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Critical text analysis: linking language and cultural studies

Many UK universities offer degree programmes in English Language specifically for non-native speakers of English. Such programmes typically include not only language development but also development in various areas of content knowledge. A challenge which arises is to design courses in different areas which mutually support each other, thus providing students with a coherent degree programme. In this article, I will discuss a BA programme involving Cultural Studies and Translation, as well as English Language and Linguistics. I will offer a rationale for a course in critical text analysis which is offered in the final year of the programme. It is intended to promote language development and cultural awareness as well as skills of linguistic analysis and critical thinking.

Introduction

Students on this four year degree programme are Chinese people typically in their very early twenties. Their first two years of study take place at university in China. They then move to a partner university in the UK. For many students, this is the first time living abroad.

On entering year 3 of the programme, students' IELTS equivalent level is at least 6.5. Most aspire to masters level study in the UK, and at the conclusion of their BA apply for programmes in a wide range of fields. Some of these may draw directly on the content of their BA, for example Applied Linguistics or Translation. For others, eg Business or Engineering, the connection is less obvious. Such a wide variation in future plans leads to an equally wide range of attitudes towards the programme and study priorities within it. Some students are committed to the programme content, whereas for others a BA degree is a means to an end.

This situation creates interesting challenges when designing a text analysis course. One is to design a course which integrates with the cultural studies and translation aspects of the programme. A second is to offer a course which teaches language analysis as a skill and at the same time develops the already advanced language proficiency of these students. A third is to design a course which encourages students to think about the links between language and culture and help them to see that translation is also cultural mediation (Olk 2003). A fourth is to encourage critical thinking.

Critical text analysis

The course aims to meet the above challenges by teaching some principles of critical discourse analysis while focusing on texts relating to society and citizenship. From the perspective of language development, the course develops students' skills in reading complex texts whose frame of reference is culturally loaded. As Widdowson (2003:63-69) explains, such texts are challenging to the extent that the reader is not a member of the community for which the text was originally produced. From the perspective of cultural studies, exploration of these texts allows students to deepen their understanding of current issues in UK society. From the perspective of critical

discourse analysis (CDA), students are introduced to the idea that social problems can be discourse related (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999) and to some tools of critical text analysis.

To provide a rationale for the course, I will concentrate on three issues. First, the reasons for helping language learners to develop critical reading skills. Second, the kinds of texts that can be most profitably used with this approach. And third, the relationship between these text analysis activities and the broader project of critical pedagogy.

Critical text analysis for language learners

Wallace (2003) argues that learning to read and analyse texts in a critical way is generative of improvement in language proficiency as it helps learners to consider potential alternatives in language – to think of language as a system of choices. Cots (2006) gives two examples of how this might be done. In his suggested activities learners reflect on writers' use of features such as modality or conjunctive cohesion to put across a certain reality, and work creatively with other possible language choices. Janks (2008) argues that language learning and critical reading can benefit each others: “students learning grammar can simultaneously learn about the relationship between modality and authority, or about the connection between ‘us’ and ‘them’ pronouns and othering discourses, and they can learn to recognise who is a ‘doer’ and who is a ‘done-to’ when they are taught transitivity and voice”. (Janks *ibid.*: 185). To the extent that such learning is brought to bear on a variety of texts and creative language activities, learners can increase their linguistic and pragmatic repertoire.

Texts that represent and constitute contemporary social life

In any course involving text analysis, tools and methods of analysis could be foregrounded and the actual texts used considered less important. They could be reduced to the status of examples, used by teacher and students to demonstrate techniques of analysis at work. From the perspectives of critical pedagogy and culture learning, this would be a missed opportunity. In this section of the article, I will argue that texts concerned with citizenship and society in the L2 culture can make a particularly valuable contribution.

Issues of citizenship are of obvious interest to learners combining language and cultural studies. Kerns (2008) argues that texts from an L2 culture are both reflective and constitutive of that culture. He argues that engagement with such texts is a way of helping language students to understand not only the texts themselves but also the schemata which they instantiate. They are a window onto some of the discourse worlds of the language and culture concerned – discourse worlds which, once uncovered, become available for comment and critique.

Given the global spread of English, it is particularly important to take a questioning approach to the cultures and values with which it can be associated. This is certainly the case for students combining their language learning with cultural studies since they may at times be exposed to materials which over-simplify the target culture and tend to present it as homogenous and unproblematic (Guest 2000). When students

work with texts for which they are ‘outsiders’, not the ideal intended readership, they may be able to uncover such oversimplification. They “can learn to use their outsider insights as a resource for critical deconstruction ... harness their alternative world views as a means for resisting texts.” (Janks op.cit.: 189).

