

[A] Chapter 15 Critical language awareness (CLA)

Teaching the relationship between language and power

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[B] Chapter outcomes

By the end of this chapter you will

- be able to explain what is meant by critical language awareness (CLA)
- be able to show the different ways in which language and power are connected
- be able to read texts to see how they work to position the reader
- be able to read images to see how they work to position viewers
- recognise opportunities for teaching CLA wherever language is used.

[B] Introduction

Language is not a neutral means of communication. When we use language we have to make choices all the time. (See Chapter 3). We have to choose the words we use to name things. For example, in this book, the publishers have asked us to use the word *learner* rather than the word *student* or *pupil*, and the word *teacher*, rather than the word *educator*. They have also asked us to address the reader as *you* and to use language that avoids stereotyping on the basis of race, class, sex, religion or age group. All of these choices produce effects. They make the book inclusive and informal, more like a conversation. They are designed to make you feel that I and the other writers are speaking directly to you. CLA is an approach to language that asks you to think about these different choices and whose interests they serve.

The question of interests helps us to understand the relationship between language and power. If for example, the language choices put men in a privileged position over women, what we would call sexist language, then it benefits men and disadvantages women. It serves the interests of men and not the interests of women. In South Africa under apartheid, racist language was used to disempower black people. According to the Truth and Reconciliation Report

It is a common place to treat language as mere words, not deeds, therefore language is taken to play a minimal role in understanding violence. The Commission wishes to take a different view here. Language ... does things: it constructs social categories, it gives orders, it persuades us, it justifies, explains, gives reasons, excuses. It constructs reality. It moves people against other people. (TRC:7,124,294).

CLA sees language as a form of social action that does things. Language choices construct a version of reality. In teaching CLA, we want our students to understand how these constructions benefit some at the expense of others. Who benefits? Who is disadvantaged? Whose interests are served?

[B] CLA and critical literacy

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator, who worked in adult education, teaching literacy. In the early 1970s, Paulo Freire wrote that reading and writing is more than just a skill and that reading and writing should include the 'relationships of men [and women] with their world' (1972a,), that reading the word, cannot be separated from reading the world.

To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to its namers as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*. ... It is in speaking their word that men [and women] transform the world by naming it (1972b: 61).

Like the TRC report, Freire sees language as 'word-and-action' (1972a). If the words we choose name the world in one way rather than another, to create a particular version of reality, then we need to think critically about the names/words that were chosen. If they do not serve everyone's best interests equitably, then we should try to change the way in which language has constructed the world. This is precisely what Steve Biko did when he promoted black consciousness in South Africa.

Biko: I think that the slogan "black is beautiful" is serving a very important aspect of our attempt to get at our humanity. You are challenging the very root of the black man's belief about himself. When you say "black is beautiful" what in fact you are saying to him is: man, you are okay as you are, begin to look upon yourself as a human being. In a sense the term "black is beautiful" challenges exactly that belief which makes someone negate himself. ...

Judge: Now why do you refer to you people as 'black'?

Biko: Historically, we have been defined as black people, and when we reject the term non-white and we take upon ourselves the right to call ourselves what we think we are, we choose this one precisely because we feel it is most accommodating.

(SASO/BPC Trial, May 1976).

Peer discussion

Discuss the ways in which we name people using derogatory language. Think of language used to name gay and lesbian people, disabled people, workers, poor people, women, learners, old people. What language could we use that would be more respectful and inclusive?

Critical literacy is an approach to reading that asks us to consider how the writer has named the world and an approach to writing that asks us to consider the choices that we make in naming our world. Critical Language Awareness is a language-based approach to critical literacy that was developed by linguists. It is sometimes called critical linguistics. It teaches students to examine the linguistic and grammatical choices that construct texts in order to examine the interests at work.

The word *critical* has two meanings.

- 1 Critical, as in critical thinking, means that we are able to examine texts to see if they are well argued. Are the points substantiated? Is there evidence to support the claims? How convincing is the evidence? Is the argument logical and based on reason? Does it rely on fact or opinion?

- 2 Critical, as in critical literacy, signals an analysis of power relations, based on the way language is used to influence readers.

