

Language, Power and Voices of a University: The Role of Critical Linguistics in Curriculum Development

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Summary

This paper argues that students coming to the university for the first time need to understand, not only traditional university conventions and practices, but, more importantly, the institutional power relations which have an immediate bearing on their positions as students. It is claimed that "Learning, Language and Logic", which is a credit-bearing course for second language speakers from impoverished educational backgrounds, should provide the context for the development of a critical response to the university and for the possible contestation of some of its commonsense practices. It is argued that critical linguistics, which focuses on the way in which power relations are linguistically encoded, provides one way in which these insights can be developed. The paper describes a critical language programme which was part of "Learning, Language and Logic" and then focuses on student responses to one particular task. It also includes a brief critique of this approach to language teaching.

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel word geredeneer dat studente wat vir die eerste maal aan 'n universiteit studeer nie net die tradisionele universiteitskonvensies en -praktyke moet begryp nie, maar ook, nog belangriker, insig moet hê in die institusionele magsrelasies wat direk betrekking het op hul posisies as studente. Daar word aangevoer dat "Learning, Language and Logic", wat 'n kredietdraende kursus vir tweedetaalsprekers vanuit verarmde opvoedkundige agtergronde is, die konteks behoort te verskaf vir die ontwikkeling van 'n kritiese respons op die universiteit en vir 'n moontlike weerlegging van sommige van die "commonsense" praktyke daarvan. Daar word geredeneer dat kritiese linguistiek, wat fokus op die wyse waarop magsrelasies taalmatig geënkodeer is, een manier verskaf waarop hierdie insigte ontwikkel kan word. Die artikel beskryf 'n kritiese taalprogram wat deel was van "Learning, Language and Logic" en fokus dan op studente se reaksies op een spesifieke opdrag. Dit sluit ook 'n kort kritiek op hierdie benadering tot taalonderrig in.

The context for the critical language programme described here is a first year credit-bearing course, "Learning, Language and Logic". This course, which was the first of its kind in South Africa, was introduced in 1984 and has been developed for second language speakers on the Pietermaritzburg campus of the University of Natal. It reflects one strand of the attempt to redress some of the educational impoverishment and disadvantage experienced by black students in the context of apartheid structures. Its broad aim is to identify and respond to the academic and communicative needs of second language speakers with a view to increasing their confidence and competence to interact and communicate fully and effectively within the university environment. Inevitably, a large part of the course's function is to construct a context in which students have sufficient time to practise and reflect on the academic processes and skills considered necessary for success at university.

The aim of "Learning, Language and Logic", however, is by no means confined to the acquisition or development of skills. Although it is readily

acknowledged that a single curriculum cannot address the challenges and complexities of broader sociopolitical issues fully or even adequately, it is precisely these historical conditions in which our thinking is embedded and which provide the context for the ongoing development of the course. A comment from a black female student in response to one of her early university experiences highlights several aspects of this context and provides some indication of the number of factors which intermesh to contribute to the total experience of an unfamiliar social and academic environment.

This student enrolled for "Learning, Language and Logic" in 1989. During the first quarter, her tutorial group was asked to investigate any aspect of the university community which interested them. They decided to interview Deans of Faculties about the university's admission policy, especially as it pertained to black students. The purpose of this activity was to develop the linguistic and personal confidence of new students by creating what Bryce Heath and Branscombe have termed "crises in communication", (1985: 31), contexts in which they were involved in relatively high risk situations which would challenge them to use all their linguistic, sociolinguistic and strategic resources.¹ It was also hoped that they would experience, as interviewers, even in this rather unusual context, a position where, potentially, they had some control of the encounter. High risk communicative tasks, however, can have counterproductive and demoralising effects and adequate initial preparation was an essential part of the process.

