

## **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the importance of critical literacy skills and that, by aiding English language learners to develop these skills, may provide a viable way of empowering them. Motivations for this paper are based on the following premises. Firstly, the significant role that critical literacy skills play in unpacking meanings within texts, to better understand the ideologies and or sets of belief which are inherent in them, cannot be underestimated. Secondly, from an English language teaching perspective, it is considered that the better the understanding of learners of the depth and range of meanings within a text or genre, the more that it enables them to access and participate in those genres. Thirdly, it should not be assumed that the language of English which is shared as the main language by the countries of the United States of America (USA), the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia, automatically means that the cultural context of these countries are the same. Fourthly, in an ongoing discourse analytic study, being carried out by the author of this paper, the extent to which contextual features and intertextual references affect the meaning of the discourse are being questioned. The final motivating factor for this paper lies in assessing the pedagogical implications of the discourse study and, as a consequence, developing a proposed pedagogical tool for the language learning classroom.

This paper will review each of these motivational aspects outlined above and attempt to contribute to the discussion of how language learners can be empowered to engage with and participate in the multitude of interactions to which they are exposed, whether as a migrant living within a particular country, or as an interactant who communicates from afar.

## **CRITICAL LITERACY AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

While listening and reading are considered as 'receptive' as opposed to the 'productive' skills of speaking and writing, they nevertheless require a certain amount of activity on the part of listeners and readers to understand what is being said or written. For some time, therefore, listeners and readers have been regarded as active participants in the complex and interactional nature of negotiating meaning (Savignon, 2001). However, language learners, including many of those who are learning English, do not have equal access to the skills of understanding the social practices in which reading and writing are embedded (Clark, 1995). For English language learners to be able to critically engage with textual and cultural practices, they must have access to, and be able to critique, both cultural and linguistic resources (Hammond & Mackin-Horarick, 1999).

It is useful to take account of the work of the following scholars in considering how and why it is important to develop the critical literacy skills of English language learners. Kress (1982) and Martin (1989) suggest that language learners may be excluded from engaging in 'genres of power' unless they are specifically taught how to critique them. Genres of power tend to be specialised ways of writing, such as, scientific reports and legal documents, which are generally monopolised by group members and restricted to members of particular technical and professional activities (Lemke, 1995). While acknowledging that access to these genres suggests a certain

degree of acquiescence with dominant cultural systems (Lemke, 1995), it is however asserted that critiquing these genres as they are taught can empower ESL students to both understand and participate in them. The strategies used in 'professional' genres (Bazerman, 1988, 1994; Halliday & Martin, 1993), according to Lemke (1995), should be taught in their context for deeper understanding. Developing the ability of language learners to critique these texts may, furthermore, lead them to challenge the values which underlie the texts (van Dijk, 1998). Thus, an analysis of texts undertaken from a critical linguistic position, will help to highlight the..." ideological loading of particular ways of using language and the relations of power which underlie them" (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p.258). Alongside critiquing texts or discourse, identifying the contribution of multimodal features can be important, as it may affect peoples' reactions to events (Paltridge, 2006), and thus reveal the different ways in which texts are constructed. Enabling English language learners to access and participate in genres, through the development of their critical literacy skills, could therefore ensure more equitable interactions (Cope, 2009).

### **CROSS-CULTURAL ASPECTS OF ENGLISH**

The notion of cross-culture has mainly been examined in spoken or written texts from cultures and countries whose first languages are different (see, for example, Bhatia, 2006; Simon-Vandenberg, White, & Aijmer, 2007; Wang, 2006). However, the number of varieties of English is increasing in addition to the number of people throughout the world who are speaking Englishes. According to Kachru's (1988) concentric circles, countries such as the UK, the USA and Australia form part of the inner circle of English-speaking countries – those countries where English is the primary language for the majority of that country's population (Kirkpatrick, 2007). Yet the largest proportion of English language speakers, over 1,000 million people, now belongs to the expanding circle which includes China and Russia and consists of countries where people mainly use English as a foreign language. There seems to be an implicit assumption, however, that because certain countries, for example, the UK, the USA and Australia, share English as their first language, it follows that their cultural contexts are similar. While there are likely to be some cultural similarities in the inner circle countries due to their common origins, differences may have occurred too with the evolution of these countries away from their common ancestry. In consequence, the English language may have continued to develop too, particularly in the USA and Australia, as a result of contact with other languages or varieties and changes in the social and cultural contexts (Kay, 2004).

An illustration of the important influence of context on language can be seen in the use of the word 'sorry' in Kevin Rudd's, a former Prime Minister of Australia, formal Apology speech to the Aboriginal and Indigenous people of Australia at the opening of Parliament in early 2008 (Rudd, 2008). In the Australian context, the word 'sorry' is emotionally and politically charged because it had been withheld from being said to Aboriginal people ever since the Europeans arrived in Australia in the late 1700s. In the North American or British context, however, saying a single word of apology may not be construed as particularly sincere and a more embellished apology may be demanded for a similar experience. In Australia, English language learners are likely to benefit from an understanding of the Australian historical and cultural background to be able to obtain a deeper understanding of Kevin Rudd's formal Apology speech.

