CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: TOWARDS A NEW
PERSPECTIVE OF EFL READING

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> Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and
> reading the word implies continually reading the world … In
> a way, however, we can go further and say that reading the
> word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a
> certain form of *writing* it or *rewriting* it, that is, of transforming
> it by means of conscious, practical work. For me, this dynamic
> movement is central to the literacy process. (Freire & Macedo,
> 1987, p. 35)

Introduction

Many researchers and theoreticians in the area of reading argue
that to comprehend a text we need both linguistic knowledge of the
language in which the text is written, and conceptual knowledge of the
topic which is being addressed in the text (Carrell, 1988; Eskey & Grabe,
1988, etc.). However, another kind of knowledge can also help us in the
process of text comprehension: a critical awareness of how linguistic
practices and social practices are mutually supportive. Texts bear traces
of the discourses and ideologies of the institutions which produce them
(e.g. the media), and are also an arena for relations of social power and

control. Since EFL students are exposed to texts from a different culture, their process of text comprehension can be enhanced if they are introduced to a critical perspective of reading, one that sees texts as historically, socially and culturally situated, establishing for writers and readers specific subject positions.

Therefore, it is my aim in this paper to present some ideas for a reading class based on a critical perspective. The theoretical background for this paper comes from the British school of Critical Discourse Analysis, which has as one of its basic premises the notion that linguistic practices are inseparable from social practices. In order to situate my work here, I will start by presenting a brief introduction to Critical Discourse Analysis. Next, I will define what is considered "critical reading", according to some researchers in the area of CDA, and I will also make some comments about the use of the critical perspective of reading in the EFL classroom. After that, I will present a plan of a critical reading class, which will analyse a text from a woman's magazine. Finally, I will make some concluding remarks about the advantages of relating these two areas of study: reading and Critical Discourse Analysis.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis, or Critical Linguistics, first appeared with the seminal book *Language and Control*, published in 1979 by Fowler, Hodge, Kress, and Trew. According to Fowler, the authors' interest in that book was to "theorise language as a social practice . . . an intervention in the social and economic order, and one which in this case works by the reproduction of (socially originating) ideology" (1996, p. 3). Critical linguistics is also known as functional linguistics, since it is based on the systemic-functional grammar developed by Halliday (1985,1994), who claimed that the functions of linguistic structures are based on social structures. The term *functional* here has two meanings: it implies that linguistic forms correspond to linguistic use; and it also indicates that, as language plays different functions, or does different

things, so the forms of linguistics express and respond to the functions of linguistics (Fowler, 1996). The term *systemic* is also quite relevant here: it indicates that each time language is used, in whatever situation, the user is making constant linguistic choices. These choices, even though they are realised lexico-grammatically, are essentially choices of meaning (Richards et al, 1992).

But apart from claiming that there is a bi-directional relationship between social practices and linguistic practices, critical linguistics (or critical language awareness or critical discourse analysis) has another important aim: to make available, through the analysis of language as social practice, a critique of discourse that might lead to consciousness-raising, emancipation and empowerment. Connerton's comments about the importance of encouraging a critical view of society also apply to CDA:

> Criticism . . . is brought to bear on objects of experience whose "objectivity" is called into question: Criticism supposes that there is a degree of inbuilt deformity which masquerades as reality. It   seeks to remove this distortion and thereby to make possible the liberation of what has been distorted. Hence it entails a conception of *emancipation* (in Fowler, 1996, p. 4, my emphasis).