Students worked in groups of two or three and spent considerable time defining their purpose, making the necessary appointments, role playing potentially difficult situations, discussing interviewing strategies and attempting to anticipate possible obstacles. Once the interviews had been completed, they were required to present their findings as formal written discourse and then to pool information by reporting orally to the rest of the class. The final section of the written report consisted of a personal evaluation of the interviewing experience. The student mentioned above had this to say:

What I learnt from the interview was that things didn't occur as I expected them. I was so tensed since it was the first time that I had to interview a white man. What I discovered was that he appeared to be a kind somebody. While I was fighting with my monitor² trying to construct sentences for introducing ourselves, the man asked if we would like to have a cup of coffee. I was surprised by the question to the extent that I hardly trusted my ears that he really meant it. I responded with yes but still felt hesitation so I said no. He himself provided me with coffee. Still asking myself why he was lowering himself like that, the man bumpered us with answers of the unasked questions. He talked a non-stop speech of about one and a half hours. By the time he stopped, he expected questions from us. I was amazed and it was difficult to know which questions were answered and which were not. . . Being bewildered, I asked fumbling questions just to console myself that I can ask a question. Still the man responded to them nicely.

To me the interview was absolutely wonderful. It changed my conclusions about the whites whom I regard as superior. I was brought to the conclusion that some are just like myself, willing to help and to socialize.³

As a young black woman, this student had to manage and to some extent overcome, a wide range of her life experiences which interacted to constitute her “tensed” and “bewildered” response to the situation. Firstly, the racial divisions and stereotypes which characterise this country are clearly evident. Secondly, and crucially interacting with the racial dimension, are the traditional and unequal gender relations, which are so stringently defined within many black communities (Ramphela & Boonzaier 1988). The fact that she was both black *and* female, in addition to being a first year, second language student, simply served to make her task all the more taxing. Her responses themselves give some evidence of this complexity. Most interesting here, are the contradictions that permeate her discourse. Two broad and apparently conflicting strands of the experience clearly emerge.

On the one hand, she discovered that, contrary to her “tensed”, socialised fear about interviewing a white male, the “white man. . . appeared to be a kind somebody” whom she was amazed to find “lowering” himself to make her coffee and who was prepared to respond “nicely” to her “fumbling” questions. Importantly, like her, he was also “willing to help and to socialise” and his friendly, informal manner was certainly an unexpected aspect of the experience which, at this level, was a pleasant realisation for her.

On the other hand, and in sharp contrast to the positive aspects of her experience, are the considerable confusion, the element of mistrust and lack of control of the interview that emerge in her discourse. The fact that “things”, as she says, “did not occur as I had expected them”, served to almost totally disempower her in this context. If one observes, with Shipman, that

interviews not only depend on the quality of the questions asked, but on the awareness of, and control over, the interaction involved

(1973: 84)

or accepts Cannell and Kahn’s definition of an interview as

a two person conversation initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information

(In: Cohen & Manion 1980: 291)

then it is evident that she was not engaged in an interview at all. No amount of forethought and anticipation could have prepared her for being “bumped. . . with the answers to the unasked questions” and few definitions of an interview as a specific genre would concede that it could consist of a “non-stop speech of about one and a half hours”, most particularly before any questions had been asked. At different points during the interview she describes herself as “fighting with her monitor”, feeling “bewildered” and, in the end, being able to ask only “fumbling questions” in order to “console” herself that she was capable of asking a question at all.

The positive and pivotal aspects of this encounter appear to be based on an unexpected, courteous and informal welcome from a white male and his making her a cup of coffee. There is no evidence that she had, at any level,

control of the situation nor the means, after setting up the meeting, to take even a little of the initiative.

It is not relevant here to debate the various ways in which this student was constructed in the situation – by the Dean, by the institution and, indeed, by herself. Nor is it appropriate to discuss at length the competing interpretations of the encounter; the difference between her construction of meaning and mine. Suffice it to say that, given different subjectivities, both readings are valid for different reasons and both should be incorporated into any discussion of the event. What *is* crucial is that her feelings and experience should be seriously acknowledged (Ellsworth 1989; Weiler 1991). Her overriding impression, at this time in her life, is extremely positive. She found that she *could* interact with him and that she could, despite her confusion, ask some of the necessary questions. The fact that, for her, “the interview was absolutely wonderful” and that “it changed [her] conclusions about whites” indicates that she felt that she had experienced important perceptual shifts and these are likely to have increased her confidence in other, later encounters.

