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Narratives and critical literacy

6.1 From the communicative/text-based approach towards critical language education

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that in the textbooks under review the communicative/text-based approach is followed superficially rather than systematically with regard to narrative and humor. The phenomena in question are presented through relevant texts or genres, but complementary activities aimed at creating a communicative setting suitable for the production of texts with the students’ active involvement and creative participation are very limited. Moreover, the selection of texts is problematic, since the discourse produced in students’ everyday interactions, and in particular spontaneous discourse, is not exploited at all. Instead, a variety of narrative genres with literary or sometimes historical orientation are explored. Thus, the social characteristics of the student population are not taken into account, while concurrently the proposed analytical tools come mainly from literary theory rather than from discourse analysis and sociolinguistics.

In what follows, we intend to enrich the communicative/text-based approach with views coming from critical discourse analysis. As we have seen in previous Sections, the communicative approach is based mainly on learning through the participatory involvement of students in real or simulated communicative activities. However, the application of this approach has very often been limited to creating ideal, predetermined, and standardized communicative circumstances in class, while it usually avoids collecting ethnographic information on students’ social environment, their difficulties, needs, goals, and objectives (see among others, Kostouli, 2001; Moschonas, 2003a; Leung, 2008). In short, the
communicative/text-based approach has not proven to be sufficiently sensitive in sociocultural terms.

Most importantly, the communicative/text-based approach does not take into account and does not make reference to the critical approach to the presuppositions of communication as this evolves in a specific context. Rather, it takes the correlations between registers, genres, and communicative circumstances as given, to the effect that it does not raise questions such as the following (see among others, Coe, 1994: 161; Freedman and Medway, 1994: 10; Fairclough, 1995: 233ff):

- Why is a specific linguistic variety, register, or text structure suitable for a genre – and not some other?
- Who decided on it?
- Who benefits from it?
- Does this variety, register, or genre empower some people and silence others?
- Why does communication in a specific context evolve (or should evolve) in a specific way and not in another?
- What kinds of communication does a variety, register, or genre encourage? What does it constrain against?
- Why are certain varieties, registers, or genres valorized?
- What kinds of social organization and institutions are put or kept in place by such valorizations?
- Which representations of the world are favored (or even imposed) by such valorizations?
- When and with what consequences could someone decide to deviate from what is expected in a certain communicative setting?

Given the above, our goal is to seek teaching objectives which are not restricted to the functional use of language but also cultivate students’ critical stance towards narrative texts by taking into account the context of their production and interpretation. Specifically, we shall refer to propositions originating in critical language awareness and sociocultural models of literacy, in order to come up with a proposal for critical language teaching within the framework of multiliteracies. With the question of what critical language teaching is, and how it can be put into practice at the heart of our discussion, we argue that the representation in class – and not the elimination – of different cultural traditions and ideological convictions could cultivate and enhance students’ ability to project and detect values, positioning, and identities, as these occur in all (narrative) genres.