comes from of a larger, critical multiple instrumental case study (Carspecken, 1996; Simons, 2009) into the conceptualisations and enactment of critical literacy by teachers of senior high school English in two different Australian State high schools (Alford, 2014). The four teachers were specialist teachers of EAL/D language and literacy with culturally and linguistically diverse learners. They each taught the *English for ESL Learners Senior Syllabus* (QSA, 2007 amended

2009), one of the four available senior English syllabuses⁴. This syllabus contains minimal reference to critical literacy, yet these teachers made it a priority in their planning with each school designating one 10-week term to critical literacy. The teachers exercised agency to include a critical component in their teaching. I was therefore interested in how these teachers viewed their learners’ identities in relation to critical literacy. Table 1 shows the varying degrees of experience of teaching EAL/D learners the teachers had and their qualifications at the time of the study.

Name ⁵	School	Background
Margot	Beacon High	4-year Education degree but no higher degree; over 25 years’ experience teaching high school languages (Italian and French) and EAL/D, and on state assessment moderation panels. Full-time and permanent. Writer/designer of the Beacon High senior EAL/D Work Program.
Celia	Beacon High	Early Childhood degree; M.Ed. TESOL with 5 years of teaching EAL/D in high schools. Full-time and permanent.
Riva	Riverdale High	B.Ed., M.Ed. App. Ling. and over 30 years teaching and on state assessment moderation panels. Full-time and permanent. Writer/designer of the Riverdale High senior EAL/D Work Program.
Lucas	Riverdale High	B.Ed. Eng./EAL/D; recently graduated from university in 2009. Full-time but on contract for 1 year.

Table 1. Background information on the four teachers.

Two of the teachers, Celia and Margot, taught at Beacon High school, a low socio-economic, suburban high school with a large proportion of African (e.g., Burundi, Liberia, Sudan) and Afghani refugee-background learners, some with interrupted schooling. Riva and Lucas taught at Riverdale High, a school in a relatively higher socio-economic area with a mix of international and immigrant students from European and Asian countries (e.g., France and China), most of whom were literate in their first languages. Many students, in both schools, were aiming to graduate from high school having completed an authority-registered English syllabus in order to meet University entrance requirements.

ANALYTIC METHOD

Sixteen interviews (four per teacher) were gathered at four points across one term in 2010. Questions centred on what the teachers understood critical literacy to be and how they were enacting critical literacy with their particular learners. Examples of questions asked were: How do your students respond to/handle the critical literacy components of your units/lessons? Do you think your students will succeed in the

⁴ In Queensland, Australia, senior English students can choose to undertake their study through three separate authority-registered syllabuses: English (mainstream), English Extension/Literature (for those wanting extension), and English for ESL Learners. Students can also choose from 2 non-authority registered syllabuses, English Communication and Functional English, but these do not allow entrance to University.

⁵ All names are pseudonyms.

critical tasks? If so, how and why? Data were initially analysed using an inductive method whereby all comments about students were coded, themed and retrieved. This data comprised 16 pages of tabled statements organised into a single file. In the larger study conducted, the features that characterised the discourses were decided on using a range of Fairclough’s (2003) CDA analytic tools that draw on SFL. In this paper, for brevity’s sake, I present analysis of the data relating to themes as well as analysis of semantic relations between elements of statements, in particular the use of hypotactic clauses, and adverbial or prepositional phrases or in SFL (Halliday, 1994) terms, circumstances of time, cause and manner. Hypotaxis, or the subordination of one clause to another, is used by speakers and writers in order to convey logical, causal or temporal relationships within a sentence. The subordinate clause amplifies the central idea. Circumstances serve to illuminate the action (process) in some way, locating the action in space and time (Butt, Fahey, Feez, & Spinks, 2012).

As part of the suite of resources available to speakers to encode their experiences of the world around them, hypotaxis and circumstances are significant as they provide background information and modify the “goings on” or the processes (Butt, *et al.* 2012). They indicate the speaker has an understanding of factors that affect the “goings on” and can help the listener (and the discourse analyst) to reach a better understanding of the purpose and intended meaning of a text. The analysis enabled me to identify the contingencies around the deficit discourse in these teachers’ talk, thus illuminating the complex field within which the teachers work and the “juggling act” they perform to navigate, and in some cases mitigate, the discourses that circumscribe that field.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The five key discourses that emerged from the data present a challenging yet hopeful picture. They are: learner deficit in terms of “lack”; learner deficit in terms of “needs” in relation to the demands of Australian senior high school; learner difference as resources for learning; learner difficulty with critical literacy; general positive attributes in particular learner capacity for intellectual engagement with and through critical literacy. The discourses contest one another, thereby generating a contestation of the power of existing visions of EAL/D learners as frequently deficient and often incapable (Dooley, 2012; Gutierrez *et al.*, 2009; Gutierrez & Orellana, 2006a, 2006b). Figure 1 below summarises the five key discourses about EAL/D learners that emerged from the data. The arrow indicates the interrelationship between two aspects of the deficit discourse identified.

