In the previous two chapters, I have identified some characteristics of reading as critical social practice and process. Here I want to locate my discussion within wider understandings of critical pedagogy, to pave the way for an exploration of classroom-based critical reading.

The construction of knowledge

Any educational activity must address the issue of what kind of knowledge is being transmitted, or constructed in classroom settings. A typical aim of education is likely to be, however this is achieved, to further the knowledge and understanding of topics which constitute the curriculum (Edwards and Mercer 1987: 49). This may appear to be an unexceptional point to make unless one acknowledges that much classroom interaction is less to do with building understanding than taking part in rather ritualised events where participants do not reflect – nor are invited to reflect – very deeply on the processes or content involved.

In the case of language teaching, a dilemma relates to what kind of content knowledge is in play. The object of enquiry may be language itself, for instance, as evidenced in written texts. This was a central focus of the class at the centre of this study. Additionally, there was an interest in the processes by which this knowledge was constructed and articulated, in particular the language which facilitated and revealed such processes.

However, a much more fundamental question centres around the feasibility of growth in knowledge and understanding. How is reliable knowledge possible? Bauman (1992 in Hoggart 1995: 1) notes that ‘(the concept of post-modernism) proclaimed the end of the exploration of the ultimate truth of the human world or human experience’. With the demise of the old certainties, does the pursuit of truth remain a feasible proposition in classrooms, or indeed elsewhere?

I want to argue that facts and truth do indeed matter and are necessary concerns of critical pedagogy and of critical language study in particular.
For it is the scrutiny of language which is able to reveal the difference between what happened as verifiable fact and what \textit{would or might have} happened as mere hypothesis. Apologists for the Chilean dictator, Augusto Pinochet like to quote in his defence that he prevented a communist takeover in Chile. This is one such view, quoted in the context of the imprisonment of political opponents during that era: ‘it is very doubtful whether a communist Chile, which they (those imprisoned by Allende’s regime) wanted to set up, would have treated its prisoners as humanely’ (Peregrine Worsthorne quoted in \textit{The Guardian} 4 May 2002). What is at stake is a crucial difference between verifiable fact and hypothesis, revealed in English grammar by a difference between the simple past and what English Language textbooks call the ‘third conditional’, the unreal conditional. David Cooper writing in defence of facts, and of maintaining the difference between fact and interpretation concludes: ‘However differently the murder was interpreted, one man did stick a sword into another. That was fact, not comment’ (\textit{The Guardian} 2000).

As Hargreaves (1994: 39) observes, once the pursuit of truth is denied as an objective, any endeavour becomes motivated not by intellectual principles ‘entailing a search for truth or understanding, but by political and ethical principles entailing the realisation of such things as justice, fairness and equity’.

Hargreaves’ point raises the question as to whether the pursuit of political and ethical principles can be seen as distinct from the search for greater intellectual understanding, to include the establishment of facts, in some cases. The view taken in this book, and discussed more fully below, is that notions of justice and equity, whether related to critique of written texts or to evaluation of classroom discourse, should be articulated within rational sets of beliefs – they must be rationally defensible and aim for intellectual clarity and coherence. While ‘a whole traditional ideology of representation is in crisis’, yet, claims Eagleton (1988: 395), ‘this does not mean that the search for truth is abandoned’. This view is echoed by the German philosopher, Jurgen Habermas, one of whose central beliefs is in emancipatory possibilities which are sought not merely for reasons of equity but because they are intellectually justifiable.

One of the ways in which Habermas (1979) argues for universal principles regarding the pursuit of truth, without espousing a wholehearted Kantian transcendentalism is to propose a universal pragmatics, which he differentiates from what he calls ‘empirical pragmatics’, which attends to specific contexts of use. Drawing very much on the Speech Act literature and the work of Searle in particular (e.g. 1969), he puts the case for sets of conditions which operate in all human communication and which are orientated to the reaching of understanding. Utterances, or language in use, relate to: (1) the external reality of what is supposed to be an existing state of affairs, (2) the internal reality of what a speaker would like to express before a public