Critical analysts have been looking at a variety of modes of public discourse, such as the discourses of the media, of the law, of official documents, and so forth, in order to investigate issues of power, control, discrimination and misrepresentation mediated through language. As I commented above, one of the aims of these analyses is to question the objectivity of these powerful public discourses and to raise consciousness (Fowler, 1996). Critical Discourse Analysis claims that value systems are ingrained in any mode used to represent reality (such as language), and therefore CDA tries to de-naturalise common-sensical views of reality by indicating that any situation or event can be represented linguistically in different ways, with different meanings. However, it is important to emphasise that critical linguistics

does not try to point to a "correct" or "true" description of reality, but rather it tries to indicate that there are different ways of signifying, different ways of using language, each one of them carrying their own ideological implications. As Fowler says, "this is not, in fact, simply a question of "distortion" or "bias": there is not necessarily any true reality that can be unveiled by critical practice, there are simply relatively varying representations" (1996, p. 4).

Discourse and ideology are two basic concepts in the area of CDA. Discourse is here understood as a:

> systematically-organised set of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution. Beyond that, [it] defines, describes and delimits what is possible to say and not possible to say (and by extension - what is possible to do or not to do) with respect to the area of concern of that institution, whether marginally or centrally (Kress, 1989, p. 6-7).

According to Fairclough (1989), there are three dimensions in discourse: (1) text, (2) interaction, and (3) social context. Therefore, no text can be analysed isolated from the context where it was produced. For Fairclough, discourse involves social conditions, which relate to three different levels of social organisation: *the social situation*, or immediate social environment where the discourse occurs; *the social institution* where the discourse is embedded; and *society as a whole*. Fairclough concludes (p. 25) that these social conditions shape our background knowledge, determining the way we produce and interpret texts. By introducing our EFL students to this notion and this classification of discourse, we could encourage them to investigate the immediate social context of the texts they read and the institutions these texts represent, and we could eventually lead them to reflect upon larger social processes, upon society as a whole.

Critical Reading

Paul Gee (1990) discusses the myth of literacy. He argues that the common notion of literacy as "the ability to read and write" situates literacy in the individual rather than in the society where this individual is located, and in so doing it obscures the connections that tie reading, writing and language to power relations in our society (p. 27). To contest the common notion, Gee proposes a view of literacy which is "inherently political, in the sense of involving relations of order and power among people" (p. 27).

Apart from Gee, many other scholars and researchers are proposing a new, more critical view of literacy. In the framework of CDA, writers and readers are seen as constituted by the discourses they have access to. The texts we read construct certain "reading positions" for us; that is, they suggest what ideological values and beliefs we should bring to the text. However, according to Fowler (1996, p. 7), this does not necessarily mean a passive position for the reader: he argues that the proficient, critical reader approaches the text discursively equipped, and is therefore able to reconstruct it as a system of meanings either by accepting or by challenging the ideologies that inform the text. In literary theory, this kind of reading is called "productive consumption". Fowler (p. 7) points out the educational advantages of this view of reading:

> By giving power to the reader, [this approach] promotes the confidence that is needed for the production of readers (and interlocutors) who are not only communicatively competent, but also critically aware of the discursive formations and contradictions of texts, and able to enter into dialogue with their sources.

However, it would be naive to believe that all readers, borrowing Fowler's words, are "discursively equipped" to adopt such a critical position in front of every text. Certain reading positions are preferred to others (especially the hegemonic ones, the elite reading positions),

and many readers are trained into a subordinate position. That is the argument of Catharine Wallace (1992). She believes that, even though readers can take a more assertive or more submissive position, some points about this assertive/submissive continuum should be made. First, she points out that some readers, although having knowledge of the topic of a text, approach it submissively. Second, she observes that since the school system itself forces submission upon students, many readers in the educational environment are not in a position to challenge, by themselves, the power of the text. Wallace believes that it is "the context of learning which imposes submission: the view, not always well founded, that teacher and text - and test - must know best" (1992, p. 60). That is why teachers should help students to acquire linguistic and theoretical skills which can "equip" them to approach a text more critically.

