

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN EFL CONTEXT

1. Introduction

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a relatively new approach to text analysis and although it has become popular and favoured by discourse analysis researchers, it is rather rarely used by language teachers. If, however, teachers understand the nature of this highly context sensitive approach, they will find it extremely useful in teaching critical reading to their language learners. This article is trying to present the main assumptions of CDA and its analytic tools that can be applied in EFL classroom. A short analysis of a newspaper report will attempt to illustrate how to implement CDA strategies to EFL reading classes. An example of a critical reading project conducted by Teacher Training college students will also be presented and followed by the students' comments on the usefulness of such an activity.

2. Main assumptions of CDA.

The main assumption of CDA that makes the approach different from other approaches to text analysis is that it stresses not only the decoding of propositional meaning of a text but also its ideological assumptions. Advocates of CDA are interested in how a text may influence and manipulate its readers by the use of presuppositions that stem from the author's own, particular view of the world and circumstances of a text production. Thus, the text interpretation should include a close analysis of context which is not represented only by: "the immediate environment in which a text is produced and interpreted but also the larger societal context including its relevant cultural, political, social and other facets." (Huckin:1997,79).

In other words, one can see a text as meant, according to Fairclough (1992), to be the product of discursive practices of: production, distribution and interpretation which are embedded in a broader field of social practices.

Reading texts critically seems to be a crucial skill since as Fowler (1991: 25) states: "events and ideas are not communicated neutrally because they are transmitted through the medium that contains certain structural features which, in turn, are impregnated with social values that form some perspective on events." The medium is also used by people who work under certain social circumstances and follow certain conventions of production, and as a result will choose such linguistic structures that are going to conform to those circumstances and conventions. Thus, it seems to be inevitable that writers, by choosing specific linguistic structures, will tend to manipulate readers in order to make them accept ideological message contained in a text. Critical discourse analysis aims at readers detecting this manipulation.

3. Critical reading and EFL students.

Wallace (1992: 62) notices that: "EFL students are often marginalized as readers; their goals in interacting with written texts are perceived to be primarily those of language learners". Certainly, teachers most often choose for practising reading skills texts that present functional survival or general interest material of a safe nature and the main reading tasks are analyzing linguistic structure or new vocabulary items. During interaction with such texts readers take up a rather submissive position. Critical reading approach is trying to change this situation by offering students clues how to become more assertive and more confident readers.

Obviously, learners should not in every case become critical readers. As Urquhart and Weir (1998) remark, the biology student reading the textbook recommended by the department or nuclear worker reading safety regulations will certainly restrict from criticism and adopt a rather submissive attitude to the text's content. Therefore, before application of CDA to reading classes, teachers should, first of all, identify their learners' reading purposes and kinds of texts they will be most interested to analyse.

Wallace (1996) also admits that critical reading is one of many strategies available to the readers, however it may become very efficient when learners encounter texts that contain ideological assumptions and whose interpretation depends largely on a sociocultural context. Lots of texts people read in everyday life are of this nature, the examples of which are: news reports, magazine articles, advertisements, political speeches, even some novels and short stories.

Another factor that teachers of reading in a foreign language should have in mind is that a very careful critical analysis of such texts may be too complicated for students who still learn the language. Therefore, they should rather choose for their initial critical reading classes shorter texts, such as

advertisements or news reports or implement only certain factors from those proposed by CDA analysts, some of which are presented below.

4. Analytic tools of CDA.

There is a vast range of CDA tools to be used for text analysis and the analysts differ among themselves in the choice of these tools. Huckin (1997) points out that not every CDA concept is equally useful when analysing texts and the reader should choose only those that are most interesting from a critical perspective and serve as textual manipulations of writers' or media's purposes. His suggestions for conducting critical analysis of news reports have been chosen by the author of this text for the purposes of critical reading classes with the college students.

