Facilitating Critical Reading in the Teaching of English for Academic Purposes in a Japanese EAP Classroom

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This article discusses approaches to teaching critical reading for academic purposes and argues that critical reading skills are an important aspect of any course in academic reading. While the context of the present discussion is a university in Japan, which offers liberal arts degrees programs taught entirely in English, the discussions about critical reading and critical reading strategies are generalizable to other contexts, particularly those where English is used as the principal language of higher education. The article first looks into reasons for the need to teach critical reading strategies, specifically to foster an understanding among students that meaning and the construction of meaning is never value-free but is imbued with different worldviews and ideologies that come through different ways knowledge and meaning are generated and represented. The article also looks at how students can be alerted to issues relating to language, power, and discourse as well as the construction, portrayal, and representation of different ideas, identities, and subjectivities in the language classroom.

Background

Theoretical Foundations for a Critical Approach to EAP Reading

In terms of theoretical foundations for critical reading that are useful to classroom practitioners, thinkers in social theory and academic literacies provide useful insights. Fundamental to their work is the notion of the constructedness and socio-situatedness of text, where texts are viewed as constructs of socio-semiotic meaning and action. In other words, reading involves much more than extracting meaning from written text but rather involves the need to make sense of the surrounding world (Kress, 2003). Within this paradigm, readers view a text through a socially located and individual perspective, and in order to comprehend a text, readers must decipher it through the lens of their surrounding social relations and interactions. (Blanton, 1998; Kress, 2003).

In addition, apart from being a socially situated activity, reading is also an interactive dialogic activity involving commitment to a dynamic relationship between reader and text (Blanton, 1998; Spellmeyer, 1998; Wallace, 2002, 2003). We should be aware that readers

"can and should bring their own thoughts and experience to bear" when they are reading, "in order to create a reading of their own" (Blanton, 1998, p. 227-228). In other words, readers use their own thoughts and experiences in order to talk to and interact with a text for the purposes of implication, exploration, and disagreement (Blanton, 1998; Spellmeyer, 1998; Wallace, 2003). Hence, texts are not the sole authority on any subject and students should be encouraged claim authority over texts and to interpret them "in the light of their own experience and their own experience in the light of texts" and to agree or disagree with texts in the light of their life experience (Blanton, 1998, p. 226).

In such reader-text interactions, Wallace (2003) further recognises a dimension of power—noting that reading involves a "shifting and dynamic relationship between text producers, text receivers, and the text itself" (2003, p. 9). Readers can either *animate* texts or they can *author* texts. Readers who are animators unproblematically try to comprehend and paraphrase texts for meaning that they believe is inherent in the text. Readers who are authors, in contrast, are more analytical and draw upon extra-textual knowledge from their individual environment and experiences to create, or author, meaning from texts. Through this process, these readers move beyond everyday comprehension through resistance and critique (Spellmeyer, 1998; Wallace, 2002, 2003).

Thus, from the above discussion, it can be noted that vital to critical reading is the fundamental premise that textual content is never monolithic or monologic but dialogic and socially-situated.

Japanese Classrooms

The above notions of critical reading are to be juxtaposed with what Low and Woodburn (1999) note as being characteristic of Japanese learners—the concern for correctness and wrongness, the concern for definition and exactness, and the resultant anxieties and shame that come upon Japanese learners in the event of discrepancies in detail and exactness. For Japanese learners concerned about correctness, the situated and dialogic nature of texts become concepts which could challenge both teachers and learners. Some classroom practitioners would offer first hand experience of how Japanese learners, with their intolerance of incorrectness and uncertainty, are often not forthcoming with personal (let alone critical) viewpoints, attesting to Low and Woodburn's observations, and hence to the benefits of having a critical element built into lessons.