Fairclough (2003) argues that discourses not only represent the world as it is seen to be, but also possible worlds, which are different from the actual world. These imaginaries are connected to projects to change the world in certain directions. I argue that the conflict between the discourses in the teachers’ talk possesses performative power to shift the way EAL/D learners are positioned for undertaking critical literacy. I begin with the Deficit discourse, which is powerful due to its wide-spread presence and its power to sustain particular, negative visions of EAL/D learners and their engagement with formal schooling. Data presented here are representative of the larger corpus of teacher statements (16 tabularised pages).

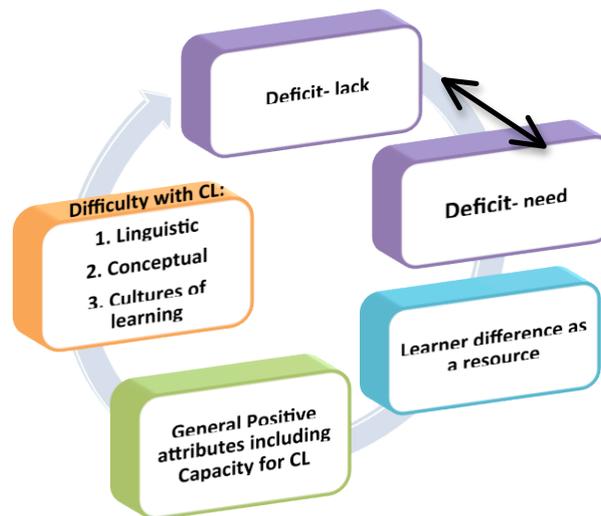


Figure 1. Five key discourses about EAL/D learners in relation to critical literacy

Deficit: “lack” and “need”

As outlined above, students who come to school with knowledge and skills that differ to that of the dominant discourse can be disadvantaged within the educational setting (Dooley, 2012; Gutierrez & Orellana, 2006a, 2006b; Sharp, 2012). As such, deficit is always *constructed in relation to* existing educational curricula, pedagogy and assessment practices. It is the “different” learner who is often *constructed* as the “problem” (Cummins, 2001; Gutierrez & Ornella, 2006a).

The greatest number of comments that were deficit in nature was made by teachers at Beacon High. For example,

- They’re from uneducated backgrounds. (Margot, interview 1, Feb 3, 2010);
- They need to understand and be given knowledge. (Margot, interview 1, Feb 3, 2010);
- They need to understand (x) (x 9 times) (Margot, interview 1, Feb 3, 2010);
- Some don’t know how to behave in class (Celia, interview 1, Feb 8, 2010).

This talk of deficit due to what the students lack is not surprising for a number of reasons. First, the students at Beacon High were mostly refugee-background with significant gaps in their formal education that had a direct impact on learning (McBrien, 2005; Miller, 2009; Miller & Windle, 2010). Some were reported to have suffered psychological trauma, which hindered their adjustment and capacity to concentrate and therefore influences their ability to achieve their best. At Riverdale High, where the socio-economic status of learners was higher and the educational backgrounds of the learners largely uninterrupted, there were only a few comments from the teachers indicating a clear deficit discourse, for instance, “They don’t have the right level of sophistication to get an A” (Lucas, interview Nov 10, 2010). However, this could easily be said of many Australian-born, non-EAL/D learners. Second, teachers generally are constantly navigating a “top-down” discourse (English, 2009) in play in Australian schools. This discourse “ascribes an authoritative role to the curriculum (and) students who do not meet curriculum-based expectations are represented as ‘lacking’” (Dooley, 2012, p. 3). This deficit discourse highlights student underachievement, ignoring their cultures, languages and identities

(Cummins, 2001). Like all teachers, the teachers in this study were influenced by this ubiquitous discourse, but many of their statements also indicated that they take into account factors such as students’ refugee circumstances, the demands of Australian schooling and previous cultures of learning.