There can be little doubt that power matters, both to people who have it and to those who do not, but the relationship between language and power is not obvious and needs to be explained. In any unequal relation of power there are top dogs and underdogs. How people get to be on top in a society has to do with what that society values. It may be age or maleness or class or cleverness or a white skin. It is easier for those who have power to maintain it if they can persuade everyone in the society that there is nothing unnatural about these arrangements, that things are this way because that is the way they are meant to be. If people consent to being powerless then the people in power need to use less force (armies, police, punishments) to maintain their power. The job of social institutions such as schools, the media, families and the church is to convince and persuade people to consent to society's rules. This is achieved through language and other modes of meaning making, such as pictures, gestures, photos, graphs, and moving images which affect the meaning of texts. Meaning is often harnessed to defend power.

But meaning making systems are also used to mount a challenge to power. By refusing to consent and by working together people can bring about change. What makes CLA 'critical' is its concern with the politics of meaning: the ways in which meanings are maintained, challenged and changed. In Freire's terms, by the ways things are named, questioned and renamed.

In Chapter three, we looked at how, when people use language to speak or write, they have to make many choices. They have to decide what words to use, whether to include adjectives and adverbs, whether to use the present, the past or the future, whether to use sexist or non-sexist pronouns, whether to join sentences or to leave them separate, how to sequence information, whether to be definite or tentative, approving or disapproving. What all these choices mean is that written and spoken texts are constructed from a range of possible language and other options.

Many of the choices we make are social choices. Every society has conventions which govern people's behaviour, including their language behaviour. There are social rules controlling who should speak, for how long, when and where and in which language. There are social norms for polite and impolite forms of speech; there are taboo words and topics. These unwritten rules of use govern what a speech community considers appropriate language behaviour. These social norms are a good indication of power relations as many of them reflect the values of the people or groups in society who have power. This is particularly true when different groups do not have equal language rights. Here is an obvious example. Because teachers have more power than their learners, you can call your learners whatever you like. You can use first names or only surnames, or even insulting names that you have made up. Students, however, have to call you by your surname and a title such as Mr or Ms; some of you may require your students to call you 'Sir' or 'Mistress'.

We forget that these rules of use are social conventions - they start to look natural and to seem like common sense. We forget that they are human constructions. It is easier to remember this when we compare the rules of different speech communities. Some groups think that it is rude to look a person in the eye when you speak to them. Other groups believe the opposite. Neither is more natural than the other. Both are just conventions.

Peer discussion

Discuss the different ways in which language and power are connected.

Find examples from your own lives to illustrate the relationship between language and power. You will have had experience of being in a powerful position (for example, as a teacher or a parent) and in a

disempowered position (for example, in the Principal's office, at the university, at the Department of Home Affairs). How do you use language differently in these different situations? Can you give examples of situations in which your social conventions did not match the social conventions of the people you had to talk to?

CLA emphasises the fact that texts are constructed. Anything that has been constructed can be de-constructed. This unmaking or unpicking of the text increases our awareness of the choices that the writer or speaker has made. Every choice foregrounds what was selected and hides, silences or backgrounds what was not selected. Awareness of this prepares the way to ask critical questions: Why did the writer or speaker make these choices? Who is empowered or disempowered by the language used? Using CLA we can teach learners how to become critical readers. Critical readers resist the power of print and do not believe everything they read. They use doubt strategically and weigh texts against their own ideas and values as well as those of others. They can learn to resist text that disempower them and they can learn to use language so as not to disempower others ¹.

The text in the classroom activity on the next page is an abridged version of Jyoti Thottam/Pune's article in *Time*, April 6, 2009 pages 43-45 on the launch of Tata Motor's minicar, the Nano. Notice how the questions I have asked help you to think about how the writer of the text uses language to position us. Positioning is an important concept for CLA. Imagine that words can put you into a position of being for or against something. When you answer the specific questions on the text think about these broader questions

- Does the writer of the text want you to think that manufacturing the Nano was a good thing to do or not?
- Does the writer of the text want you to admire Ratan Tata, the chairman of Tata motors or not?
- Does the writer want you to admire the Nano?
- Is the writer positioning you for or against the Nano? How do you know?
- What values does the writer promote?
- Does the writer of the text want you to think that the Nano benefits ordinary people more or Tata Motors more? Whose interests are served?

