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Discourse analysis as an approach to intercultural competence in the Advanced EFL classroom

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Abstract

In 1991 Michael McCarthy wrote in his Preface to *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers* that discourse analysis is ‘not a method of teaching languages; it is a way of describing and understanding how language is used’ (McCarthy 1991: 2). By 1994 he had reformulated his position and, with Ronald Carter, published *Language as Discourse: Perspectives for Language Teaching*, which argued in favour of providing students with a metalanguage by which to analyse the language they were learning. These days, owing to the work of McCarthy, Carter, and others, the basics of discourse analysis can indeed comprise an appropriate subject matter for the advanced English learner, especially in a multicultural setting. This paper outlines one way in which discourse analysis can not only give Advanced EFL ^[1] learners the opportunity to sharpen their critical thinking skills, but to simultaneously examine the cultural assumptions embedded in both their target and native languages.

Context of course

To my own intellectual delight, I have recently discovered the truth of what researchers such as Michael McCarthy, Ronald Carter, and others have suggested extensively: that the Advanced EFL classroom is an excellent forum for teaching discourse analysis. ^[2] Since discourse analysis hones critical thinking skills, it offers language learners useful, practical, and, in indirect ways, perhaps even marketable skills. ^[3] It need not, in other words, be thought of as a strictly ‘academic’ or theoretical subject area, beyond the remit of the EFL classroom, since it clearly offers those familiar with its tools highly concrete ways of interpreting contemporary culture and its signs. Learning to negotiate the complex and mixed messages of the media, for instance, is certainly practical. Equally so is learning to identify the ideological slant of a newspaper or magazine article, or to detect racial or sexual bias in a seemingly innocuous business report. Indeed, such linguistic ‘undercover’ work is especially useful and suitable to those foreign language students who are learning to function in a target culture, not just acquire a target language. I began teaching elementary aspects of discourse analysis ^[4] to EFL university students in Ireland, mostly because necessity is the mother of invention. I lecture on what is known as the Joint Degree in International Business and Language at Dublin Institute of Technology. It is comprised of four ‘major language streams’ – French, German, Spanish, and, most recently, English. Students in the second year of the degree take a course in translation, but because the EFL students come from multiple language backgrounds, they share no L1 on which to base translation practice. Thus a kind of compromise course was needed, and what emerged was a hastily formulated but ultimately satisfying alternative called ‘cultural translation’ which, if custom tailored, might easily lend itself to any number of other learning contexts.

The students concerned – four French, four Austrian, one Basque, one Swedish, and one Burundian – were disappointed at the loss of a proper translation course and were, for a while, rather disgruntled. As business students they are inclined to favour the acquisition of skills with a clearly practical edge, such as, quite sensibly, translation. They are disinclined to embrace anything seemingly abstract or

‘academic’. Thus I was careful not to use the phrase ‘discourse analysis’ until I had warmed them to the idea that, while this next-best-thing course would not help them to mediate between languages (except incidentally), it would (I hoped) help them to mediate effectively between cultures. That is, it would help them to mediate between their home cultures (France, Burundi, etc.) and their host culture (Ireland). The plan was, over the course of two terms, to examine samples of written discourse drawn from both ‘host’ and ‘home’ cultures and, applying the tools of discourse analysis even-handedly to each, to consider not just their textual features, but their sub-textual ones.

Methodology

The term ‘subtext’ itself offered an attractive starting point. Students were drawn to the notion that they would be uncovering potentially hidden meanings, ‘reading between the lines’, unveiling the subliminal. Such skills sounded not only practical, but mildly subversive as well. Using undergraduate textbooks from Ronald Carter’s and Angela Goddard’s *Intertext* Series, designed inclusively for native and non-native learners alike, we began to build up a glossary of terms: narratee/narrator, connotation/denotation, sign and signifier, intertextuality, interpretive community, and so on. Students were given a detailed syllabus of weekly topics and were asked to use Internet or print sources to collect, if possible, two similar ‘real world’ texts, one Irish and one from their native language, which reflected the discourse principle or linguistic device under consideration that week. They were to provide a gist translation of the foreign text for the benefit of the class. We began with advertisements and our project was twofold: we sought to analyse the various linguistic components of each ad, and to note the ways in which it imbibed some aspect of culture or ideology, two terms which in themselves prompted much critical analysis.