The second and related discourse identified – a “deficit-needs discourse” – signals a problem faced by many teachers of EAL/D learners in senior schooling within a mandated curriculum. Where a “deficit-lack” discourse relates to the knowledge and attributes lacking within the learner in relation to what is valued by the dominant education system (Gutierrez *et al*, 2009), “deficit-needs” refers to the specific knowledge and attributes demanded by the dominant system and society more broadly for “success”. Teasing out “needs” as distinct from “inherent lack” allowed for more nuanced analysis of the teachers’ comments. It highlights the fact that the “needs” that are demanded by the curriculum often do not match and do not capitalise on the life-worlds of diverse EAL/D learners.

However, while teachers in the senior school have some agency in adapting the curriculum, they are also required to meet certain minimum syllabus requirements, especially for high-stakes assessment purposes, including writing in SAE. Thus, the “needs” of EAL/D learners becomes a sphere of constant negotiation for teachers between what will allow students to progress through dominant culture knowledge and skills pathways on the one hand (Delpit, 1988, 1995), and learner “difference”, including capabilities and cultural ways of knowing (see Dooley, 2008) on the other. Distinguishing the particular relationship between the discourses of “deficit or lack” and “need” in the teachers’ talk can assist in identifying possible ways forward.

The analysis revealed that the deficit discourse in many statements was alleviated by reference to conditions that influence their students and that are outside the students’ and often the teachers’ control. At Beacon High, in interview 1 (Feb 3, 2010), Margot reported many statements that included hypotactic clauses (in bold) or Circumstances (in italics) that indicate her awareness of the broader context of her students’ so called “lack”, for instance:

- **If they’ve missed out on education**, ...they haven’t developed conceptual understandings *in the way that students brought up in Australia have developed conceptual understandings*;
- (They) don’t understand formal register *for tertiary study*;
- (They) haven’t got the language *to express critical literacy*

The statements by Margot above pertain to what the students lack *in relation to* time, and space or context. For instance, Margot takes account of students’ previous experience, for example, “If they’ve missed out on education”, and their future goals, that is, “for tertiary study”. She also takes into account the ways things are done locally, for example, “in the way that students brought up in Australia have developed conceptual understandings”. The “deficit” is contingent on the demands of localised schooling.

Riva also acknowledged this neatly with a hypotactic clause (in bold) and then a causal Circumstance (in italics): “If they’re going to study in a western society, they need to know that way of looking at texts, *because all of our study is based on those*

ideas that texts can be questioned”. (Riva, Interview, 2, Oct 6, 2010). Another example of Riva’s employment of circumstances (in italics) to modify the “goings on” is: “*From the point of view of living in this world*, (they need) to be not disempowered; not to have (the) power, but to not be disempowered” (her emphasis underlined). These examples of the teachers’ talk can be seen to indicate a “*contingent deficit*” discourse, circumscribed by factors beyond the learners’ individual lacking, showing these teachers are very aware of the complex challenges facing their students.

Learners’ differences as resources

In contrast to the deficit discourse, the teachers in this study talked often and enthusiastically about their learners’ generally positive attributes, acknowledging their existing skills, dispositions and knowledge. Difference is often “construed as an aberration of mainstream norms” (Lam, 2006, p. 215), yet these teachers spoke about their learners as possessing resources specifically relevant to engagement with critical literacy. This led me to identify a third discourse – the “learner difference as a resource” discourse – that sees learners as rich sources of learning with funds of knowledge (Moll, 1992; McLean *et al.*, 2009). This discourse views learners as positive *because* of their differences, not in spite of it. The “difference” that these students bring to the classroom, *because of* their backgrounds, is seen as beneficial rather than an obstacle. A number of statements were made by the teachers that indicate this valuing of “difference” (underlined). For instance:

- Because of their own life experiences where they’ve just had to push themselves and they’ve got a lot of resilience anyway, and they’ve managed to make it this far and they’re really good at just plodding along until they get it. (Margot, Interview 2, Mar 10, 2010).
- So much of what’s gone on before in their lives impacts on what they’re understanding in the classroom. I don’t think we can discount that. (Margot, Interview 3, Mar 23, 2010).