Self reflection

How do these questions and the ones attached to the text differ from the kinds of questions that you usually ask when you set comprehension questions?

In the classroom

Nano Power. India's Ratan Tata kept his promise to produce the world's cheapest car.

In New Delhi in the early 1970s, my family travelled by scooter in the classic death-defying Indian fashion. My father would drive, with me as a toddler, standing on the floorboard in front of him and my mother seated pillion, cradling my infant sister in her arms. In India at that time, cars for a young family were far out of reach.

Ratan Tata recently described a family just like mine as the inspiration for the Nano, the ultra-cheap 'people's car' that Tata Motors launched in 2009. "What sparked it off was riding in a car and looking at them and saying, surely there's a safer way that these people can be transported", he recalls.

The project began with an audacious promise: build a safe, roadworthy vehicle costing 100,000 rupees (about \$2 000), so affordable that it could allow millions of people in the developing world to park their scooters. Tata has been as good as his word.

The company's engineers and part suppliers started from scratch, rethinking every component to minimise cost and weight without sacrificing basic performance, comfort and style. The car which weighs just 600 kg has a two cylinder engine which is bolted in the rear (like the classic people's car, the Volkswagen Beetle) and can power the car to a top speed of 100 km/h in 23 seconds. Fuel economy is excellent: about 24 km/L), better than a Prius, Toyota's hybrid sedan.

While environmentalists worry about the impact of millions of new cars on Indian roads, Tata argues Nanos could actually clear the air by replacing exhaust belching motorbikes.

The car which has four doors and seats four adults, doesn't feel like a lightweight on the road. While the interior is Spartan, the Nano handles as well as any of the other low-end minicars available in India. The brakes lack feel and there is little storage space, but the car turned heads. People swerved and tail-gated to get a closer look, waving and shouting "Hey, Nano" as the bright yellow, fully air-conditioned car passed. When we stopped, a crowd immediately gathered.

"Possessing a car is a status symbol," says Rajib Das, 30, a shopkeeper, who says he wants to be the first in his village to own a Nano. "Who wouldn't want to rise in life?"

Why do whole families in India use one scooter if it is unsafe?

Is public transport in SA safe? Why or why not?

Why are there no laws to protect people from unsafe transport?

What do the words 'riding in a car', 'them' and 'these people', suggest about Ratan Tata's position compared to that of the scooter families?

What wording suggests that Tata developed the Nano for the good of the people? Who else might benefit?

Which words position the Nano favourably compared to other cars?

What does the phrase 'the people's car' suggest?

Who do you think is right?

Why does it matter?

The word 'but' in this paragraph is very important because of the way it affects the readers attitude to the Nano. How does it do this?

Are cars status symbols? Should they be? What are other status symbols in SA? What does this say about our values?

CLA questions are different from the kinds of questions that we normally ask of texts. This does not mean that we no longer ask questions that test comprehension and learners' ability to make inferences, such as

- Why might the Nano replace scooters in India?
- Why is travelling by scooter in India described as 'death-defying'?
- Is the Tata response to the environmentalists' concerns convincing? Give reasons for your answer.

It is, however, important to ask the kind of questions that will teach learners to become aware of how language works to position readers. Some understanding of which linguistic features do what kind of positioning work, makes it easier to understand the effects they produce in texts. It helps to know what to look out for.

[B] Naming: representing the world in word and image

Because CLA is an approach to critical literacy that was developed by linguists it relies on an understanding of how different aspects of language work to position texts differently. This section looks at seven key linguistic features and some visual features that are helpful for reading texts critically.

1. We/they and us/them pronouns

One of the ways in which power operates is by actions that include some and exclude others. We can see this happening in our classrooms all the time when learners decide who can be a member of their group and who cannot. The use of us/them language shows who is in and who is out. Here are some typical examples.