A third point made by Wallace about the assertive/submissive continuum is that a reader may challenge the propositional contents of a text, but not its ideological assumptions. Ideology here means "the common-sensical assumptions which help to legitimise existing social relations and differences in power" (Wallace, 1992, p. 61). Effective reading involves challenging *both* the propositional contents *and* the ideological assumptions that underlie a text. As the ideological content of a text is generally presented as "obvious", hidden behind naturalised assumptions, teachers may have to guide readers to become aware of it. In this line, critical reading, according to Wallace, "involves a critical awareness in a broader sense, of what reading itself is, which, in turn, involves a consideration of cross-cultural aspects regarding who reads what and why in what situations" (p. 61)[1].

Critical Reading in the EFL Classroom

One important reason for relating Critical Discourse Analysis and EFL reading is that critical reading is generally not encouraged in the EFL classroom, where reading is usually seen as an unproblematic activity, the encounter between reader and text. According to Wallace, conventional reading classes lack three basic things: (1) an attempt to

link reading activity and texts to the broader social context; (2) the use of more provocative texts; (3) a methodology for text interpretation that helps uncover both the propositional content and the ideological assumptions behind the text (1992, p. 62). CDA aims at addressing these points by offering a social perspective to language and reading, and by suggesting several methodological approaches to the text (such as the use of Halliday's systemic-functional grammar, as I will comment below).

As to the use of "provocative" texts, I think this is a rather controversial notion. What is a provocative text? The one whose ideological implications are more obvious (e.g., reports from the popular press)? Some critical analysts, such as Kress, have just the opposite opinion, considering the "bland" text worthier of analysis (1993, p. 169): "CDA needs to be clear about the texts which it selects as objects of critical analysis. Ideologically the most effective may be the text which does not overtly declare its ideological constitution, the bland text."

How can we, then, as teachers, decide which texts are provocative enough? In my opinion, the solution for this dilemma is to approach all kinds of texts *provocatively*, that is, with critical eyes, trying to go beneath their surfaces and probe their ideological implications. Any kind of text is open to this critical reading, and the larger the number of textual genres a reader is exposed to, the better prepared she will be to establish a dialogue with texts. However, as Davies (1995) points out, classroom/ school book reading usually does not reflect the wide range of reading materials read outside the classroom; in the same line, Wallace (1992) says that L2 readers may not be familiar with the whole range of genres to which members of the majority culture have access. In light of that, I believe that a large variety of reading materials (newspapers, magazines, literature, academic texts, leaflets, official texts, product descriptions, CD covers, recipes, warnings on medicine bottles, etc.) should be explored critically in the EFL classroom.

According to Wallace, in the critical approach reading is seen as a tripartite activity: it involves *practices* (what kind of reading behaviour typifies different reading communities), the *production* and

consumption of reading materials (which I have discussed briefly in the previous paragraph), and the *process of reading*. It is this last aspect of reading that I want to address now. In the perspective of CDA, reading is a socially situated activity, first, because our social experiences and social context will shape the way we read, and second, because texts reflect and reinforce the social context where they have been created (Wallace, 1992, p. 67).

As I said in section 2 of this paper, texts are just a part of the discourses in which they are embedded (the other parts being interaction and social context). One of the aims of critical reading, then, is to help students to reconstruct the discourses to which a text pertains, which can be done by de-naturalising the common-sensical assumptions on which a text rests (such as assumptions about gender, race, social class, etc)[2].

Adding a critical perspective to the EFL reading classroom

In order to add a critical perspective to the reading class, some methodological aims have to be established. For this paper, I will propose two methodological aims based on Wallace's work (1992, p. 70-71): (1) to avoid the "find the right answer" approach, expressed in the conventional use of multiple-choice questions or guessing "what the teacher has in mind;" and (2) to add a critical element to the pre-reading/while-reading/post-reading procedure. To help raise awareness in the reading classroom, Wallace (p. 71) suggests four initial questions:

(1) Why is this topic being written about?
(2) How is the topic being written about?
(3) What other ways of writing about the topic are there?
(4) Who is writing to whom?