The situation described above is a single example of the multifaceted nature of the experiences facing students, particularly black students, coming to the university for the first time. It has been discussed here, not as a reflection of the experiences of all students, nor because it captures the total complexity of this single encounter. It does, however, help to identify several of the broad contextual considerations in which “Learning, Language and Logic” is being developed and it provides the framework in which this particular language programme has been conceptualised.

It is self-evident that many students coming to the university for the first time, particularly second language students, must acquire or develop essential academic and communication skills and should, for their own benefit, become aware of traditionally accepted institutional conventions. What is not so easily recognised is that these skills and conventions need to be understood within the broader framework of an explicitly critical analysis of the university as an educational institution. Norton Peirce, for example, claims that there is often an emphasis on appropriacy at the expense of the development of a critical approach. She argues that

if we teach English in a way that promotes a student’s uncritical integration into a society, students will lack the tools to question the predetermined roles established for them by that society. Conversely, if we teach our students that appropriate usage, although useful to acquire, is nevertheless historically and materially constructed to support the interests of a dominant group within a given society, we can open up possibilities for our students in terms of the way in which they perceive themselves, their role in society, and the possibilities for change and growth in their society.

(Norton Peirce 1989: 407)

It is important, then, that students are encouraged to understand and critique the less visible dynamics of the university, most especially the power relationships which shape it. In the light of both the authoritarian and unquestioning school systems and numerous alienating experiences reported by black students especially during their first university year (Hart 1988),⁴ a

context for the development of a more interrogative relationship with the institution needs to be developed. Students need the space in which to gain the confidence to contest, when necessary, some of the dominant practices.

The attempt to facilitate the development of this critical perspective overtly rather than implicitly has important pedagogical implications. It has resulted in a far more rigorous and critical reflection on our own practice and a movement away from an emphasis on appropriacy *per se*. Last year for the first time, we began the course with a component designed to facilitate the development of academic reading skills while at the same time (by analysing texts drawn from university discourse) encouraging a critical understanding of the university environment. Implicit in this shift of emphasis is a conscious commitment to a methodology which incorporates, but, in addition, moves beyond, the notion of communicative competence and an acknowledgement that our previous focus on it might in fact have denied students opportunities to operate as powerfully as they could within the institution (Norton Peirce 1989; Fairclough 1992).

The underlying conception of the nature and role of language is crucial here and in this regard we have found some poststructuralist insights, particularly those relating to the relationship between language, power and change, to offer useful guidelines. The complexity of the debate is in no way reflected here, nor are the ideas new, but the articulation of a few central principles has played a crucial role in the development of the course. One of these is the explicit recognition of the political nature of language – in this context English as it is taught to second language speakers in a South African university. Language is viewed, not as a transparent, innocent medium which neutrally expresses or reflects social conditions, but as a socially constructed phenomenon which both shapes and is shaped by social change. For Weedon

language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organisation and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed. (1987: 21)

People, or subjects, then, are constituted in and by language which is directly implicated in relations of power and dominance. Within these constraints, however, it is possible to contest dominant practice and this has very important implications for the ways in which people perceive themselves and their relationship with others in society. Within the context of the university, it seems reasonable to suggest that one of the reasons that black students so often report feelings of alienation is that it is difficult to find a subject position from which to operate; it is difficult to make meaning or to contest dominant practice within the context of an institution that constructs itself in ways often inaccessible and alien to students. What we are attempting to do is to create a context in which students can begin to understand university discourse, and with this insight, construct positions for themselves from which contestation is possible.

The notion of language as discourse goes some way towards explaining the political nature of language. Here I am not referring to the commonly held sociolinguistic view that discourse is

a continuous stretch of (especially spoken) language larger than a sentence. . . at its most general, a discourse is. . . a set of utterances which constitutes any recognisable speech event.