Not discounting what has gone before meant Margot was able to draw on their life experiences sensitively to help them access new knowledge and skills. It exemplifies “equity in literacy learning (which) suggests the need to account for how an individual’s race, culture and socioeconomic background shape his or her understanding of texts and practices” (McLean, *et al.*, 2009, p. 158) Other evidence of this discourse includes the following statements:

- They are pretty aware of what’s happening in the world. Quite aware of general news happenings. (Celia, Interview 1, Feb 8, 2010)
- One of their strengths is that they have a lack of fear. I think they’re pretty bold. They go into a text and they know that there’s more to it. They’re willing to dig deeper. (Celia, Interview 3, Mar 17, 2010)
- They came up with different things from what I would have expected but they were good! You know I was very pleased with them. (Riva, Interview 3, Oct 22, 2010)
- This is a really good group ... a good mix so that it’s not just a block of Chinese students or a block of Vietnamese students so we can talk about all these different cultures. To draw on that in the classroom is fantastic... (Lucas, Interview 2, Oct 5, 2010)

These data extracts show the teachers specifically mentioning that rather than being a hindrance, their learners’ life experiences and attributes can assist them and their teachers to explore texts critically together. As part of the dialectical nature of discourse, discourses affect social structures in terms of either aiding and abetting continuity or generating change (Fairclough, 2003). These teachers, I argue, are generating the space for important change by talking about their learners in ways that take into account and draw on their lived experiences as well as the demands of education structures. This discourse was not as dominant as the competing “capacity” and “difficulty” discourses in their talk but nevertheless existed and served to interrupt dominant views of EAL/D learners’ difference as problematic.

However, the teachers did not fully draw on their learners’ Diversity – their home cultures, languages and everyday literacy practices, as Janks (2000, 2010) describes it. This was largely due to policy, assessment and time constraints. The teachers seemed to be indicating that they recognised that Diversity is significant in the process of schooling, but the context in which they worked did not recognise it as equally significant to the curriculum itself.

Capacity for critical literacy

Two other key discourses existed in the teachers’ talk. One, that their students had the capacity for intellectual engagement with critical literacy and conversely, that the students had difficulty with critical literacy. These two discourses constituted the largest amount of data, in roughly equal amounts, in the single file generated. The tension between the two discourses, I suggest, mirrors the attempts the teachers were making to tailor, through their pedagogy, a constraining curriculum. A “capacity for critical literacy” discourse refers to EAL/D students’ cognitive or intellectual capacity to undertake the specific higher order thinking inherent in critical literacy (Lau, 2013). Examples from both schools include:

Beacon High:

- We get people (*teachers*) saying, “So and so can’t do this, this or this”. Then we get these kids and it’s like, “Yes they can!” So something happened or they were being judged in a different way....Then you put them in the class (*the EAL/D classroom*) and realise, “Well, hang on, they’re actually much better than that!” (Margot, Interview 3, Mar 23, 2010)
- I don’t think that it’s beyond them to learn how to write critically. I really think it’s achievable and accessible to them. (Celia, Interview 1, Feb 8, 2010)
- I think a lot of these kids do rise to the challenge...You actually can challenge these kids and they should be able to rise to the occasion 99 per cent of the time. (Margot, Interview 2, Mar 10, 2010)

Riverdale High:

- Critical Literacy is not too hard for these kids to understand. (Riva, Interview, Interview 2, Oct 6, 2010)
- Their language skills might not be through the roof yet, but you could see in their writing that they know what “foregrounding” was and that they know what marginalising was and how we are positioned, and then in some instances, why were are positioned. (Lucas, Interview 1, Mar 17, 2010)

- They are bombarded with the same texts (as L1 students are) so why shouldn’t they have the skills to critically analyse what they see and what they read? Just because they have English as a second language...doesn’t mean that they don’t have the capacity to understand that a text was (*deliberately*) structured. (Lucas Interview 2, Oct 5, 2010)

Lucas, in this last excerpt, echoes Delpit’s (1995) view that “teachers can ...acknowledge the unfair ‘discourse-stacking’ that our society engages in. They can discuss openly the injustices of allowing certain people to succeed, based not upon merit but upon which family they were born into, upon which discourse they had access to as children” (p. 165). One particularly pertinent example of the complex interplay between the discourses of “deficit” on the one hand and “capacity” on the other comes from Riva.