Over time, the group became highly adept at ‘unpacking’ the ideological content of any given ad and then considering how that content depended upon the shared values of a particular interpretive community (such as a nation, a culture, or a sub-culture) to achieve its aims. Interest levels were high, not only because so many

ads are clever and engaging, but also because, as Chi-Kim Cheung convincingly argues in ‘The Use of Popular Culture as a Stimulus to Motivate Secondary Students’ English Learning in Hong Kong’, authentic popular material, such as songs and advertisements, does indeed connect with students’ own personal and social identities and prompt satisfaction (Cheung 2001: 60).

My Burundian student, for instance, was especially keen to analyse the ways in which advertisers not only ascertain but also seek to shape African consumer values in order to exploit them. In an African political and business magazine, written in French, he found a Western Union ad bearing the caption, ‘Millions of people trust us to send money home’. Our task that week was to consider the ways in which advertisements use carefully chosen ‘signifiers’ to appeal to their ‘implied readers’. The Western Union ad showed an African man’s hand holding an open wallet containing a photo of a young, smiling African woman in native head-dress, holding on her knee a smiling African boy in Western clothing. In my student’s end-of-term portfolio, he wrote:

The ad did perfectly what it was intended to do. The picture suggests a scene that catches the reality of many Africans living in Europe. The way I quickly interacted with the picture was by seeing the hand holding the wallet, which signifies money, as mine, and the woman and child in the photo inside the wallet as direct members of my family, to whom I will one day be expected to send money. The mother and child’s smiles are symbols of how the money sent by her man from Europe through Western Union safely reached its destination. Through the traditional head-dress and the boy’s western clothing, the photo signifies the desire of many Africans to acquire western wealth, while still keeping the old customs. The woman’s smile is a visual sign confirming that she received the money, as is her clothing, which looks expensive. Together the mother and child signify family. This advert was designed to appeal to African men abroad. They are the implied readers. Many African cultures still hold the man as the breadwinner. It is the man who is supposed to be in Europe,

working and sending money to his family (wife and children and parents) back in Africa. ^[5]

In another ad for the magazine *Business and Finance* aimed, by contrast, at an Irish financially minded readership, the same student identified the photo of a tiger as the ‘Celtic Tiger’ of the Irish economy and noted how the caption, ‘How many lives does he have left?’, used a widely known but still culturally specific idiom (about cats having nine lives) to prompt anxiety in an implied Irish reader who may fear an end to the current economic boom.

In his bi-culturally informed but, of course, still subjective opinion, my student argued that there is something in the aspirational African character that responds to a message of hope or optimism, such as in the Western Union ad, and something in the upwardly mobile Irish character that is easily made fretful. Perhaps. But more importantly, the contrastive approach he took to the two ads helped to foster a wider classroom debate about cultural difference, and about the ways in which creators of texts seek to determine their readers’ viewpoints. In keeping with that wider debate, one of the French students later used the topic of ‘point of view’ to demonstrate how a progressive French Insurance Company sought to challenge the reader’s perspective with an ad caption that read, ‘Heterosexual couples, the MAIF insures you too’. She noted how the ad used irony to undermine widespread societal assumptions about sexual norms, and she asked the class to consider whether such an ad would have been effective in an Irish context. ^[6]

As we worked our way through numerous ads aimed at Irish, British, French, Spanish, African, Swedish, and Austrian readers, I became increasingly mindful of a caveat that Alan Pulverness expressed at the Spring 2001 IATEFL ^[7] Conference during a session in which he made the point that intercultural awareness, when taught, should ‘not be declarative, but reflective’. He argued that we as language or cultural studies teachers should not proclaim to our students that the English or Americans do this or that, but rather that ‘I’ am like this or that because I am a product of my culture in these specific ways (Pulverness 2001). For my cultural translation students, advertisements provided ideal lenses through which to observe the formation of

personal, social, and cultural identities, especially as influenced by corporate media.