(Crystal 1980: 114)

But rather to the broader conception that

discourses are systematically-organised sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution. Beyond that they define, describe and delimit what it is possible to say and not possible to say (and by extension – what it is possible to do or not to do) with respect to the area of concern of that institution. . . . A discourse provides a set of possible statements about a given area, and organises and gives structure to the manner in which a particular topic, object, process is to be talked about. In that it provides descriptions, rules permissions and prohibitions of social and individual actions.

(Kress 1985: 7)

It is with this definition of discourse in mind that the course was developed last year.

A linguistic theory compatible with the theoretical framework sketched above is critical linguistics. As an approach to the teaching of language this is referred to as either critical language study or, most frequently, critical language awareness.⁵

The term “critical linguistics” was used for the first time by Fowler and others (1979) and by Kress & Hodge (1979). This perspective has added an important new dimension to language teaching and has been substantially developed in recent years. (See especially Kress 1985; Chilton 1985; Fowler 1991; Fairclough 1989, 1992.) It is primarily engaged in the formulation of a principled account of the relationship between language, power and ideology and the way in which texts, through the selection of specific linguistic structures and lexical items, encode these relationships and reflect the interests of particular groups of people, most especially the dominant and powerful. Janks defines it as a theoretical perspective which

by looking at the ideological presumptions of texts and the linguistic selections of words and structures attempts to challenge the naturalisations in texts. It aims, in the words of Foucault, to “sap power” from dominant discourse to make people into resistant readers of texts.

(1988: 68)

For Fowler

Critical Linguistics seeks, by studying the minute details of linguistic structure in the light of the social and historical situation of the text, to display to consciousness the patterns of belief and value which are encoded in the language – and which are below the threshold of notice for anyone who accepts the discourse as “natural”.

(1991: 67)

It is in terms of the hiddenness of, and the (often unconscious) attempt to naturalise specific ideological positions that the term “critical” is defined in this context. Fairclough explains that it is used

...in the special sense of aiming to show up connections which may be hidden from people – such as the connections between language, power and ideology. . . (1989: 5)

and Wodak expands this notion when she describes the critical linguist as attempting to

...uncover and de-mystify certain social processes in this and other societies, to make mechanisms of manipulation, discrimination, demagoguery, and propaganda explicit and transparent [and]. . .to understand how and why reality is structured in a certain way.

(1989: xiv)

It would be misguided to claim, however, that the uncovering of hidden ideological assumptions underlying a given text, is in itself sufficient to counteract the subtle and manipulative influence of a particular ideological position. In this regard, Menz provides cautionary comment:

The exposure of ideological linguistic use does not automatically eliminate the effect of ideologies and myths, but in making them explicit it is possible to make them visible to everybody and thus encourage a conscious, i.e. critical, debate about them.

(1989: 233)

It is precisely in making hidden meaning explicit, in showing “how the detailed structure of a language silently and continuously shapes the ideas presented” (Fowler 1991: 231), that critical linguistics can make a significant analytical contribution. The initiation of critical debate implies at least that the “effect of ideologies” is rendered visible and brings with it the possibility, within determining social and historical constraints, previously unseen options. It implies that if the construction and intention of dominant conventions and practices can be better understood, they can also be critiqued and either accepted or rejected.

Like other critical disciplines, critical linguistics insists that any enquiry is placed within an evolving historical context. It is acknowledged that while language shapes society, it is itself powerfully shaped by sociohistorical conditions. In this, critical linguistics both complements and moves beyond the notion of communicative competence, a concept developed by Hymes against Chomsky’s claim that

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly. . . .

(1965: 3)

Hymes argues that

We have. . .to account for the fact that a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He or she acquires

competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where in what manner.