- They have come to steal our jobs.
- Members of the axis of evil are a threat to our safety.
- We don't want them in our neighbourhood because they are noisy.
- We don't want our daughter to marry one of them.

At different moments in history 'we' have been Hutus and 'they' have been Tutsis; at other times 'we' were Croats and 'they' were Serbs. Sometimes 'we' are Christians and 'they' are Jews or Moslems. Often 'we' are white and 'they' are black or Asian. Sometimes 'we' are management and 'they' are workers or 'we' are straight and 'they' are gay. Us/them language is fundamental to the ways in which we construct people who are not like us as other and dangerous. Under apartheid Africans were represented as 'die swart gevaar', the black danger, in order to justify a policy of racial segregation. Us/them language often signals racist, ethnic, religious or heterosexual intolerance of people who are different. At its worst it leads to genocide, an attempt to exterminate the dangerous other.

2. Euphemism

When we use euphemism we give pleasant names to unpleasant things. Here are some examples.

- Genocide, that is mass murder, is euphemistically called ‘ethnic cleansing’.
- The word ‘debriefing’ is used for interrogation under torture.
- The structured racism that removed Africans from the cities and confined them to Bantustans was called ‘separate development’; Bantustans were called ‘homelands’ and forced removals were justified as ‘repatriation’.

Euphemism is often referred to as doublespeak – saying one thing and meaning another. Language is deliberately chosen to hide the truth and to mislead.

3. Tense and modality

Tense is used for categorical statements – clear-cut statements that can be shown to be either true or false.

- Mandela became president of South Africa in 1994. (True? or False?).
- President Barack Obama is married to Michelle Obama. (True? or False?)

Modality is used to show uncertainty.

- South African schools have to improve in the future. (How likely?)
- Global warming might lead competition for basic necessities such as food and water. (How likely?)

Modality is also used to show authority

- You must do your homework by tomorrow. (How much authority?)
- You might be arrested if you do not obey the rules of the road in SA. (How much authority?)

Both certainty and authority come from the combination of knowledge and power. People who have less power often have to give way to their seniors and be less assertive. They have to be both more deferential and more hesitant. Tense and modality are good places to look for asymmetrical power relations. Another place to look for asymmetry is in unequal forms of address as we saw with learners and teachers.

Tense is also able to show when something happens, if it is ongoing or if it is over. We saw this in Chapter 3, when we looked at the difference between

- U.S. soldiers torture prisoners (the present tense is used for habitual action or timeless truths);
- U.S. soldiers tortured prisoners (the past tense is used for actions that happened in the past - that are no longer happening);
- U.S. soldiers are torturing prisoners (the present continuous tense is used for actions that are ongoing and happening as we speak);
- U.S. soldiers have tortured prisoners (the perfect past tense is used for recent actions).

You can see how tense can be used to create different meanings that serve different interests and that in this case position U.S. soldiers differently.

Tips for teachers

If you are reading a text and you want to see how a particular tense affects meaning, replace it with a different tense to see how this changes the meaning. It is sometimes easier to see how meaning works when you can compare a linguistic choice with a different choice.

4. Subjects and verbs

All finite verbs have to have subjects – participants who perform the action. Language is in fact structured to tell us who is doing what to whom in what circumstances. The basic pattern for this is subject-verb-object, with the inclusion of circumstances as optional.

- The principal suspended the boys.

Here the sentence is in the active voice. In the passive voice, it becomes possible to delete the actor. (The boys are now the subject of the verb.)

- The boys were suspended ~~by the principal~~.

Deleting the actor makes it possible to hide who made the decision, who is responsible, who performed the action. It is also possible to hide agency by turning the verb into a noun.

- The boys are under suspension.

We can call this nouning the verb (or nominalisation). Nouns have no subjects, no tense, no modality – they just are. Actions are turned into things. These things can then become subjects of sentences, as though they are the actors and agents. This hides abuses of power.

- Segregation led learners to attend different schools.

This establishes segregation as an established practice for which no-one is responsible. If we noun all the verbs, we can remove all participants from the sentence: no-one is responsible and no-one is affected. Verbs turned into nouns become the participants.