^[8] To my surprise and, I believe, our mutual pleasure, my students and I soon found ourselves lightly discussing the differences between essentialist and constructivist approaches to human subjectivity.

Such discussions would not, of course, have been possible in a less than Advanced EFL classroom. And some might argue that at a certain point my cultural translation course ceased to be a proper language course at all, since our primary aims were not to acquire vocabulary, refine grammar, or perfect pronunciation. However each of these results occurred for my students as well. They assimilated many new discourse-related terms such as semiotics, deictics, lexical cohesion, intertextuality, modality. They observed the emotional effects of using the passive rather than the active voice. They expressed themselves verbally in highly involved classroom discussions. Surely such activities enable language learners to wield the written and spoken word more persuasively, more consciously, and perhaps more conscientiously as well. No harm for business students.

When in the second term we turned our attention to newspaper articles, the extent to which the class had been honing its critical thinking skills and linguistic defence mechanisms became apparent. At the suggestion of a colleague, ^[9] I asked each student to locate two articles on the same news item, one from an English language paper and one from a paper in their native language. They were to use the discourse analysis tools they had been acquiring to make comparative studies of each article's approach to the same event. ^[10] A central aim was to detect bias by isolating the linguistic practices that work to either reveal or conceal ideological subtext or authorial point of view. Danuta Reah's textbook *The Language of Newspapers* (also from the *Intertext* Series, 1998) was invaluable in this regard. One of its central concerns is with the representation of groups. Using guided exercises based on authentic extracts, students work to uncover an article's racial, ethnic, social, or sexual assumptions by challenging the writer's use of both lexicon and syntax in presenting particular groups such as working parents, gays and lesbians, mothers, royalty, or African-Americans, to name a few. Students then trace the way the article inevitably re-transmits its own values.

Reah shows, for instance, how the simple practices of ‘modifying’ and ‘naming’ linguistically determine the reader’s predisposition to a particular group. By way of example, she points out that in describing homosexual activity as ‘lewd’ in political scandals involving underage participants, newspapers, usually tabloids, tend to pass judgment on homosexuality itself. By way of another example, she suggests that in naming the British ‘Brits’ and the aboriginal Australians ‘Abos’, an article may give the surface impression of being playfully affectionate to each group, but given Australia’s colonial history, it cannot use these terms equivalently. Such observations may seem obvious when pointed out, but when my cultural translation students began to examine the partial ways in which both Irish and other national newspapers applied naming and modifying practices to particular groups, they were startled to discover just how easily non-neutral language slips unnoticed into everyday reportage.

The class examined broadsheets as well as tabloids and found an abundance of value-laden language in each. My Swedish student, for instance, noted how such modifying phrases as ‘an American style school shooting’ and ‘deadly US violence’ were used in both Irish and Swedish broadsheets to describe a fatal secondary school shooting in Stockholm. In her opinion, these lexical choices not only raised the emotional cache of each report, but also served to provide an alarmed European readership with a common ‘other’ – the Americans – on whom to place blame. ^[11] One of the Austrian students, in looking at syntactic rather than lexical choices, noted how the quotes of officials in both English and German articles on Nazi compensation negotiations used active rather than passive verb phrases to create the impression of high resolve on the part of the compensators. ^[12] For me, a high point of the term came when several of the students prompted us all to question our textbook’s regular use of the term ‘community’ to refer to particular groups, such as in the phrase ‘gay community’ and ‘black community’. They wondered if this naming practice, though benevolent of course, did not in fact conceal a liberal authorial bias that might have been neutralised by the phrase gay or black ‘population’. I was beaming.

Benefits of the course

One of the immediate benefits of a course such as cultural translation is that learners, without really trying very hard, simply acquire a small wealth of knowledge on the current affairs and cultural habits of other nations. They do so through their Internet culling, their advertisement collections, their scanning of international newspapers, their class presentations, and their many informal discussions about the happenings and habits of other countries. Their intercultural awareness (and that of their lecturer) just grows and grows.