(1979: 15)

Part of a language teacher's role is certainly to expose students to linguistic behaviour considered appropriate and to traditional conventions generally accepted within various social and educational institutions. Crucially, however, that role extends also to a critique of those conventions (Norton Peirce 1989). By extension, this also means a critical view of appropriacy models of language teaching. Fairclough (1992), for example, rightly insists that there is no simple relationship between varieties of language and the contexts in which they are used nor are these varieties and contexts neatly definable.

In summary, critical language awareness provides a critique of the notion of communicative competence and appropriacy. Through the development of an understanding of the way in which language encodes power relationships, it is an approach that can assist students, not only to understand the generally accepted conventions and practices of a given institution or society, but crucially, to ask questions which provide a framework for understanding the historical conditions of those conventions. Focus is not only on what is stated but also on what is left unsaid and there is an explicit interest in the way in which powerful social groups benefit from traditional, commonsense practice. Critical language awareness has the potential to equip people to make better informed choices about if and when to contest dominant practice and encourages the development of the self-assurance to do this. As Fairclough points out, however,

it is also crucially important that learners' own linguistic practice should be informed by estimates of the possibilities, risks and costs of going against dominant judgements of appropriate usage

(1992: 54)

What follows is an account of how an attempt was made to translate these considerations into the "Learning, Language and Logic" curriculum. I will begin with a brief overview of the whole programme, focus on one or two activities in more detail and finally consider some of the student evaluations of the process.

The broad aim of the programme was to open up possibilities for students to develop a critical response to the university as an educational institution while at the same time beginning to address some of the academic strategies required for successful study. They began by writing a short account of how they perceived their roles as members of the institution. The purpose of this task was to have some record of how students initially positioned themselves within the university and to try and assess the range of activities they thought of as being options for them. This was followed by recollection of past school experience, focusing on the most positive and negative incidents and then a short written piece in which they wrote about what for them, constitutes a "good student". Important discussion followed this, revolving around such questions as:

Who made the rules in your school?
Who benefited from the rules?
Were they ever challenged?
What happened if anyone challenged them?
How much say did students have in any decision making processes? Whose ideas are contained in the “good student” texts? Ours? Our parents’? Teachers’? The societies’?
How much choice do we really have in the decisions we take or the ideas we formulate?

Through this discussion, students were introduced to several central concepts. Although not technically named, questions relating to subject positioning, interpellation, dominant group interest, power relations and notions of determinacy and agency were briefly touched on. Some of these were developed later in other parts of the programme.

Students were then required to construct two dialogues, both based on the same situation but with different interlocutors. In the first text, dialogue was between themselves and a close friend and in the second between themselves and a senior, male teacher at their school. Role plays on the basis of these resulted in lengthy discussion on the way in which context and social relationships – difference in age, status, power – resulted in significantly different linguistic encoding. The discussion, however, focused not on the naturalness of these relationships but on their social construction. Central here was the idea that

Words change their meanings according to the positions held by those who use them.

(Pecheux 1982: 111)

Diversity of opinion about whether or not “respect for the aged” was automatically warranted and whether in fact it was given in all situations, led to the consideration of the role played by social and historical conditions in the shaping of human behaviour. This, in turn, resulted in discussion on the central importance of context and the extent to which meaning is constructed by it.

From this point, the focus moved from the school to the university context. Students began discussing the various ways in which the institution divides its social space and how it represents itself, particularly through text. They then worked with a questionnaire designed to elicit their responses to the initial range of texts they had received from the university as incoming students. Then, concentrating on one text, they considered authorship, purpose and attitude and were also asked to suggest any changes they thought necessary.

During the third week, students listened to a lecture entitled “The Challenges of Critical Language Study”. This had a dual purpose – to make explicit some of the theoretical principles underpinning the programme and also to facilitate the development of students’ note-making strategies. The next task involved a comparison of two texts advertising reading courses on the campus. The first of these had been circulated in 1989 and, as a direct result of student comment and criticism during “Learning, Language and

Logic” tutorials, had been substantially rewritten. The outcome was a very different construction, one which excluded many of the original negative structures, made different “non-deficit model” lexical choices and generally positioned students much more positively. Students responded enthusiastically to this task, perhaps partly because the second version had been a result of student criticism.