- Segregation led to attendance at different schools.

When we noun the verb, actions are turned into states of affairs, into actions accomplished.

5. Conjunctions

Conjunctions are important because they structure arguments. They provide reasons (because), purposes (so that), result (so), conditions (if), caveats (although, despite) and circumstances (when, where, how). They add information (and) or they provide alternatives (but).

Remember that the TRC report found that language ‘justifies, explains, gives reasons, excuses’ and that these are used to persuade and to construct reality. ‘Because’ introduces reasons and by changing the clause to which it is attached we can change cause and effect.

- The principal suspended the boys because they took drugs.

- The boys took drugs because the principal suspended them.

If you want to see how reality is being constructed, what is being legitimated, the logic people use to rationalise their behaviour, look at the conjunction they have chosen and the logic it produces.

6. Sentence types

In Chapter 3, the different effects of sentences, questions and commands was discussed. In looking at the choice made between sentence type, a critical approach would consider the ways in which these options create different positions for writers and readers or speakers and listeners.

I have summarised these different positions in the table below and the activity below provides an opportunity to see how these ideas work in context.

	Writer or speaker	Reader of listener
Statement (S)	Positioned as having information to give.	Positioned as needing information.
Question (Q)	Positioned as needing information.	Positioned as having and being able to provide information.
Command (C)	Positioned as powerful enough to tell someone less powerful what to do.	Positioned as someone who can be told what to do and ordered around.

In the classroom

The text below was taken from an Old Mutual Advertisement which appeared in *Edgars Magazine*, April 2009. It provides interesting examples of the use of modality, conjunctions and sentence types that you can discuss with your learners.

You might also want to consider how this picture and heading which accompanied the add works to position the reader.



FACT

There is no need to try and sell education to parents. Every parent we know understands the importance of a good school followed, hopefully, by a technikon, college or university. Most of us agree that a solid education can be the foundation for a real future for our children. And, even though we know that a good education can be expensive, we are still prepared to try and provide the very best we can.

However, in the endless list of household expenses... it is almost impossible to save money for education by simply leaving it in your current account - and very difficult to transfer money to a savings account after everything else has been paid.

BUT

There's a secret to saving for education... one that is so simple, so effective and so affordable - as little as R150 a month - that, before you know it, you'll have saved substantially towards your child's education.

HERE'S THE SECRET

Treat saving for education as an expense.