One particularly useful type of text is that which Sarangi & Slembrouck (1996) would term a ‘bureaucratic’ text; for example, an official claim form used within the L2 culture to mediate entitlement to social benefits. For Sarangi & Slembrouck, a bureaucratic text instantiates a power-oriented communication between an institution and an individual, where the institution has the power to define the terms and conditions of the interaction. Its purpose is usually to process people towards some bureaucratic end which will have meaningful consequences in their lives.

In such texts, the power asymmetry of the communication is often encoded in the structure of the form. Those filling it in are obliged to fit themselves into predefined categories, to provide the information which is requested and no other. The institution, and not the individual, determines the content of the information exchange.

Critical pedagogy with undergraduate learners

At this point, it is useful to draw a distinction in principle between critical text analysis, as discussed above, and the broader project of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is education which aims to improve social justice and raise the status of marginalised groups. It has long been advocated by those researchers and teachers who feel that education is a key setting for the promotion of these goals (Kincheloe 2008). Yet it is argued that critical pedagogy has been too often absent from foreign language education (Akbari 2008, Cots 2006, Wallace 2003). Such absence may occur in situations where language is taught as a technical skill, and students are not offered challenging content outside language learning itself.

The absence is ironic considering the key role of critical language awareness in the critical pedagogy and social justice project (Regan 2006). Fairclough (1992:3) argues that critical language awareness is “coming to be a prerequisite for effective democratic citizenship, and should therefore be seen as an *entitlement* for citizens”. Language learners, one might think, would be ideally placed to benefit from this awareness.

For undergraduate students, there is an expectation that course content will be challenging and that critical thinking will be encouraged. Therefore cultural studies is not taught as a reductionist enterprise of learning facts about other cultures, but rather as a developing understanding of social functioning. Likewise, language capacity is not considered as a neutral, technical competence, but as a social practice. These students, whose future careers may well involve them in positions of cultural mediation and relative power, should be equipped to consider the wider social implications of their activities and the roles they can play in challenging or maintaining the status quo. .

A detailed example: a text used to decide child residence

To give a detailed example of this work in a class situation, I will discuss a particular bureaucratic text which I have used. It is known as Form D8A – Statement of Arrangements for Children. It is a legal form which must be completed by parents in the UK who are in the process of getting divorced. For reasons of space, I do not reproduce the text here. It is available from the UK court service website, <http://www.hmcourts-service.gov.uk>. For an analysis of the text from a systemic functional perspective, see Wharton (2009).

It is very much a bureaucratic form, and a clear example of text as a mediator of social power. The answers parents make on it can influence whether a court chooses to exercise its power to make decisions about where children will live after their parents' divorce.

The form contains 30 numbered questions and covers a range of issues about parents' and children's lives. There are questions on current living arrangements, such as the size of accommodation and details of who lives at the same address as the children. There are questions about who cares for children on a day to day basis, and more specifically while parents are at work; as well as questions about where the children are being educated. Further questions cover each parent's financial contribution to the children's upkeep, and whether these arrangements have been legally formalised. Most of the questions are on matters of fact and require brief answers only, though some ask for further details.

The language of the text is at times technical, but it is not overly complex. Nevertheless it may present a challenge to students on a first reading because its meanings are so culturally embedded, and because these students are not its intended audience. It presents, then, a language learning challenge; if students' first reaction is to reach for the electronic translator, they are quickly reminded that lexical meanings can vary considerably between registers!

Despite this apparent obstacle, groups of students have found the text engaging; it touches a theme which is of universal human interest (relationships) and importance (legal rights). Students can make connections with what they know about the social patterns of couple relationships in the UK, and reflect on the Chinese situation. They can also consider the mechanisms that different societies might have for getting access to social and legal rights.

In class, I have exploited the text from two major perspectives. The first is to examine it as a text which represents (a version of) reality. The second is to examine it as a text which mediates interaction between individuals and state authorities.

Text as representation

A first point to consider for this text is the choice of lexis made by the author(s) of the form. It refers to divorcing parents via the legal terms *petitioner* and *respondent*. Students will first need to understand these terms, and can then be asked to consider the implications of the choice to label parents in this way. They can be reminded of

other texts where groups of people have been labelled in potentially loaded ways; certain newspaper reports are an obvious example.