This is coupled with the Japanese educational culture in which often only the teacher is given substantial authority over what is to be considered legitimate knowledge. Sato (2004) describes how "without their physical presence, teachers enjoy invisible authority—referring to the authority, respect, and control teachers secure.... The explicit hierarchical organization of schools and classrooms bestows teachers with structural authority" (p. 189). The consequence of this is that students coming into tertiary institutions may not be that familiar with the space that a tertiary classroom (especially

classrooms with critical orientations) would seek to give to more independent, if not critical, responses. Sato affirms this in her observation that, "day-to-day classroom life is colorless, and students' perspectives largely remain off the canvas altogether" (p. 14).

Given this, with areas like reading critically, learners and teacher will need to work through an initial stage where learners, in particular, will have to feel assured that expressions of opinion and critical thinking are acceptable and even to be encouraged. Sato, in an earlier paper aptly entitled *Honoring the Individual*, sees good potential for this when she observes of Japanese classrooms that "the cultural veneer of homogeneity is fabricated by standardised practices, and conceals...actual diversity and individuality" (1999, p. 120). She argues that beneath the veneer of conformity, "uniform procedures and forms of behavior reflect outward appearance, not necessarily homogeneity or uniformity...within students' hearts and minds.... Students may practice identical skills...but once learned, these basic skills actually enable them to become more adventuresome" (2004, p. 202-203).

Pedagogical Applications

Engendering the Socially Located Reader

Following Sato's point about adventuresomeness, students in EFL reading classes can be assured that it is important for them to be interpreting, critiquing, and interacting with text rather than seeking a "single correct" interpretation or expect the teacher to furnish them with one. To do this, it is important that the following three considerations be taken into account, especially at the planning stage.

First, reading texts should preferably be about topics near to home, topics that draw ready responses from students, and topics which students are able and ready to demonstrate a degree of critical commitment. Examples of these include articles about the case of a young sumo wrestler beaten to death with beer bottles in a sumo stable during training (Japan Times, 20 March 2008), a famous singer and actor being found undressed at midnight in a public park (Japan Times, 25 April, 2009), or a famous entertainer's experience trying to rent a downtown apartment (Japan Times, 5 December, 2009). As they read such articles, students can be encouraged to draw on their own knowledge and experiences in relation to each article (Eidwick, 2010). Students come with rich individual histories and experiences resulting from their exposure to the institutions where they have been schooled, which is coupled with experiential knowledge they have gathered from sports, neighborhoods, field trips, cyber world interactions, and electronic media. These are all valuable sources to be tapped as they "read into" the article.

Second, students need to be primed to read critically. It would be ideal if students were given open-ended questions focusing on matters for which there will be no pat solutions, let alone fixed answers. Equipped with such a list of questions, the teacher can

draw out student reactions by exemplifying or elaborating on the issues presented or having various dilemmas fleshed out or simulated as real-life situations. In order to further bring to life relevant issues, teachers may also use televised news reports, news clippings, or action snippets from websites such as Youtube.

Third, to reinforce the point that a variety of responses are allowed, and indeed desirable, time can be allocated for students to check online blogs and other websites where they can encounter a wide variety of responses to the issue at hand. This will enable (and more importantly engender) a habit of students feeling at liberty to think through and evaluate for themselves a wide range of reactions in relation to the particular topic.

Metalanguage for Use in the Classroom

To complement the above and thinking in terms of classroom implementation, making available uncomplicated metalanguage is important. Given useful metalanguage, students come away with concepts simple enough for them to gather up ideas and apply them. Johns (1997) argues for teaching a "metalanguage, or a language about language" because it means that students "develop a language about their strategies for completing tasks, thus enabling them to discuss, critique, and reflect upon what they have done and how they have done it" (p. 128). For students in our university, the following key notions were introduced as part of providing them with critical reading metalanguage: (1) viewpoints, (2) motives, and (3) sources and histories. The next section describes each of these three areas and how they can be applied in the classroom using illustrations from the article on the untimely death of a young sumo wrestler.