Huckin divides text analysis to three levels: the text as a whole, a sentence and a word. What are recognized as the salient features at the most global of these levels are: *genre, framing, foregrounding, backgrounding and presupposition*. Establishing the genre helps to inform the reader – analyst whether the text conforms to its type or the writer has decided to include features of other genres to fulfill their own purposes. *Framing* signifies how the content of a text is presented and represents its structure. For example a news report can be framed as a narrative, as a compare – contrast presentation, can adopt a problem – solution outline, or provide information in a raising or descending order of importance. Critical readers should also be able to recognize when various types of frames appear in one text and what could be the purpose of such a presentation. A helpful device that, according to CDA, helps to frame a text is the use of *visual aids*, such as: photographs, diagrams, tables, font of headings etc.

The concepts of *foregrounding/ backgrounding* refer to the author's emphasizing or diminishing certain factors.

Presuppositions are implicit assumptions about the world which writers use to present to readers certain ideas as those that must be accepted without questioning. Presuppositions appear also at the sentence level and are quite common, as Huckin (1997) observes, in various forms of persuasive rhetoric like: political speeches, advertisements, news reports. Another form of presuppositions are insinuations used in the comments of a suggestive nature, not directly stated by a writer.

Another text analysis factor that occurs within a sentence is foregrounding that Huckin (1997) calls *topicalisation*. A sentence topic is represented by a grammatical subject of a sentence and it is the author's decision what to put in the topic position in order to make readers see certain pieces of information as more important than others. This decision also results in presentation of agent – patient relations in a sentence; in other words in seeing things or people as those initiating actions or those that are submissive to such actions.

Finally, critical analysis of a text can be conducted on a level of individual words that carry with themselves certain *connotations*. The term stem from the frequent occurrence of words in certain context and can also be conveyed by the use of metaphors.

In addition, critical reading involves detecting the *register* of lexis whose use is manipulated by the writer in such a way that readers are more willing to accept their ideology because the text sounds more friendly or is laden with the language that nominate text producers as absolute authorities in the matter being presented.

In order to illustrate how the text can be interpreted by the use of the CDA tools, there is an attempt of such an analysis of the news report, "Pomp and pageantry for US president's state visit" from *The Guardian Weekly*, Nov. 27 – Dec. 3, 2003 (see the appendix), presented below.

5. An example of critical analysis of a news report.

Bearing in mind that the sociocultural and political context surrounding the text and the circumstances of its production are extremely important in critical analysis, it should be stated that the text was written at the time of the war in Iraq and fights with terrorists attacks organized by al-Qaida. Among other nations it was mainly British and American soldiers that fought with squads after an overthrow of Saddam Hussain's regime. The war was still in progress and more and more people were getting

killed on both sides. Lots of anti-war protesters announced the manifestation in the streets of London during the US president's visit to Britain.

The visit of the US leader in Britain was not welcome by most of the British nation who also claimed that it was going to take lots of money to organize and protect the president and his wife. Moreover, British political commentators stated that the Prime Minister was becoming more and more unpopular because of his focus on the war rather than on urgent domestic problems.

Following Fairclough's view about the importance of text distribution and the medium of presentation in textual interpretation, the analysis should point to the fact that the news report was published in the *Guardian Weekly*, a quality newspaper, which could indicate that readers would be offered a rather substantial background information and verbal commentary.

As regards the genre and framing, the report is of a top-down, 'inverted pyramid' (Van Dijk, 1988) structure, with information presented in descending order of importance. The most important pieces are presented in first six paragraphs, starting from the most global events : *war against terrorism, war against al-Qaida*, to the local ones: *Britons detained at Guantanamo Bay, illegal US steel tariffs*. The middle paragraphs describe the ceremony of welcoming the presidential couple in details; the last paragraph presents the least important information about a visit to a pub and menu that was offered for the guests.

At paragraph 7 the authors choose a narrative construction for presenting events surrounding the visit and continue to the last paragraph where they describe how the president ended his trip. The choice of a narrative frame allows the reporters to present facts in chronological order, rather than in the order of importance, which resulted in the reporters distancing themselves from deciding what facts could be regarded as more crucial. Most probably Bush's speech in Whitehall and his reaction to anti-war protesters, might be more important for the reader of the *Guardian Weekly* than how the president was greeted by the Queen or how long his limousine was.