As students can be made aware, the use of vocabulary labels to categorise human participants is an important aspect of the ideology of any text, and of its construction of reality. Discussion of the category labels used on this particular form can lead to discussion of some interesting facts about the UK legal system: for example that even when a divorce is sought through mutual consent, one partner is obliged to instigate proceedings against the other.

A second important issue from the perspective of text as representation is that of underlying assumptions. Two questions on the form are as follows: *8a Do the children see your spouse/ civil partner? 8b Do the children ever stay with your spouse/ civil partner?* Yet there is no parallel question such as ‘Do the children see you’. The assumption, then, is that children are living with one parent only and that this parent is the person filling in the form. This may of course not be true – children might be living with the spouse who has not filled in the form or sharing their living arrangements between the homes of two separated parents.

From previous experience of critical reading, students should be used to detecting assumptions in texts which are predominantly written in the declarative mood. It may be newer for them to see that in this text, which is one half of a ‘dialogue’, the *questions* encode assumptions about an authorised view of reality. If students can make links with their knowledge of social practices and realise that this authorised view may not be accurate for all families, they will see how the structure of a text can silence certain voices. They can observe the problematic situation of a form, with constrained categories, which may fail to accurately represent the lives of the people completing it. It fails to acknowledge diversity: as Sarangi and Slembrouck (op.cit.) have argued, such a failure means that a text is a likely site of bias and injustice.

A third perspective on representation is the portrayal of power relations. To discuss power in the text explicitly, students might look at how its language represents the legal system itself, as distinct from how it represents individuals. Students might note phrasings such as *the court will only make an order [regarding childrens’ living arrangements] if it considers that an order will be better for the child(ren) than no order*, or *Will you be applying for a child maintenance order from the court?*

If students search for other phrases including ‘the court’ and ‘you’, then they will quickly notice that this pattern recurs. They can see that the court is represented as a powerful participant which gives orders or permission. Individual parents are represented as wanting or asking the court to do something for them, as weaker participants in the interaction. Students can also notice grammatical metaphor in phrases such as ‘the court will decide’ - suggesting that decisions are made not by fallible humans, but by legal institutions.

Through discussion of such issues, students can exchange views on social realities in the UK and make links with information that they may have learned on cultural studies modules. They can also think about the contribution that the language of powerful institutions can make to social problems

Text as a mediator of interaction

The second major way to exploit a bureaucratic form is to consider its role as a vehicle for communication between individuals and the state authorities.

A first approach to this issue is to look at the intimate nature of the questions. The form asks very detailed questions about children's living arrangements, activity routines, and state of health. With what right, one might ask, does the form ask for these details? On what basis does bureaucracy give itself the right to intrude on individual lives in this way?

Students may themselves have experience of feeling obliged by a bureaucratic process to answer questions which they consider intrusive. Some have commented on the process of getting a visa to study in the UK. Students may see themselves as paying customers of UK Higher Education, contributors to the economy. Yet some report that bureaucratic texts assign them a different position, that of soliciting the privilege of studying in the UK.

Returning specifically to form D8A, students can be asked to identify specific problems with the questions on the form. For example, some questions require unambiguous statements about the future. Question 4 includes a series of sub-questions on living arrangements, and question 6 a series of sub-questions on childcare arrangements. In each case, the final sub-question is *Will there be any change in these arrangements?* Students can observe that parents using the form would probably not be in a position to know. As a response, they can be encouraged to think of a hedged and qualified wording that might be more appropriate, eg 'To the best of your knowledge, will there be any change in these arrangements in the next two years?'

As a mediator between the individual and the state, a bureaucratic form offers access to the authorities to the people completing it. The text examined here is particularly interesting because it seems to offer such unequal opportunities to the parents in their roles as petitioner and respondent. Students can be asked to compare these opportunities. This is a challenging analytical task, as it involves students at least partly in an analysis of what is not there; they need to notice interactional opportunities which are not offered, as well as those which are.

Students can notice that the form is addressed *To the petitioner*: ie, it requires that the person instigating divorce proceedings be the one to complete it. They can immediately see that just one person must tell a story of many. The form mainly comprises questions about facts, so when it is finished it looks like a statement of facts: the petitioner's version of events. Importantly, there is no space on the form for the respondent to challenge the accuracy of the statements made.

Because the form is a 'dialogue', it can be used to introduce students to notions of goods exchange and knowledge exchange. The questions at first sight appear to form a knowledge exchange, but a closer examination suggests that they also function to offer goods and services to one parent. For example, the form suggests to the petitioner the possibility of making a financial claim against the respondent: *7e Will you be applying for: - a child maintenance order from the court - a child support*

maintenance through the Child Support Agency. If the nature of child maintenance is discussed in class, then students can realise that if the respondent of the divorce is to have care of the children then he or she might also want to apply for such an order. But the form does not provide the opportunity.