Contextual factors, therefore, can affect how language is used across cultures, and, for this reason, it is necessary to highlight and distinguish features of the context in order to analyse hidden and coded meanings in texts (Wodak, 2007). Wierzbicka (1997) additionally claims to have provided evidence of specific Australian patterns of social relations and cultural values in her examination of the word 'mate', stating that the Australian variety of English includes a socio-category of the word 'mate' not found in other varieties of English, such as British and American English.

English language learners, therefore, who find themselves living in a country, or communicating from elsewhere, with people whose first or main language is English, may find that they do not fully grasp the meaning of what is being said or that the variety of English is different to that with which they are familiar. While the sequence of events in a spoken or written transaction are often similar, even in two cultures in which the first language is different, the way of using language may vary from one cultural group to another (Paltridge, 2006), and is strongly influenced by their cultural norms (Huth & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006). Consequently, speakers and writers reflect their cultures and roles in interactions, making certain assumptions about a situation and the participants (Moerman, 1988). Thus, in English language learning, there needs to be an awareness that understanding a text is more than just knowing the meaning of the words and that, in particular, the context has an effect on the discourse. For learners of English to be truly empowered, they need to be aware of the impact that both the broader socio-cultural context of the country and the local situational context in which the text is published may have on the meaning of texts.

### **OVERVIEW OF A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYTIC STUDY**

This paper has been derived from an ongoing study which is examining a selection of newspaper texts from the USA, the UK and Australia, written by influential authors, on the Global Financial Crisis. From a critical discourse perspective, one of the aims of the study is to compare and evaluate writing strategies to highlight the extent to which, and in what ways, the cultural contexts impact the discourse of the texts. It is considered that an investigation of the impact of background knowledge of cultural and situational contexts on discourse, may lead to an understanding of how this affects readers' understanding of the meaning of a text. Additionally, the critical analysis of writers' strategies could reveal the underlying ideologies or sets of beliefs which they adhere to.

An analysis of cross-cultural aspects will allow comparisons to be drawn between the three English-speaking countries of the USA, the UK and Australia during the Global Financial Crisis. Even though English is the dominant language in all three countries, it is expected that the context may affect the discourse in various ways from country to country. Examining the impact that these three cultural contexts have on the discourse could be of additional importance because, as well as demonstrating how socio-economic factors and ideologies inherent in national contexts affect the production of discourse during a crisis across three English-speaking cultures, it may also lead to an understanding of how writers position themselves and their readers.

## **PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND A TOOL FOR DEVELOPING CRITICAL LITERACY SKILLS**

The development of critical literacy skills for English language learners is thus important because through the application of these skills, learners will develop an understanding of the underlying meanings of spoken and written English. It is intended that developing the ability to critique and access 'genres of power', such as newspaper texts from the study written by influential writers, will ultimately allow students to engage with and participate in them. It is proposed that a simplified version of the methodology derived from the study could be applied in the classroom as a pedagogical tool.

In consideration of how to develop a pedagogical tool for teaching critical literacy skills, the following factors have been taken into account. A top-down approach is favoured, as put forward by Ellis (2003), so that the heading and structural aspects of the whole text are considered before individual words. This concurs somewhat with Crawford's (2002) proposition that the focus of classroom materials should be on "whole texts" (p.84), and where possible an audiovisual component is useful for richness in linguistic and cultural information. Texts should be authentic-like (Crawford, 2002), and be adapted for learners according to their proficiency levels and the teaching context. There should be an understanding that, in reading a text, the reader is actively interacting with it in order to negotiate meaning from the text. Guiding the language learner through the reading task using their critical literacy skills can allow the reader to discover possible cultural and linguistic resources for themselves which can lead to powerful insights.

This paper has stressed the importance of context in understanding a text. This tool, therefore, emphasises two types of contextual factors, those relating to the broader socio-cultural context in which the text is set, and those which relate to the more immediate contextual factors in which the text is produced. Some of these aspects may already be known to students, while other information may need to be elicited from students, or supplied by the teacher.

A table or grid could be drawn up for each student and questions adapted according to the level of proficiency of the students. The following contextual factors could be considered before reading the text, for example:

- When and where was the text written?
- Who wrote it? What is known about the identity of the writer - what is their age group, gender, nationality, role?
- What is the title of the text and sub-title? Do these give an idea of what the purpose of the text is or what the text is about?

After finding the answers to the questions above and discussing them, the following could be considered while reading the text:

- What values may be associated with the text? Which words or structures suggest these values?
- What phrases or names or individual words are unfamiliar? Do you think these names or words are written without explaining them because the writer thinks the reader might already know them? Why might the writer do that?

- Which words or phrases are important to understanding the text?

Awareness of both contextual and textual factors in reading materials will provide a starting point for the development of English language learners' critical literacy skills. It will help them to more fully understand the cultural context of the English writers of either the country in which they are living or with which they are communicating from afar. It is intended that eventually these skills will empower them by enabling them to participate fully in the discourse.

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