Visual aids used by the newspaper are a photography at the pub, rather than in a more official situation, and the table of '*Presidential ups and downs*', both of which definitely attract readers' attention but also create a very informal atmosphere of the state visit.

The foregrounded information is the visit during which the leaders of both countries stress their common approach towards the war. What is backgrounded is differences between them and British nation's reaction to the visit, mentioned only in paragraphs 11 and 13 and in '*presidential lows*'.

Most of the president's speech on foreign affairs in Whitehall is omitted, although the reporters themselves say that that event was '*the centerpiece of the day*'. They mention, however, only fragments of that event where Bush praises Blair, Bush gets a standing ovation from defence specialists, Bush challenges the protesters by stressing the necessity of using force in Iraq. Those fragments, however, offer nothing new or crucial to the reading public.

When the analysts focus their attention on agent-patient relations in the text, they could observe that in most sentences Bush is the one who initiates actions. Mr Blair is presented as the subject of the sentence only twice, which could suggest that he takes a rather submissive role during the whole meeting. In that way the reporters might convey a message that the Prime Minister is generally submissive to any American decisions.

As regards the use of presuppositions at the sentence level, it can be noted that the president's statement: '*we are making good progress with al-Qaida*' (in paragraph 2) presupposes that, despite efforts to end that war, they are still fighting. An anonymous official's statement: '*that's a matter for the president*', '*that's a matter for the prime Minister*' (paragraphs 4 and 5) presupposes that they cannot achieve a common decision.. Additionally, Blair's commentary on the trial of the Britons detained at Guantanamo Bay in paragraph 6 indicates that the Prime Minister did not say anything significant about solving that problem. Finally, Bush's sentence: '*Islam is somehow inconsistent with the democratic culture*' (in paragraph 15) presupposes that the religion should be eradicated, which is not a rather democratic approach.

There are also a few insinuations in the text. For example Laura Bush's comments in '*presidential highs*' point to the everlasting American feeling of being inferior to Europeans as regards the richness and length of cultural tradition. Additionally, the fact that '*she hardly saw any protesters, just some nice folks waving the stars and stripes*' shows her as a funny, ignorant lady.

Approaching the text analysis at the word level, one can observe that there are quite a few connotations used. Instead of giving the names of the officials, the reporters write: '*No 10 official*', '*Whitehall*' in general. Expressions such as: '*a 700-strong entourage*', '*red-carpeted stairs*', '*to be ferried*', '*pomp and pageantry*' in the heading are associated with the description of a royal wedding rather than a state visit. They contribute to showing the visit in an exaggerated, mocking tone.

Similarly Britain's and US leaders' statements about '*US – British relationship an alliance of conviction and might*' are examples of a lofty style, typical for political rhetoric.

The article is written in a semi-formal register, with the use of indicative mood and past tense, with quite an informal tone of presenting 'presidential ups and downs' in the form of a list of points without any comments from the reporters.

Summing up, the whole report seems to be written rather for entertaining than informing the readers. This fact could indicate that the writers deliberately wanted to diminish the importance of the US leader's visit and in that way show that they agree with the opinion of most of the British nation. Additionally, both the president and the Prime Minister are not presented in the article in a positive light and the fact that they said so little about solving the local problems between both countries contributes to their unpopularity. On the other hand, a status of the quality newspaper could not allow the reporters of the *Guardian Weekly* to present the visit of the leader of the powerful country as merely an entertaining story or a despised event. Therefore, the authors wrote so little about the anti-war protest and foregrounded the information where both leaders were full of enthusiasm towards their policy.

6. CDA in EFL classroom.

The learners that took part in the classroom research of application of CDA to foreign language classes were all third, final, year students from the Teacher Training College in Sieradz. The skills and strategies that the students practiced during their reading course involved, among others, critical reaction to texts that could serve as those presenting writers' ideological views and manipulating readers by the use of certain textual features.

In order to get a sense of how CDA works the students first exercised critical reading of advertisements where the power of language heavily influences readers' perception of the text and the world. Moreover, they chose longer magazine articles of topics that were interesting for them. Generally, it was texts from the press that were analysed most often during their critical reading classes. The choice was dictated by what Fowler (1991: 42) states about the medium, seeing it as used by people working under certain economic circumstances and following certain conventions of production, with ideology already imprinted in the discourse.