Viewpoints

Viewpoints is about the need for students to scrutinise and evaluate content from multiple perspectives. The word *viewpoints* is used in line with the aim of keeping the metalanguage uncomplicated. Through viewpoints, students consider matters through the eyes of various participants and come to understand why people think and act in different and unique ways. Through seeing matters from multiple viewpoints, students are given the message that they too can offer their own opinions and perspectives.

In the newspaper report about the death of the young sumo wrestler, many students were quick to center their critique on the victim's plight and position. Typically, students tapped their background knowledge of bullying practices, which they said were common in Japan, and linked them to the violent death of the young wrestler. The fact that he died in mysterious circumstances—made even more dubious by the police claim that he died of heart failure—attracted students to consider matters from the dead boy's viewpoint. Questions raised by the students included why no one came to his rescue, why there were no controls on the part of the sumo stable, and why there were no other observers who could have stopped things from getting out of hand. There were also reactions of empathy: "I think Saito did not have the power to resist. So I think it was very hard." And there were

reactions of sympathy: "I think Saito is very pitiful." And quite a few students pointed out that his life was ended prematurely: "He was only seventeen," "He was young," "He entered the stable as apprentice," and "Seventeen years old is an important age, but he was deprived of his life by his boss."

Besides the victim, the students were also able to look at the matter from the viewpoints of the stable master and the boy's father. With the stable master, the students tried to empathise with the fact that not many young people were entering sumo stables as apprentices and this has been a trend over the last twenty or so years. Stable masters have been fighting hard to keep their trainees and to attract more new ones. More trainees mean more money for each sumo stable. The fact that this young wrestler kept on wanting to leave the stable and even tried to run away as well as his alleged laziness could have been the cause of the stable master's impatience and ire.

As for the boy's father, he was the object of sympathy but also the subject of blame. Students felt that as a father who had entrusted his teenage son to the stable, he would never have expected that his son would lose is life. Students empathised with the father's feeling of loss and regret, and the fact that if he had just lent a listening ear to his son's pleas to leave the stable, he would still have his son alive and well. Some students, however, felt that the father was equally to blame because of his failure to listen to what his son had to say about his life at the stable.

By looking at matters from different viewpoints, students benefited by coming away from the reading exercise feeling that they had been able to uncover new insights, while others came away feeling that the thoughts they had been having about people involved in sumo were more deeply affirmed. With such an exercise, students come away feeling that they have done a thorough reading, where matters are also considered from the standpoint of even the silent or marginalised characters (Yahya, 1994). In the case of the young sumo wrestler, the dead boy's viewpoint became one literally silent viewpoint the students found useful to examine. This supports Apple and Christian-Smith's (1991) call to examine "the treatment and invisibility of oppressed groups in texts" through considering "other voices to counter the lack of serious attention" given to them and the importance of examining the nature of social relations in text (p.17).

Motives

In the passage on the death of the young sumo wrestler, the police and sumo association are characterized as being reluctant to investigate or talk about the incident. In passages of this nature, students can be asked to think about motives, which are concerned with why certain people or groups of people choose to act or behave in certain ways and for what advantage they stand to gain.

In class, students identified the fact that broadcasting sumo tournaments is worth a considerable sum in profits for the broadcasting network with rights to broadcast sumo

tournaments. Hence, they would certainly not be in favour of any sort of bad publicity for sumo. So, in terms of motives, it would be to the advantage of those with a stake in sumo broadcasting not to have such a matter escalate into one that would bring continued bad publicity for the sport.

Students responding to the passage made incisive comments relating to secrecy as an important driving motive: 'this kind of incident has been a secret of the bad side until now," "the Japan Sumo Association must have wanted to hide the problem." Regarding the police response that the wrestler died of heart disease, students expressed their disbelief that the police might have thought it more expedient to have the matter classified as death through natural causes than to enter into further investigation or exposure of the matter. One student stated, "I can't believe the police." Attempts by students to "author" what went on in the mind of the police can, hence, also come under the notion of motives.