Another benefit of such a course, with its emphasis on critical thinking skills, is that what learners take away from it transcends their immediate use for the language. Given the current debates taking place in English Language Teaching (ELT), perhaps this is no small payoff. As emerged at the IATEFL Conference in 2001, there are many of us who are unsure about how to proceed in the classroom without unconsciously imposing Anglo-centric values on our learners, especially if we come from Anglo-centric backgrounds ourselves or find ourselves using Anglo-centric text materials, as is often the case. And then there are also a number of us who believe that the *sooner* we manage to involve our students in Anglo-centric modes of thought, the better off they will be since so much of the world's business and cultural transactions take place through English. Whatever our orientation, it is probably safe to say that most of us wish our students to think and speak critically and reflectively, not just to think and speak English. So by offering them the more-or-less 'neutral' tools of discourse analysis, we give them the practical skills and intellectual resources to negotiate the ideological undertow of written English discourse and, indeed, of discourse in any language. It's a complex world out there. They will thank us for it.

And who knows? We may make converts of them all. We are very well placed to do so. At an address to participants at a Modern Language Association Conference in 1999, John Romano, a former English professor and current television screenwriter, made a plea to academics in literary studies to widen their professional briefs by taking their pedagogy outside the ivory tower. He argued:

The indefinable sophistication about language and culture that an education in the humanities develops is exactly what's lacking in the

public discourse. As you [academics] get smarter and smarter in your quarterly journals, more skeptical of current pieties, more deft in interpreting the culture through its signs, the public is getting dumber, intellectually clumsier, more naïve about just the same sort of things. This is television's fault, surely, but it is also yours: the fault of those who might usefully be addressing the public and instead are locked in conversation with one another.

(Franklin 1999: 35)

Many of us in ELT are, tactically speaking, so much better situated than our colleagues in the Academy proper. Our learners are not, in most instances, receiving an education in English literature or linguistics. They are probably not receiving an arts or humanities education at all. Their motivations for learning English are likely to be 'practical' and oriented towards coping with the world at large and with the business-related expectations of a global economy. This is likely to be true whether our learners are adolescents, young adults, or working professionals. They are, as Romano says, 'the public', and we, therefore, have such a golden opportunity. When we choose to deliver advanced English language instruction in ways that are not merely communicative or transactional, but which prompt or reinforce critical, reflective, or analytical thought, we are reaching those who might otherwise have received more narrowly utilitarian types of education. We are reaching those who have chosen the self-classed 'practical' disciplines of Business, Engineering, Computer Science, and so on. We are reaching many of those who, like my business students in the cultural translation class, insist on the purely functional, and who just don't know yet how 'functional' certain branches of the arts and humanities can be. Despite its fairly artsy origins, discourse analysis has plenty of utilitarian aspects all its own, especially for language learners. And for those of us who find a suitable context in which to teach it, it offers rich rewards as well.

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Notes

- 1 English as a Foreign Language.
- 2 See McCarthy 1991; McCarthy and Carter 1994.
- 3 An article in the *Modern Language Association Newsletter*, for example, cites 11 newspaper sources quoting CEOs who place high recruitment value on the critical thinking skills acquired by humanities graduates, skills which are lacking in graduates with purely technical or vocational degrees. See Hutcheon 2000.
- 4 ‘Discourse analysis’ is being used in the encompassing sense expressed by Michael McCarthy in *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers* (1991) where he notes its origins in various disciplines of the 1960s and 1970s ‘including linguistics, semiotics, psychology, anthropology and sociology’ (McCarthy 1991: 5) and defines its current status as a ‘wide-ranging and heterogeneous discipline which finds its unity in the description of language above the sentence and an interest in the contexts and cultural influences which affect language in use’ (McCarthy 1991: 7).
- 5 I wish to acknowledge Romeo Nininahazwe.
- 6 I wish to acknowledge Emilie Lama.
- 7 International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language; see <http://www.iatefl.org>.
- 8 For an elaboration of these themes see Todorova 1999.
- 9 I wish to acknowledge Dermot Campbell, Assistant Head of the School of Languages at Dublin Institute of Technology.
- 10 Two websites were very useful: <http://www.findarticles.com> and <http://www.theworldpress.com>.
- 11 I wish to acknowledge Mia Beckman.
- 12 I wish to acknowledge Doris Krauetler.