Before taking up critical reading strategies for text analysis the students were asked to read the text as typical readers. Having this typical reader in mind, they practised a second, more critical reading with the use of factors suggested by Huckin (1997) and presented in part 4 and 5 of this article. They mostly worked in groups, each of which had a few factors to analyse and to present the outcome of their analysis to the whole class. That part was usually followed by a discussion on what role social context plays in text interpretation and readers' personal understanding of the text and its writer's ideology.

The students realized that texts can have more than one meaning depending on what Fairclough calls discursive and social practices (1992). They became more interested in the circumstances of text production as well as in its political, social and cultural background. All the students admitted that taking up critical reading approach made reading activities much more interesting and motivating than merely doing traditional comprehension questions.

When the students felt more confident in their CDA practices, they were asked to conduct a contrastive analysis of two texts (magazine articles or news reports) covering the same topic but coming from different sources. The analysis was supposed to be done according to critical reading assumptions with the help of CDA tools that the students had practised during their classes. That critical reading project was supposed to be done individually outside classroom.

After the project's analysis it could be observed that the learners were not afraid of choosing texts of political and social topics that were often controversial. They presented profound background knowledge of the context and were able to point out differences and similarities between linguistic representation of ideas in both texts. They also noticed that the language and presentation of facts differed with regard to in which newspaper the texts were published. Most of the students carried out a fairly detailed and careful analysis of the texts.

At the end of the academic term, the students were asked to comment on the idea of introducing the critical reading project as a part of developing their foreign language reading skills. Out of thirteen students, eleven found the activity very interesting, one admitted that it was too time consuming and one claimed that she did not understand the aims of CDA. The same student stated that the project did not contribute to improving her reading skills in any way. Similarly, two other

students, despite their judging the CDA project as a very interesting element of their regular FL reading work, wrote that they did not have a feeling of improving their reading skills. Nine other students claimed that after they had become familiar with CDA approach, they were more motivated and more assertive readers and their reading skills of understanding text structure and content, of selecting more important from less important fragments, and of the use of background knowledge certainly improved. One student also added that the ability of responding to texts critically helped him formulate his own thoughts in a more concise way.

7. Conclusions.

It can be concluded from the presentation of introducing CDA to EFL classroom that the approach to text analysis, although not very easy to conduct for some learners, is advantageous for both the students and the teachers. Lessons are more interesting and motivating learners to individual reading outside the classroom; students are more involved in the post-reading discussion, and more aware of socio-cultural and political influences on the interpretation of texts. They also feel more confident in expressing their critical response to what writers present. Moreover, learners observe that they have choice in what they find interesting for reading.

Obviously, as the students' comments suggest, there may be learners that find CDA unnecessary for reading and interpreting texts in a foreign language. The teachers may, thus, modify critical reading activities so that they should become more understandable to students. Their additional role should be to show students that the nature of reading does not only lie in comprehension of a text's content but also in detecting those discursive practices which influence comprehension in the way to serve writers' purposes, and which are reflected in the linguistic presentation.

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Appendix:

Pomp and pageantry for US president's state visit.

Bush and Blair skate over differences and pledge unity against terrorism

Michael White and Ewen MacAskill and Jonathan Freedland

1. George Bush and Tony Blair joined forces again last week to insist that the war against global terrorism – from Afghanistan and Iraq to Palestine and Europe – is being won and that their "common struggle to end terror" will not be thwarted by the latest wave of attacks.