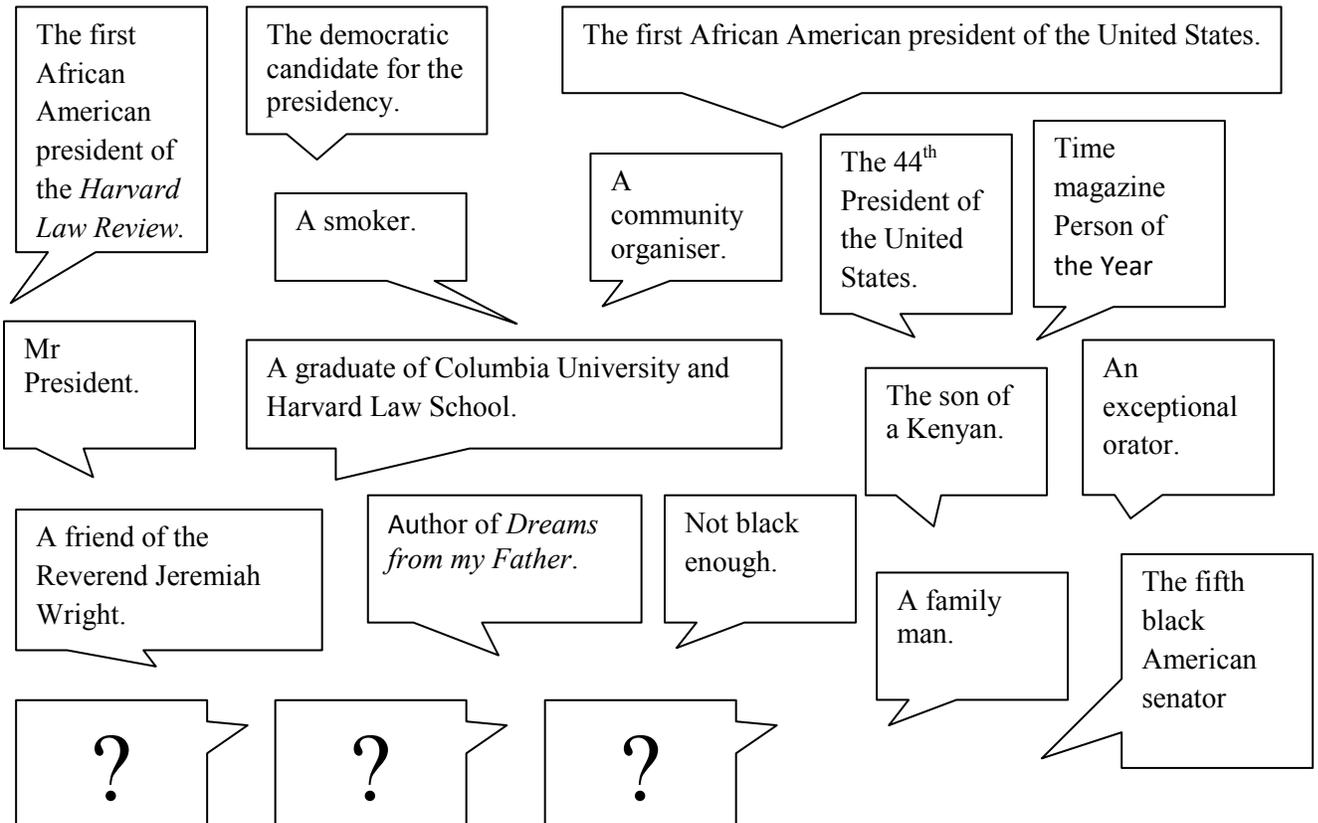
A debt that you owe your child.

Pay it before you spend any money.

7. Naming

The linguistic term for naming is *lexicalisation*. Lexis means vocabulary, and lexicographers are the people who write dictionaries. The words we choose name the world – the participants, their actions, the circumstances. How we name the world constructs social categories.

Think for a moment about ways in which people have named Barack Obama. He has been called:



Each of these namings foregrounds an aspect of his identity and backgrounds other aspects. They tie him to different social categories of race, education, position, history, nationality, religion, employment. Each naming puts him into a particular box, tries to fix him, to essentialise him. This is how naming, classification and categorisation work. The same is true of all wordings.

8. Visual features

Designers of visuals also have to make choices. They have to decide on the shot – close-up, medium shot, long shot; they have to decide on the angle – low, high, side or oblique; on exposure (how much light there will be); and on what will be in focus and whether the focus will be sharp or soft. They have to decide what to include or exclude. They also have to decide on colour and composition. Each of these choices creates a different design, a different version of the subject of the image.

In the classroom

Ask learners to bring as many pictures as they can find of Barack Obama. Which aspect of his identity is foregrounded in each picture. An image (picture, photo, cartoon etc) is a representation and it is important to consider how the person has been portrayed. Look at the Obama's eyes, face, clothing, body language, who he is with, where he is standing, what he is doing.

In modern forms of communication where it is easy to insert visuals into texts, texts are becoming increasingly multimodal. This means that they use more than one set of meaning-making modes. In this Figure the visual and the verbal are combined. This book, for example, includes a number of visual elements: shaded grey boxes, different fonts, drawings, figures, tables, bulleted lists and so on.

The following figure accompanied the text on Tata's Nano.

Images with verbal captions.

