This book investigates reading as a social, critical process. It is addressed to language teachers and researchers, and is based on studies of reading and readers, as well as on classroom interactions around text. My point of departure is the text: what do texts have to tell us about contemporary social life? How can we make use of them in the language classroom for critical reading?

I taught my first ‘critical reading’ class to a group of intermediate foreign language students from various European and Far Eastern countries in the Autumn of 1989. In Europe it was a time of change, typified most memorably by the fall of the Berlin Wall. I recall discussing with students the image of Germany in one newspaper report ‘striding like a colossus across Europe’, an image which, in the view of the German students in the class, conveyed a menacing and false impression. Later that academic year, in February 1990, came the release of Nelson Mandela. The texts recording this occasion remain defining texts of their era – we all recall the clenched fist salute of Winnie and Nelson Mandela, which featured on the front pages of newspapers worldwide. The following year brought the Gulf War and a fresh set of newspaper reports, which as I revisit them now in the Summer of 2003, take on a new resonance in the context of further conflict in the Gulf. During that first course and those in subsequent years, students and I went to work critically on a wide range of texts, not just newspaper report texts, but brochures, posters, advertisements and magazine articles, drawn largely from everyday life. I shall follow Luke et al. in calling these ‘community texts’. These texts of everyday life may seem, as Luke et al. put it, ‘innocuous, neutral texts requiring simple decoding and response’ (Luke et al. 2001: 113 in Fehring and Green eds), but cumulatively they document and shape social and cultural life.

My experience of working with community texts, largely with foreign language learners, over several years ultimately fed into the rationale for the particular course which is at the centre of this book. The class I shall describe took place in 1993, and consisted of first year university students, those preparing...
for the Cambridge Proficiency examination and, in addition, several students doing a Master's degree in English language teaching (ELT). The students were mainly in their early twenties and came from France, Spain, Germany, Japan, China, Indonesia, and Argentina.

In looking for some analytical tools to present to students in their work with texts, I turned to critical discourse analysis (CDA), and the work of Norman Fairclough, whose influential book *Language and Power* appeared in 1989, and I have since continued to develop frameworks based broadly on the systemic/functional grammar of Michael Halliday (e.g. 1970, 1994), which Fairclough in turn drew on. I will describe more fully in Chapter 2 the varying accounts of this work and the nature of its impact. Suffice it to say for the moment that CDA is concerned with critiquing the ideology of texts, the way discourses serve to privilege those with power. A discourse, as Kress describes it, ‘provides a set of possible statements about a given area and organises and gives structure to the manner in which a particular topic, object, or process is to be talked about’ (Kress 1985: 7). Here Kress is drawing on a Foucauldian view of discourses as deriving from the major institutional bases of society. Foucault (1972) downplays the role of individual agency in the manipulation of power, seeing it as mediated through social institutions, such as education, the military establishment and the law, rather than being consciously exercised by the authors of specific written or spoken texts. Discourses are implicated in power relations in the sense that they tend to reaffirm the largely taken-for-granted dominance of particular social practices and social groups.

While critical discourse analysts such as Kress and Fairclough offer detailed textual analyses of the manner in which power operates through language, as an educational procedure a further step is needed, one which can translate some of the principles of CDA into pedagogic action. This became the role of critical language awareness (henceforth CLA), more fully described in Chapter 3, which saw its goal as raising students' awareness of how the uses of language in all its realisations serve to perpetuate dominant discourses and the ideologies they encode. For the moment I shall use the term CDA generically to include the pedagogic strand represented by CLA.

Some might say that, both in educational and popular texts, greater care is now taken to avoid the discriminatory language of earlier times. Yet, I would argue that, while grosser, more visible forms of sexist and racist language are relatively rare, discourses continually regroup around new issues and social groups, in a manner which privileges dominant members of societies, and is prejudicial to others. A current example might be discourses of islamophobia (cf. Sarwar 2002). To be alert to these, and to invite students’ attention to them, is part of our project as educators. A key principle of this book then is that texts matter, what they say and how they say it. At the World Congress of Reading in 2002, Vincent Greaney, lead education specialist for