2. At a joint press conference to mark the most serious phase of Mr Bush's pomp-laden state visit, the two leaders offered an upbeat view of the struggle to bring peace to Iraq and to defeat al-Qaida. "We are making good progress with al-Qaida", said Mr Bush.
3. Both campaigns are "an essential part of defeating this fanaticism and extremism that is killing innocent people all over the world today", said Mr Blair. The pair also invoked their absolute unity of purpose during private talks that covered weak points in that unity, including the Britons detained at Guantanamo Bay, illegal US steel tariffs and differences over operations in central Iraq.
4. Though they touched on the US-EU row over steel tariffs, officials on both sides had not expected it to be resolved. "That's a matter for the president", said one No. 10 official, pointing to Brussel's December 5 deadline for a response from Washington.
5. What Whitehall admits is a "matter for the Prime Minister" is Mr Blair's willingness to accept that British terror suspects being held at Guantanamo Bay can be tried in the US with acceptable safeguards – rather than being sent home, where UK law may prevent a trial. That would be unacceptable to Washington.
6. "Either they will be tried by the military commission out there, or alternatively, they will be brought back here. It will be resolved at some point or other," the Prime Minister said. The president said that "illegals picked up off the battlefield" were being humanely treated.
7. The four-day visit began last Tuesday evening when Mr Bush, his wife, Laura, and a 700-strong entourage flew into Heathrow airport. The couple were greeted by the Prince of Wales, then whisked to Buckingham Palace by US military helicopter.
8. The next day began with Mr Bush taking breakfast with the Windsors. According to a rumour the US president had kept Queen Elizabeth waiting for five minutes. He was certainly on time for his first engagement, the formal welcome at Buckingham Palace.
9. For this he was ferried by limousine from the back door of the palace round to the front. The presidential motorcade was so long, stretching from point of departure to destination, that the bullet-proof Cadillac barely needed to inch out of first gear.
10. As the 41-gun salute sounded, the first couple emerged from the presidential car and went up the red-carpeted stairs to a receiving line in which Lord Lieutenant was first Mr Tony Blair second. The president was introduced to the chief of the defence staff, along with the heads of the army, navy and air force; then he shook hands with the lord mayors of London and Westminster and later watched the Household Cavalry mounted regiment file past.
11. But the centerpiece of the day was at the Banqueting House in Whitehall. In a 40-minute speech on foreign affairs Mr Bush took up the challenge of the anti-war protesters by mounting a defence of the use of force in Iraq. He said that UN resolutions had to be backed by force.
12. Mr Bush praised Mr Blair for his support since the September 11 attacks, comparing him to Churchill as a leader who did not waver, and the US-British relationship as "an alliance of conviction and might".
13. Speaking to an audience of mainly foreign affairs and defence specialists, who gave him a short standing ovation, Mr Bush issued a challenge to the protesters. He said that "the tradition of free speech – exercised with enthusiasm – is alive and well here in London" but added tartly: "They now have that right in Baghdad, as well."
14. He recalled that the last US president to stay at Buckingham Palace had been Woodrow Wilson in 1918: that had been the high point of idealism. But within a generation the League of Nations had failed. "Through world and cold war, we learned that idealism, if it is to do any good in this world, requires common purpose and national strength, moral courage and patience in difficult tasks," he said.
15. Looking beyond Iraq, he reiterated his recent call for the democratisation of Arab countries, adding that it was condescending to suggest that "Islam is somehow inconsistent with democratic culture".
16. Mr Bush ended his trip with a visit to Mr Blair's Sedgefield constituency in County Durham. The pair lunched in the village's Dun Cow pub where Mr Bush, a teetotaler, opted for non-alcoholic lager to accompany fish and chips, with the northern variation, mushy peas.

Presidential ups and downs

Highs

- Staying at Buckingham Palace. "someone from Texas might be a little amazed to be staying at Buckingham Palace," confessed the First Lady.

- Despite 110,000 – 200,000 people marching against the state visit, Mrs Bush said she hardly saw any protesters, just some nice folks waving the stars and stripes.
- Lunch at the Dun Cow Inn in Tony Blair's Sedgefield constituency [and doing a runner without paying the bill]
- Getting away without saying anything about the US steel tariffs.

Lows

- Having to look at all the boring Americana that the Queen keeps in the palace
- Bush is president of the country that gave us freedom fries, so why was he subjected by the Queen to a menu of *delice de fletan aux herbes*?
- Vietnam veteran Ron Kovic leading the countdown to the toppling of a 5m-high effigy of Bush
- The protester with a megaphone who was heard by both the president and the Queen shouting: "If you think Bush is a moron, shout retard"