Price Is Right
The Nano could redefine perceptions of what a car ought to cost

TATA NANO
\$1,970
(Taxes and other fees not included)

APPLE MACBOOK PRO 17"
\$2,799
(U.S. Apple Store price)

BAJAJ PULSAR 220 DTS-FI
\$1,705
(New Delhi dealership price)

TAG HEUER LINK CALIBRE S
\$3,122
(Manufacturer's retail price)

In the classroom

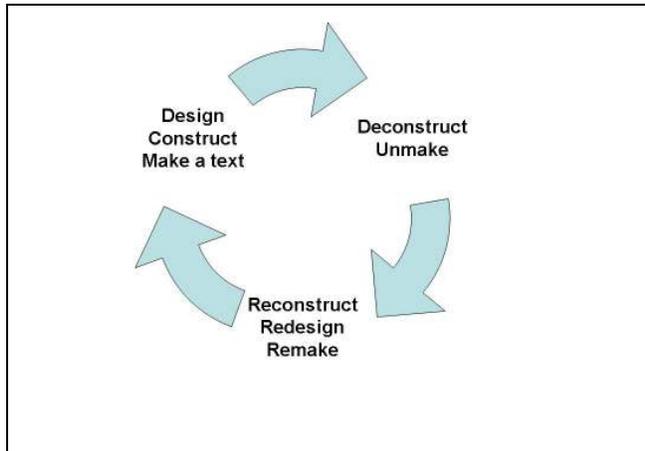
How does this set of images with their captions contribute to or change the meaning of the *Time* article that we have already examined?

[B] Renaming

Renaming returns us to Freire's idea that critical literacy is about naming, problematising the naming and then renaming the world. This suggests a cyclical process because every re-naming, is also subject to critical inspection and possible transformation. It produces an approach of constant questioning of texts,

what I have called the redesign cycle (Janks, forthcoming). I use the word design because although written texts have to be re-written, multimodal texts have to be redesigned.

The redesign cycle



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When we teach reading of both written texts and images, we need to show students how to question the meanings that texts construct. But literacy is more than just reading. It also includes writing and designing. Learners who can read texts critically can also read their own texts to see who is disadvantaged by the way they have constructed the participants and events. They can look to see how they have positioned themselves and their ideas and the effects their words are likely to have on their readers. This is a crucial aspect of editing and redrafting.

Now when I give my learners texts to de-construct, I always invite them to redesign the text. They have to imagine how it could be different so as to serve a different set of interests. Because CLA works with a social justice agenda, redesign becomes important where texts serve the interests of the few, rather than the many. For Freire, redesign is always about social transformation, about re-writing the world.

Teachers are often wary of teaching CLA because they think it is too political. Questions of power are always political. But there is big 'P' Politics – Presidential campaigns, political corruption, terrorism, war, the global economy – and little 'p' politics. Little 'p' politics is about playground bullies, name calling, the way we view people who have AIDS, or foreign Africans, or learners from poor homes, or people who do not speak our language. It is about the relationship between adults and children, teachers and learners, haves and have-nots, men and women. It is about how our words and actions affect other people. It is about our values as individuals and as members of a community. Redesign, the ultimate goal of CLA is about striving for a more just society and the difference we can make by the words we choose and the little things we do every day.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the origins of CLA and its connections to critical literacy and multimodality. It has argued that the central questions posed by CLA when it looks at how the world has been represented

in images and language are: Who benefits? Who is disadvantaged? Whose interests are served? To answer these questions we need to examine how our language and visual choices work to position readers. Another way of saying this is that texts try to persuade readers to take sides. Sometimes taking sides creates a more fair society; sometimes it harms people. Language happens everywhere outside and inside schools, in language classrooms and across the curriculum, in our homes and in the media. We need to teach critical awareness so that our learners can use it wherever they are.

In order to teach critical literacy you should be able to

- Find interesting everyday texts to interrogate.
- Find examples of how language choices that position readers.
- Examine images to see how they represent their subjects.
- Ask CLA questions. Teacher learners to ask CLA questions.
- Be able to explain why CLA matters

Because young people, often feel that they are subject to the whims of the adults who control their lives, they are very interested in power. They see difference and inequality every day. A critical approach sharpens their awareness of how language, amongst other social actions, constructs reality. It provides them with an opportunity to problematise the world and to change it. This what Obama called ‘the audacity of hope’ and he used it to inspire young and old in America. As teachers we should not aim for anything less.

[C] Endnotes

1. Many of these ideas first appeared in the *Critical Language Awareness Series*, Janks, H. (ed) 1993.

[C] References

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