These questions can inform any critical approach to the text. Below, I will propose three ways of working critically with a text entitled *The Lure of the Sexually Aggressive Woman,* published in the British

Cosmopolitan magazine in February 1994[3]. Basically, the text argues that women who are sexually aggressive are more attractive to men. My aim in proposing a critical reading of this particular text is to raise consciousness of the issues of gender relations and sexism present in this particular article, and in *Cosmopolitan* as a whole. One of the most important questions to be raised in this critical reading is what ways of talking about sexually aggressive women were chosen by the writer. As the principle of options is essential to CDA (and hence to critical reading), question 3 above ("what other ways of writing about the topic are there?") is central to this critical discussion. This question informed the three classroom procedures proposed in this paper, which have been based on suggestions from Wallace (1992). The first procedure follows this pattern:

Pre-reading
1. What is the text about?- Scan pictures, headlines, subheadings to establish the topic.   Describe the text in a single sentence.
2. What do you think a "sexually aggressive" woman is?3. What ways are there in which we might write about sexually aggressive women?
4. Why do you think the text was written?
   - because of .... e.g., an interest in transgressive sexual practices
   - in order to .... e.g., inform/persuade/entertain

While-reading
- How is the material presented? Focusing on the description of a sexually aggressive woman in the extract on the side, consider:
1. How is Catherine described?
2. Is she depicted as an "ordinary", "normal" woman, or as a deviation from normality? Why do you think that is so?
3. Look for words, expressions, constructions, etc., that indicate the writer's position towards Catharine. What position is that?
4. Why do you think the writer compares Catherine with her friend Jenny?

Post-reading
1. To whom is the text addressed?
2. In what other ways could the text have been written?

This final post-reading question goes back to the third question in the pre-reading section; that is, as the readers have already discussed different ways of addressing the topic "female sexual aggressiveness," they can be made more aware of the options that were taken by the writer, the options that were left out, and what these choices mean (in terms of ideological implications). It is important to point out that, since this critical procedure does not require the use of a specific methodology (which is the case in the second procedure), it can be used for all levels of EFL readers, even those who still have some linguistic deficiencies.

Another way of working critically in the reading classroom is by using Halliday's functional grammar (1985) as a methodological tool for analysis. Since this would require familiarity with at least a simplified version of the Hallidayan grammar, this second reading procedure might be better indicated for more advanced EFL students (e.g., sixth- or seventh-semester undergraduate students in an English *Letras* course in Brazil). The class would be divided into three groups (A, B, and C) who would focus respectively on field, tenor and mode (Wallace, 1992, p. 77). The procedure would be the following:

Group A: Field
Experiential meanings (How the writer describes what is going on):
1. Participants: what/who is talked about?
2. Predicates: how is female sexual aggressiveness talked about?
   - What adjectives or nouns collocate with *sexual aggressiveness* and *sexually aggressive women*?
   - What verbs (states, actions, mental processes) co-occur with *sexual aggressiveness* and *sexually aggressive women*?
3. Agency: what/who initiates an action?
4. Effect of writer's choices?

Group B: Tenor
Interpersonal meanings (How the writer indicates attitude to self, subject and reader):

1. Mood: What mood is selected: - affirmative
                                      - imperative
                                      - interrogative
2. Modality: What kinds of modal verbs, adverbs, adjuncts, etc., are selected?
3. Person: What personal pronouns are selected?
                How does the writer refer to self, subject and reader?
4. Effect of writer's choices?

Group C: Mode
Textual meanings (How the content of the text is organized):
1. Theme: What information is selected for first position?
2. Voice: When is active or passive voice selected?
3. Cohesive relations: What kind of connectors are used?
4. Effect of writer's choices?