Through being encouraged to look at motives, students benefit even as they are encouraged to do what Wallace (2003) terms as authoring the text through deeper analysis and problematizing different reactions and motivations. The important point here is that while reading, students are attempting to delve deeper, or conjecture, into the issue of motives, and in so doing, students engage with matters giving rise to both conflict and dilemma.

Sources and Histories

Sources refers to origins or seats of power which readers can identify and resist through critical reading. These could be people or agencies through which power can be exercised or wielded. *Histories* refers to contextual background and recent events and how they influence matters. Additionally, histories examines how sources of power set in motion or precipitate different eventualities or outcomes which naturalise unequal power relations. Again, readers can pick up on contexts, histories, and eventualities and make critical comments on processes, results, or eventualities that come through such histories.

In relation to the sumo article, the sumo association would qualify as a source. One student made comments directed at the sumo association to the effect that the association had lost public confidence in its handling of the death of the young wrestler: "I would completely lose the trust of the sumo association after this case." The other source identified was the stable master who allowed three other wrestlers to beat the young man to death, and one student had this to say: "I think the stable master and the three wrestlers arrested must repent of his death."

The fact that a tragic eventuality resulted from the actions of the stable master led one student to make the comment that sumo and the sumo fraternity and eldership had hidden secrets behind the scenes all this while. One student pointed out that such secrecy needs to be exposed through closer scrutiny of what actually happened and said that if the father of the dead wrestler had not pursued the matter the case would have been "let go as a

death by heart attack," as was claimed by the police. Several students pointed out that the ultimate loser in such struggles involving power and control is Japanese culture itself: "Can you say that sumo wrestling is a proud sport of the Japanese culture from now on?," "Sumo is a Japanese traditional sport. I'm sad to hear this news," "I was very ashamed because sumo is Japanese traditional culture. I do not believe that people who inherit Japanese tradition should pollute it." Of course, the point here is that students are given the opportunity to locate the sources of power and control, and in so doing, engage more deeply with what they read.

In terms of context, one student pointed out that what is reported is but the tip of the iceberg—beating trainees with baseball bats and beer bottles and burning them with cigarette butts. One other student, showing her background knowledge of sumo in Japan, pointed out that sumo had of late been involved in various scandals including alleged match fixing and drug use while another student quickly put the whole scandal against a larger historical background of a culture of cliquishness and bullying present in Japanese educational institutions and workplaces. Yet another student went even further when she associated the incident as yet another case of dishonesty so often highlighted in the news putting the incident alongside a food labelling scandal that also rocked and outraged the Japanese public.

Looking at sources and histories benefits students, and student responses strongly attest to the notion of the socially located reader—readers that come into the reading exercise as social beings with understandings of backgrounds and histories that enable them to understand perplexities, dilemmas, and conflicts (Kress, 2003). This in turn engenders responses to text that go beyond a mere gleaning of factual information to what Turner (1999) has called a "reading in" process where deeper understandings of centres of power and control become a significant part of attaching deeper critical meanings to text.

Conclusion

Facilitating critical reading means that students will be able to scrutinise and comment on various representations of knowledge and content, including those that are stereotypical or monolithic. Students can also be encouraged to form the habit of doing the same when it comes to their content courses, where faculty would expect them to consider various theoretical or practical issues in depth and from multiple viewpoints. Related to this, Johns (1997) puts it strongly when she talks about the "danger of teaching assimilation to academic cultures and their texts rather than critique, of promoting students' acceptance of what is considered to be the status quo" (p. 18). With critical reading skills in their repertoire, students will be able to more thoroughly engage with text as co-authors and co-constructors of knowledge while appreciating the richness and complexity of text and meaning. Through such an approach to EAP reading, students will also be able to more

rigorously engage with discipline specific knowledge as active and critically savvy and critically conditioned participants. This makes for richer intertextualities and dialogisation in academia and deeper participation in university and community, from which students and the academic community will only benefit.

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