The second part of the programme consisted of a series of tutorials during which students discussed, analysed and wrote about the ways in which a selection of discrete linguistic structures are used in a range of university texts. Two important and inter-related features provided the context for this work.

The first was that students themselves provided the texts on which exercises were based. They drew from a wide range of sources which included residence rules, the code of conduct, extracts from student newspapers and the mission statement, political slogans and advertisements off notice boards, the then-BSS information sheets and the Vice Chancellor’s opening address to first year students. Logistically, the process makes pre-planning difficult and preparation somewhat pressured but this is outweighed by the benefits of incorporating students, if only to a small degree, into the development of the curriculum and the belief that student-selected text is likely to have a more immediate bearing on their lives, and, by extension, their level of motivation. This was borne out by a tutor later when she evaluated the programme:

Students were very motivated and engaged when doing the critical language exercises. Using material which has real consequences in their lives certainly enabled them to see *why* certain structures are used in particular linguistic contexts, in a way that using just any material would not. I think it also motivated students to understand and be motivated to *master* linguistic structures in a way that traditional grammar teaching seldom achieves.

The second feature was the use of a large collage – a combination of, and further selection from, the students’ choices. This especially constructed “text from text”, entitled “Voices of a University”, had two functions. First, it was used in an attempt to keep the broader context in mind (and literally in sight) while concentrating on discrete structures. Second, it was a means of introducing students to the notion of intertextuality, the intersection of meaning between texts and the impact of each on the meaning of others (Halliday & Hasan 1985). A later student evaluation of the programme indicated that, at least for some, this had been effective:

It has helped students to realise the importance of the total context in the production and interpretation of texts, considering the way in which meaning of texts is influenced by other texts and to see that different texts position readers in different ways.

The linguistic constructions selected for the language tutorials were modality, the active and passive voice, the article and the use of pronouns. The significance of lexical choice was also considered, often in conjunction with one or more of the other structures. Students began by dealing with each

construction separately and were engaged in a wide range of tasks – reading, discussing, analysing and writing. For example, in discussion of modality, students considered the implications of the use of the present tense in such sentences as

It is a privilege to have been selected to live at Malherbe.

(Malherbe Residence 1991: 5)

or

Everyone is calling for the resignation of Magnus Malan

(Nux March 1991: 3)

and they related this to the often questionable use of the present tense in their own academic essays. They analysed a text commemorating Sharpeville Day in which police were described as having opened fire “in a moment of over-reaction”. They also tried to identify who “*the* community” referred to in the Vice Chancellor’s opening address to first years and asked similar questions about “*the* customary society norms” to which he referred.

One of the extracts that caused heated and animated discussion was drawn from the Malherbe Residence Rules:

HELPFUL INFORMATION

1. Security.

1.1 Doors

WOMEN STUDENTS: Doors to the Women’s Residence are locked at 11.30 p.m. Monday to Saturday and at 11.00 p.m. on Sunday. A late leave key is issued to women to let themselves in after hours, but this privilege may be withdrawn if used irresponsibly.

MEN STUDENTS: The front door is locked at 10.30 p.m. but unrestricted entrance is available through the basement door.

IF YOU ARE OUT AND ANY DIFFICULTIES ARISE PLEASE DO NOT HESITATE TO TELEPHONE EITHER THE WARDEN OR ONE OF THE SUBWARDENS.

Students first considered this text in terms of the lexical choices only – why it was, for example, that keys for women were a privilege, why women were likely to abuse this and the implications of the unrestricted entrance available to the men. Later, when asked to use any insights gained from the Critical Language programme, this was one of two texts students analysed in detail. Many students were aware of the unequal gender relations, as the following extracts show:

In the text from Malherbe Rules the women and men students are positioned differently. To position women students strong words are used like doors locked promptly, withdrawn, etc. With male students the doors are just locked so making the issue. . . much softer. For women students it seems to be a privilege to have their doors open. . . for male students there is no such privilege. . . the writer puts this as if it’s their right.