A third possible critical reading procedure suggested by Wallace (1992, p. 75) is to divide the text into several parts, and present each one successively to the students, deliberately withdrawing information as to the author, the genre and the source. The objective is to see if the students can reconstruct this information on the basis of linguistic and non-linguistic clues provided by the discourses present in the text. Some possible questions in such an activity would be:
Reconstructing context from text extracts
1. What is the genre?
2. What is the topic?
3. Why was the text written?
4. Who is writing? (in terms of gender, class, nationality and personal traits)

5. To or for whom is she/he writing?
6. What other information is revealed? (e.g. time of writing)

After each section of the text is read, the students would discuss the questions, and only at the end would they be given information as to the author, the genre and the source. Wallace (1992) suggests that a good exercise would be to compare a group which read an uncontextualised version with another group which read a contextualised version of the text.

Conclusion

As I commented above, CDA does not propose to present a "correct" or "true" description of reality; rather, it hopes to indicate that while producing a text, we have a plethora of linguistic options, and that the options we finally make are traces of our social, historical and ideological positioning. Therefore, I have deliberately withdrawn from making critical comments about the article chosen for the reading procedures mentioned above. My intention is to suggest ways of working critically with a particular text from the mass media, but not to indicate "correct" or "appropriate" ways of interpreting it. It would be interesting to apply the critical reading activities proposed above to different reading groups, and compare their interpretations and impressions of the text (which could indicate if there is a "preferred" reading position in relation to articles from women's magazines, if the reading varies according to individual differences (gender, race, age, social class, etc.), etc.)[4].

As Wallace points out, critical reading activities in the EFL classroom will vary depending on the characteristics of each group of students (and each individual student). Different levels of social and linguistic awareness will result in different readings of a text. That is why the procedure which involved the use of Halliday's grammar was suggested for more advanced students. Teachers who want to adopt this critical approach to reading have to adapt activities according to

the socio-linguistic level of their students. As Wallace says, "work on ways of systematising a simple linguistic description for critical literacy remains to be done" (1992, p. 80).

A last comment concerns the use of CDA as a way of raising consciousness and paving the way to emancipation. Wallace (1992) says that the interpretation of a text produced by a class where the concepts of language, ideology and the nature of discourse have been previously discussed is markedly different from the interpretation produced by a class where this critical approach has not been adopted. Therefore, each teacher will have to decide if she/he wants to add or not this critical element to their reading activities. If so, criticism of language, ideology and relations of power in discourse can lead to a process of empowerment and self-emancipation. Teachers can help to empower students "by providing information and knowledge, by helping [them] to reflect on their own views and practices, by giving systematic explanation of the way language works" (Clark, 1992, p. 137). And the beauty of it is that, by introducing a critical element in our teaching practices, we can also, as individuals, dive into a process of self-knowledge and self-emancipation.

Notes

1   Another important step in the process of consciousness-raising and emancipation through a critical approach to reading is a discussion of the notion of access to discourse (Van Dijk, 1996). Van Dijk sees discourse as a powerful asset in our society, one of the resources that form the power base of elite groups. Therefore, he advocates an investigation of which groups have access to which kinds of discourse (such as the discourses of politics, of the media, of the academia and of business), since this can indicate which groups dominate others or are dominated by others via the use of discourse.

2   Wallace (1992, p. 68) points out that, since L2 [and EFL] students are not the intended audience of many authentic texts, they are in a privileged position, as 'outsiders', to challenge and contest both the propositional and the ideological contents of a text.

3   For a further analysis of women's magazines from a critical perspective, see Figueiredo (1995) and Caldas-Coulthard (1996).

4   The different interpretations (or the similar interpretations) of a text produced by a group of readers can also be used to help them explore their own discourses, since the discourses to which they have access will determine the interpretation of the texts they read. This is so because, as Gee comments, "each discourse protects itself by demanding from its adherents performances which act as though its ways of being, thinking, acting, talking, writing, *reading* and valuing are 'right', 'natural', 'obvious', the way 'good' and 'intelligent' and 'normal' people behave" (1990, p.191, my emphasis).

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