I think it’s really important for them to see that they can do it (critical literacy), not to be silenced by their language ability or **deficit – shouldn’t say deficit** – but I think it’s really important for them not to be silenced and they can start to say things they’re thinking. I really try to encourage that. (Riva, Interview, Nov 18, 2010, my emphasis)

Riva self-regulates her use of the term “deficit” in the interview. She knows it is a powerful discourse that impacts on her work and the students’ experience of learning. The interview context with me as researcher may also have impacted on her decision to “backtrack” on this choice of word. She considers her learners to have ability (“they can do it”) and “voice” (“they shouldn’t be silenced”, and “they can start to say things they’re thinking”). Locke and Cleary (2011) and Sandretto (2011) argue that providing space for students to voice emerging positions can foster genuine dialogue and thereby redistribute power that is often denied EAL/D learners in classrooms.

Acknowledging their learners’ capacity for critical literacy comes as a result of the teachers’ particular practice of critical literacy. It brings this important, positive view of EAL/D learners into the “discourse mix”. In inhabiting this particular discourse mix, these teachers have views and knowledge to share about EAL/D learners that others may not have access to. However, as Hammond (2008) points out, while culturally and linguistically diverse learners provide plentiful sources of opportunity for teachers, they also produce particular kinds of challenges.

Difficulty with critical literacy

A “difficulty with critical literacy” discourse was also identified. The teachers stated three particular aspects of critical literacy work that EAL/D learners find challenging. These include linguistic challenge with writing; conceptual challenge; and “cultures of learning” challenge. I address these in turn in the following section.

Linguistic challenge

Recurring often across all of the teacher talk was the notion that the particular writing tasks required by assessment items are challenging for these learners.

Beacon High:

- I think they’re still struggling with it. I think it’s difficult because, I mean, I don’t know that their language is at a level where they’re able to manipulate it, and I think that’s probably a key issue. I’m asking them to do a lot of things, which is manipulating language, trying to critically look at an issue without necessarily imposing your own particular opinions on that which is actually quite hard. (Margot, Interview 2, Mar 10, 2010)
- Certainly their level of language is a challenge. (Celia, Interview 3, Mar 17, 2010)

Riverdale High:

- They don’t often achieve the results that express their understanding because they, the way they express it is not accurate. Accuracy is an on-going problem, even in Year 12 and particularly with complex sentences. (Riva, Interview 2, Oct 6, 2010)
- They need to get their head around the English language involved as well as the concepts; it’s like they’re hit twice thereThey don’t have the right level of sophistication (*in their writing*) to get an A. (Lucas, Interview, Nov 10, 2010)
- They’re always going to have problems with an essay under exam conditions with regards to, are they using the correct verb tense? are they nominalising? are they making sure they are putting the verb in the right place. (Lucas, Interview 3, Nov 2, 2010)

The “lack” discourse clearly intersects here with the “difficulty/linguistic” discourse. Writing is a significant problem for EAL/D students in senior critical literacy classes, as Allison (2011) has pointed out. The teachers’ pedagogy responded to this but the limits of this paper preclude discussion of pedagogy here.

The combination of the “*difference as resource*” discourse explicated above, and this “*difficulty with writing*” discourse begs one key question: why do schools not allow EAL/D students to also demonstrate their conceptual knowledge of critical literacy through their own “different” resources of expression, rather than insisting they write analytically in a language they have not yet mastered? The answer lies partly in seeing the learners’ “different” resources as normal and productive sources of innovation and legitimate ways to express knowledge. It also lies in the unresolved “access paradox” (Lodge, 1997; see also Janks, 2004). Access on its own naturalises and privileges powerful language forms and genres, and undervalues students’ own forms of expression and knowledge, yet access is the gateway to success in schooling. Students therefore need to be told explicitly the rules of the culture of power in order to make acquiring that power easier (Delpit, 1988, 1995); they need “access to schooled literacies – to the standard variety of written language, a range of genres and the social and rhetorical sophistication needed to write for different audiences and purposes. These are harder for students to master if they have no experience of meaningful, pleasurable, fluent writing on which to build” (Janks, 2010, p. 158). This was the case for many of Margot and Celia’s refugee-background learners, who were not fully literate in their first language/s. Their linguistic development needed to be addressed quickly in order to meet certain tertiary entrance requirements and standards, and owing to the limited time teachers had with senior high school EAL/D learners, many of whom were already 18 years of age or older.