The idea behind the text is inferiority of women and superiority of men. This has been encoded in the text so as to retain the status quo. . . nothing may be withdrawn from men and there is no irresponsibility which may be dealt with as is the case with women.

. . . girls are subtly but strongly discouraged from, being out later than 11 p.m. . .

Others considered the implications of the agentless passives:

We don't know who is responsible for the action. So it is difficult to ask some further information about the Malherbe situation.

In some cases the rules were interpreted as a protective measure. This applied to responses from both male and female students. The response below is from a woman:

I think rules are tough to women because protection is needed to them, whereas men are able to protect themselves. If there was an unrestricted door even for women I think even rapists would enter while students are asleep.

One student used the text in an answer to an exam question. Having discussed the central features of Critical Language Study in the abstract, she then explained how it can be applied in a university context:

As a critical university student, one has to ask some questions about the above statement [the Malherbe Rules] and not just accept it like:

Is it a privilege to issue late night keys to residents at university?
 Why is it a privilege for women and a right for men?
 Who issued/wrote the statement?
 What does the person who wrote this statement benefit from it?

. . . a person may find out a person of power and status, say a male warden, wrote this statement. It is highly possible that this statement was written without the residents' consultation.

The emergence of what Ellsworth calls "affinity groups" (1989: 317), which are small groups within the larger class who discover common experiences and values different from those of other students, is significant here. The wide diversity of opinion over the interpretation of this text evidences the varied interests and investments of different groups. Both the written responses and debate in tutorials left us in no doubt that some students, men and women, were extremely keen, not to reach consensus, but to legitimate their own views at the expense of others. One of our future tasks is to find ways of incorporating these differences and possible conflict into the curriculum rather than attempting to avoid difficult issues and hoping that students will reach consensus – in some instances an impossible task.

It is impossible to estimate the extent to which students will develop and integrate an increased awareness of the more subtle uses of language into the ways in which they read and how they define themselves within the university and other contexts. Certainly, tutors reported responses in tutorial discussions that at times evidenced a sharper and more critical focus than we have

encountered previously. This comment was included in one tutor assessment:

I had some students who internalised and expressed the empowering nature of this approach quite clearly. When I asked for examples of how a command could be expressed in a masked form, using some modal structures, I had a student quite accurately refer to a statement I had made...at the beginning of the tutorial. I was most impressed at the student's willingness to turn new knowledge so neatly on the language of her teacher.

Student evaluations of the programme were extremely positive. While they inevitably differed in approach and emphasis, they all felt that the programme had been of considerable benefit and many linked it directly to their approach to reading more critically. These are a few typical responses:

CLS has taught me not to accept the text as it is written but to find out who the writer is. To be critical about the language he (sic) has used and to find out where I am positioned as a reader. . . I can now challenge writers in what they are saying.

Before, I did not even bother about the words used by an author and their effect on readers. I now do that. . . I also question an author's use of words now and I even consider the words he (sic) might have used instead of those he used.

It means we can derive meaning from text, not just general meaning but hidden ones, if any.

One of the potential pitfalls of this approach to the teaching and learning of language is to focus on the linguistic constructions at the expense of the broad sociopolitical context. Indeed, critical linguistics, especially as it was formulated by its earliest proponents, Fowler (1979) and Hodge (1979), has been sharply criticised by Thompson (1984). He argues that

their analyses frequently presuppose a specific account of relations between, for example, different races, classes or sexes; but they provide no systematic discussion of these relations and no sustained justification of this account. Instead they tend to assume that by attending to linguistic processes, one can discern, through the deceptive veil of surface forms, the underlying social reality.

