Critical Reading in the Classroom

This chapter will describe a specific context of use for practical critical discourse analysis (CDA), beginning with the notion of classroom as critical community. It will continue with an account of some classroom-based studies which fall under the broad umbrella term of ‘critical language awareness’. Against the background of these, I set out my own Critical Reading class, describing the texts and tasks chosen; finally I provide some vignettes of classroom procedures. The chapter views the classroom and the course very much from my own perspective as the teacher, and it is my voice which is dominant here, especially in the early lessons of the course. Gradually, however, the students’ own voices begin to emerge.

The classroom as a critical community

Much of the discussion of critical pedagogy and related work such as critical literacy has been at an abstract level. There has been, as Usher and Edwards in Pennycook (2001: 82) note, a ‘curious silence on concrete pedagogical matters’. Indeed Pennycook (2001) himself, while he offers a comprehensive account of critical applied linguistics, including a chapter on the Politics of Pedagogy, says little about actual classroom procedures. Canagarajah (1999) looks critically at his own classroom practice in teaching EFL. However, only in a further source (2002) does he offer practical proposals for the application of critical principles to his teaching of writing.

A further problem with most critically oriented study is its singly authored nature. If we turn to the textual critique favoured by critical discourse analysts, the interpretations produced by critique are not generally opened up to communities of interpreters. CDA has tended to be done by the lone armchair critic, giving rise as O’Regan points out, to comments by opponents of CDA that critical analysts promote textual exegesis by proxy on behalf of the supposed ‘uncritical reader’ (O’Regan in preparation). One advantage of drawing on specific teaching experiences and learner data is
that we can concretise some abstract ideas about pedagogy and language; secondly, we have access to a class of students who offer us a ready-made interpretative community, who bring different knowledge and cultural resources to bear on textual critique.

This immediately raises the question of what we mean by ‘community’. I have drawn on the idea of ‘interpretative community’, based originally on Fish (1980), to describe reading as a social practice, that we read not as individuals but as members of a more or less readily identifiable social group (cf. Wallace 1992a). Londoners will be aware of the literacy preferences of regular travellers on the Tube. It seems, from my observations, that there are distinct communities: the Central Line readership is different from the Northern Line or Piccadilly Line one. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde, when the hero Jack Worthing announces that he was mislaid on the Brighton line as a baby, Lady Bracknell’s famous reply is: ‘the line is immaterial’. In our case, the line is material. Central line travellers are strongly *Guardian* reading; Piccadilly line readers, at least at certain times of day, favour *The Sun*. And, as often observed, women, rather more than men, on all lines are readers of novels.

Talk of the ‘classroom community’ is now common, as a way of validating and promoting solidarity and mutual support in classrooms. However, as Cazden (2001) notes, the notion of community is in danger of becoming cliched and fairly empty, unless we specify in some detail what characterises the creation of community. Even more problematic is what we mean by a critical classroom community. The investigation of classroom interaction in Chapter 6, aims to embark on this discussion, while not presuming to provide definitive answers. Provisionally we might say here that membership of such a critical community involves both teacher and students being alert to how power relations are embedded not just within the texts we critique in class, but are continually reproduced in and through classroom interactions. We might agree to observe how far power is applied collaboratively and productively or used strategically for specific and individual, even destructive, purposes. Also, ideationally speaking, members of a critical classroom community articulate awareness about matters of social justice in the contemporary world. In a class centred around text analysis, this means pointing to the unequal treatment of participants within texts, the manner in which the reader is positioned and the relative openness of the discourses in a text, all textual features, which as argued in Chapter 2, are amenable to investigation through systemic-functional grammar – the tool for analysis selected in the Critical Reading course. This is linked to the broad goals of critical pedagogy noted in Chapter 3: the desire for social change and commitment to social justice. It is important to add that empathy is a key factor here too; in the view of critical pedagogy I have opted for here, which privileges distance over involvement or desire, one has to understand the principle of social justice, as *apart from* one’s own involvement. One of the students on the course, Yuko, sums up my point