Conceptual challenge

The teachers acknowledged that while some students had capacity for critical literacy, others were moving between decoding, engaging with meanings and critical literacy with greater difficulty. This seemed particularly true of some students at Beacon High:

- I’ve noticed this with a few of the kids, they’ve kind of got it but then they’ll veer off and talk about you know the issue again. So he’s still...he’s coming to an understanding. It’s a developing understanding rather than a fully-fledged understanding. (Margot, Interview 3, Mar 23, 2010)
- They’ve got to go out of their comfort zone and learn some (new) ways of exploring text. I guess that’s the hurdle. They’ve got to feel the confidence to get beyond the black and white of the text and get inside it and discover more about it. (Celia, Interview 1, Feb 8, 2010)

The teachers at Beacon High acknowledged realistically the challenge that some of their students faced with critical literacy. There were far fewer comments made in regard to conceptual challenge by the teachers at Riverdale High, where learners were more literate in their first languages and had not had the interrupted education and refugee-background many of those at Beacon High had had.

“Cultures of learning” challenge

“Culture of learning” refers to the particular cultural and education system through which one is socialised (Wallace, 1995) and which prioritises and exposes learners to certain types of learning, for example, teacher-centred transmission or participatory pedagogy (Alvermann, Phelps, & Gillis, 2009). Various comments from the teachers indicated consideration of the students’ broader cultures of learning in their countries of origin and transit *en route* to Australia:

Beacon High:

- A lot of these kids, maybe *because of their culture backgrounds* are not allowed to have opinions. Like cultures where children don’t have opinions and don’t learn how to back up and support an opinion. (Margot, Interview, May 31, 2010)
- (They) are not taught to look at things critically *in their education systems*. They are taught *in traditional ways*. (Margot, Interview 1, Feb 3, 2010)

Again, the Circumstances of cause and contingency, highlighted in italics, show that Margot considers the learner in ways other than simply in relation to the curriculum. The primary socialisation into education for these students, their “cultural backgrounds” or culturally preferred ways of making knowledge (Dooley, 2012) is factored in. Riva and Lucas acknowledges this as well:

- Some of them still come with the idea that they have to learn what the teacher says...where they have to wait for the teacher’s meaning and learn that one, and so they’ve got a bit of a shift to make. It’s exhausting for them. A big challenge. (Riva, Interview 2, Oct 6, 2010)
- They’re coming from cultures where the critical is discouraged, where it’s frowned on and it’s not really taught at all. So it’s definitely a new way of thinking for them.” (Lucas, Interview 3, Nov 2, 2010)

These two quotes show the “top down discourse” in operation “which ascribes an authoritative role to the curriculum (and) students who do not meet curriculum-based expectations are represented as ‘lacking’” (Dooley, 2012, p. 3). It shows how the “lack” discourse and the “needs” discourse connect with the “cultures of learning” discourse, all of which these teachers juggle in their thinking and responses to their learners.

CONCLUSION

The five competing and interconnected discourses identified show that these teachers drew on their unique communities’ resources for naming the world, “on the discourses that they inhabit” (Janks, 2010, p. 158). The teachers in this study were engaged in an on-going negotiation of these competing discourses, in particular the “linguistic difficulty with critical literacy” discourse, and the “capacity for critical literacy” discourse. The co-existence of this range of discourses highlights the complexity of teaching intellectually demanding lessons, such as critical literacy, with students who are from other cultures of learning and who, for some, have low levels of literacy in the standard variety of the dominant language valued in education.

The combination of discourses also indicates a shift, generally, in teachers’ talk about EAL/D students’ ability to engage with more than functional approaches to language and literacy learning. Hammond (2006, 2008, 2012) and Gibbons (2008) have long argued that “high challenge” teaching is possible with EAL/D learners and that what is needed is “high support” pedagogy. The teachers’ employment of pedagogy that makes critical literacy accessible to their learners⁶ can change the way teachers talk about EAL/D student identity. The analysis in this study suggests that EAL/D teachers, *because* of their specialist pedagogy, are in a unique position to inform others about more productive ways to view EAL/D learners. Identifying a more expansive range of discourses, such as the ones outlined above, including counter-discourses, opens up “the potential for exploiting the ideological dilemmas between the existing discourses” (English, 2009, p. 502). Further documenting EAL/D teachers’ pedagogy, that enables EAL/D students to more fully experience intellectually engaging lessons as normalised practice, is needed.

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⁶ See Alford and Jetnikoff (2011); Hammond (2006); and Miller and McCallum (2014) for further discussion of such pedagogy.

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