The key issue to emerge through this aspect of textual examination is the active and re-active roles that the text assigns to the divorcing parents. The petitioner has the opportunity to make proposals about future childcare arrangements, but the respondent does not. The form instructs the respondent to react to the petitioner's proposals: *If you agree with the arrangements and proposals for the children you should sign Part IV of the form. If you do not agree with all or some of the arrangements or proposals you will be given the opportunity of saying so when the petition for divorce or dissolution is served on you.* The final part of the form, addressed to the respondent, says: *I agree with the arrangements and proposals contained in Part I and II of this form.* [space for signature]. There is nowhere for the respondent to sign to indicate that they do *not* agree. One might conclude that a respondent who does not agree with the petitioner's proposals is put in an extremely difficult position by this form. They must simply withhold their signature, and wait to see what happens.

Critical language awareness and critical pedagogy require that we look at texts in their wider social context and connect them with other discourses. In the case of form D8A, a broader social issue that emerges is that of gender inequality. By looking at UK statistics on divorce, students learn that most divorces in the UK are petitioned by women (UK Office of National Statistics). Through its representations of reality, the form implies that at the moment of legal divorce, parents are already separated and the children are living with their mother and (probably) 'seeing' their father. It suggests opportunities to the petitioner rather than to the respondent. This means that the parent privileged by the text is likely to be the mother, not the father. Gender issues are frequently raised in critical text analysis and in critical pedagogy, but more often the perspective is that of bias against women. Students may find this text interestingly different.

The broader the discussion becomes, the more students find themselves interpreting the text, exchanging opinions on it, as well as analysing it in the technical sense. This relates to criticisms levelled at CDA approaches by scholars such as Widdowson (2003). In an undergraduate context, and in a course intended to encourage critical thinking, such ambiguity may in fact be an advantage.

Conclusions

In this article I have discussed the classroom exploitation of one text and indicated how the approach may be used with others. I hope to have demonstrated that such work is useful to students in three principal roles. As students of cultural studies, they can learn more about contemporary life in the UK and relate this awareness to previous knowledge. As language learners, they can learn a technical-legal vocabulary and can see the modal system and nominalisation function at work to construct power relations. As students of language analysis, they can see the text as a series of choices,

and understand that analysis is a resource for uncovering social meaning as well as a technical skill.

To step back now from this particular text, I would like to conclude by reconsidering the benefits of critical text analysis within the goals of critical pedagogy.

Firstly, students are encouraged to interrogate texts to find out whose interests they are serving, and whether any group is being disadvantaged. They may learn about the positioning of groups to which they do not belong, as with the text here. In other cases, students might work with texts which help them reflect on their own position in the structures of social power. Janks (op.cit.) advocates that students sometimes work with texts which address them directly, so that their analysis can help them to question the assumptions which the text may have about its intended readership. This is critical pedagogy with rather a disruptive potential as it may disturb some of students' values and senses of self. Examples which I have used with this group are promotional texts used by universities in the UK to 'attract' overseas students such as themselves.

Akbari (2008) argues that a major purpose of critical pedagogy is to make learners aware of issues faced by marginalised groups. An appropriate choice of text can facilitate such awareness. For example, I have used texts which mediate the access of disabled citizens in the U.K. to state benefits to which their disability should entitle them. Disabled people are arguably not well represented in most language or cultural studies textbooks. A critical examination of, for example, the form for claiming disability living allowance can give insights into a 'hidden' aspect of UK culture and spark critical reflection on associated issues of social justice.

Secondly, students are encouraged to take on the relatively high status role of language analysts who can critique and deconstruct a text, rather than language learners who are reading in order to understand a message. It is arguably empowering to be able to take up such a position vis a vis socially powerful texts from a foreign culture.

The third and final point relates to the fact that these students tend to come from relatively powerful socio-economic groups. Even if they are temporarily positioned as less powerful 'students in a foreign country', this does not negate other more privileged identities that they may have. Wallace (op.cit.) argues that critical pedagogy is a *broad* social project, which needs to go beyond working with specific marginalised groups for their own empowerment. Therefore it can be particularly appropriate and necessary to engage in critical pedagogy with more privileged groups. If language education is to contribute to social justice, it must encourage people in *all* social positions to understand the relationships between language and ideologies.

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