(1984: 124)

Work done since the publication of *Language and Control* (Fowler et al. 1979), however, has taken serious cognisance of this objection. Fairclough (1989), for example, insists that the understanding and analysis of linguistic constructions in a given text must always be understood within the context of broader discursive practice and that it is only one of three components required for critical discourse analysis. The linguistic description of a text must always be undertaken in conjunction with an interpretation of the interaction between the text and the processes of its production and interpretation and an explanation of that interaction and the social context. Fowler himself, having claimed, with Kress, that

meanings are carried and expressed in the syntactic forms and processes, that is. . .the analyst can "read off" meaning from the syntax

(1979: 197)

now argues that it is “a fundamental principle of critical linguistics that there is no invariant relationship between form and meaning” (1991: 99) and that

the significance of discourse derives only from an interaction between language structure and the context in which it is used: so the discourse analyst must always be prepared to document the circumstances in which communication takes place, and consider their relevance to the structure of the text.

(1991: 90)

What has been attempted at the University of Natal is the foregrounding, at the very least, of the broader institutional discourse and the analysis of individual texts within that context. Given time constraints and other pressures, however, it is possible to neglect the wider issues, to decontextualise text and therefore to make the implicit and questionable assumptions with which Thompson (1984) takes issue. Regardless of the constraints, the fact that meaning is constructed in and by the total context needs to remain central.

Critical language awareness can provide students with valuable insights into some of the complex and perplexing relationships which make up the university environment. It has the potential to empower them within the university context; it offers, along with a range of other non-linguistic factors, possibilities for the construction of counter-discourse (Terdiman 1985: 56) and in this, has a crucial role to play in the process of transforming universities in this country. One of the students, in her evaluation of the programme said:

The CLS tutorials also make me feel as one who can play a great part at university.

Perhaps a comment like this one is the starting point from which a more detailed analysis can begin.

Notes

1. Canale and Swain (1979) and Canale (1983) have developed a theoretical framework describing communicative competence which includes four broad areas of knowledge – grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic. Grammatical competence refers to familiarity with the formal rules of the language while sociolinguistic competence, they argue, is the ability to use language appropriately in different social contexts. Discourse competence is the capacity to combine sentences to form coherent and cohesive spoken or written text. Strategic competence (for example, the use of gesture or of the first language) is the range of measures adopted by learners either to improve communication or to compensate for its failure. It should be acknowledged that Canale and Swain do not make claims about how these components interact but simply identify *what* they consider to be the minimum requirements for communicative competence. It should also be noted that their position fails to adopt a critical view of the notion of appropriacy (cf. Fairclough 1992).
2. Krashen (1982) distinguishes between language acquisition and language learning. Acquisition, he argues, is a subconscious process similar to the development of competence in the first language. The term learning, on the other hand, refers to

the conscious knowledge of a second language when the learner is aware of some of the formal grammatical rules and is able to recall and discuss them. Conscious reference to the rules of a language is the basis of his Monitor Hypothesis in which he claims that acquisition and learning processes are used in quite distinct ways and the only function of learning is as monitor or editor. For Krashen

learning comes into play only to make changes in the form of our utterance, after it has been "produced" by the acquired system. This can happen before we speak or write, or after (self-correction).

(1982: 15)

Current debate around the validity of this claim is not at issue here. The point is that this student had been involved in tutorial discussions about it, hence her reference to "fighting with my monitor".

3. I am indebted to a colleague, Mike Hart, for providing me with this extract.
4. Alienation in this context is not used as it is in Marx's Theory of Alienation (Larrain 1979; Eagleton 1991) but in its more colloquial sense. It refers to the negative experiences of first year students described by Hart (1988). His research reveals several factors which contribute to feelings of isolation and alienation in the university environment. These include overt racism in many sectors of the university, unrealistic expectations on the part of some students coupled with a lack of awareness of their underpreparedness, feelings of social and academic inadequacy and expectations of failure on the part of others and differences in interactional style. For Hart

the picture that emerges. . . is one where the alienating experience of university, for a significant number of Black (sic) students, results in a sense of hopelessness because they feel that there is little that can be done about their situation.

(1988: 28)

5. I have used the term "critical language awareness" throughout this article. Students in their evaluations, however, refer to it as critical language study or CLS, which is the term with which they were familiar.

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