

2. DEVELOPING A CRITICAL APPROACH TO READING IN ACADEMIC CONTEXTS

Saturday 26th February 1994

The Institute for English Language Education, University of Lancaster

Organiser: Romy Clark

The conference theme of helping international students to develop a critical approach to their academic reading is seen as a central one for those working in the field of English for Academic Purposes and is one focus of the research and development taking place in IELE. The speakers were all from the University of Lancaster.

In arranging the programme for this one day conference, the aim of the organiser was to achieve a balance between examining issues in terms of classroom approaches and materials development on the one hand, and drawing on the insights of subject specialists in relation to staff expectations and the problems students encounter on the other. The content was arranged to reflect these two aspects.

The hope was that the programme was not seen as unidirectional; rather the presenters hoped that, by addressing salient issues on this theme, they were initiating debate so that a mutually beneficial exchange of ideas and opinions ensued.

Programme:

1. [A workshop on Developing a Critical Approach to Reading: Romy Clark and Roz Ivanic of IELE.](#)
2. A 'work in progress report' based around a poster display on Materials Development: Anne Marshall-Lee of IELE.
3. [Critical Reading: Tutor Expectations and Student Difficulties: Rachel Rimmershaw of the Department of Educational Research.](#)
4. [Reading Literary Criticism: Lynne Pearce of the English Department.](#)

Romy Clark and Roz Ivanic (University of Lancaster): a workshop on *Developing a Critical Approach to Reading*

The aims of the workshop were to:

1. present the theoretical approach to critical reading that RJC and RI follow
2. apply this approach to a range of texts
3. suggest a set of pedagogic procedures for the tertiary classroom

The workshop began with a discussion of a text on the "Gulf War", published in the Guardian on 23.1.91.

Mad dogs and Englishmen	
We have... Army, Navy and Air Force Reporting guidelines Press briefings	They have... A war machine Censorship Propaganda
We... Take out	They... Destroy

<p>Suppress Eliminate Neutralise or decapitate Decapitate Dig in</p>	<p>Destroy Kill Kill Kill Cower in their foxholes</p>
<p>We launch... First strikes Pre-emptively</p>	<p>They launch... Sneak missile attacks Without provocation</p>
<p>Our men are... Boys Lads</p>	<p>Their men are... Troops Hordes</p>
<p>Our boys are... Professional Lion-hearts Cautions Confident Heroes Dare-devils Young knights of the skies Loyal Desert rats Resolute Brave</p>	<p>Theirs are... Brainwashed Paper tigers Cowardly Desperate Cornered Cannon fodder Bastards of Baghdad Blindly obedient Mad dogs Ruthless Fanatical</p>
<p>Our boys are motivated by... An old fashioned sense of duty</p>	<p>Their boys are motivated by... Fear of Saddam</p>
<p>Our boys... Fly into the jaws of hell</p>	<p>Their boys... Cower in concrete bunkers</p>
<p>Our ships are... An armada</p>	<p>Iraq ships are... A navy</p>
<p>Israeli non-retaliation is... An act of great statesmanship</p>	<p>Iraqi non-retaliation is... Blundering/Cowardly</p>
<p>The Belgians are... Yellow</p>	<p>The Belgians are also... Two faced</p>
<p>Our missiles are... Like Luke Skywalker zapping Darth Vader</p>	<p>Their missiles are... Ageing duds (rhymes with Scuds)</p>
<p>Our missiles cause... Collateral damage</p>	<p>Their missiles cause... Civilian casualties</p>
<p>We... Precision bomb</p>	<p>They... Fire wildly at anything in the skies</p>
<p>Our POWs are... Gallant boys</p>	<p>Their POWs are.. Overgrown schoolchildren</p>
<p>George Bush is... At peace with himself Resolute Statesmanlike Assured</p>	<p>Saddam Hussein is... Demented Defiant An evil tyrant A crackpot monster</p>
<p>Our planes... Suffer a high rate of attrition Fail to return from missions</p>	<p>Their planes... Are shot out of the sky Are Zapped</p>

All the expressions above have been used by the British press in the past week

The Guardian 23.1.91

Participants were asked to focus on three issues: what the text tells us:

- a. about language
- b. about reading
- c. about reader-text-writer relations

After a discussion of the text, RJC made explicit the theoretical categories which she thinks are fruitful in developing a critical approach to reading ([see below](#)). The workshop continued with RI demonstrating her critical reading of two linguistic texts. She then described how she and RJC ran a one-off, two-hour workshop for mixed discipline students at the University of Lancaster.

The workshop ended with a discussion of the pedagogic implications.

CRITICAL APPROACHES: KEY CONCEPTS

- READING AND WRITING ARE SOCIAL PRACTICES
- LEXICAL CHOICE + STRUGGLE OVER MEANING
- INTERTEXTUALITY
- IDEOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS
- READER/WRITER POSITION
- MODALITY
- TRANSITIVITY
- TRANSFORMATIONS: PASSIVIZATION/NOMINALIZATION

Rachel Rimmershaw (University of Lancaster): a workshop on *Critical Reading: Departmental Expectations and Students' Conceptions*

The workshop began with an introduction looking at the models of critical reading reflected in the critical writing of professional academics. Three problems were identified in relation to the use of such models with students:

- not all the academic writing students encounter is openly argumentative - but they need to see how they are manipulated/excluded/positioned by these discourses too;
- models from published academic writing are product rather than process models - students need a repertoire of tools and guided practice in using them;
- students may not understand the social conditions under which such academic writing is produced.

This led to a focus on different conceptions of academic scholarship, different conceptions of reading and of what it is to be 'critical'. These different conceptions can be a source of miscommunication between tutors and students. So the practical part of the workshop involved looking at three kinds of data which could give participants an insight into both tutors' and students' expectations about reading for study. These were:

- three examples of tutors' written guidance on reading for study, offered to undergraduate students on individual courses in history, psychology and accounting
- classified examples of critical commentary on course reading from the informal writing of a group of undergraduate students in a computer-based course conference
- extracts from a transcript of a discussion about critical reading involving undergraduate students, postgraduate students and academic support tutors

These data included an example of guidance which did make explicit the social conditions of production of academic writing in ways which were intended to help students be more critical readers, and a provisional classification of students' commentaries on reading which could be a basis for tutors explicitly unpacking with students the alternative conceptions referred to earlier.

Lynne Pearce (University of Lancaster): a presentation on *Critical Reading: Expectations of Teaching Staff*

The purpose of this research was to investigate the ways in which teaching staff regard the role of 'critical reading' in subject teaching. In this instance, the subject in question was English Literature and the research was based on a questionnaire of the permanent staff/teaching fellows who comprise the Department of English at Lancaster University. Although the questionnaire was drawn up with the aim of soliciting opinions about the role of reading in general, I was especially interested to see how staff regarded so-called 'secondary reading' (i.e. literary theory and criticism) and whether they thought the Department should provide 'skills training' to help students to learn to read with greater critical awareness. In addition to statistical data obtained from the questionnaire, respondents were invited to offer 'comments'. The resulting interpretation was, therefore, both quantitative and qualitative.

It was clear from statistical analysis of the results that the overwhelming majority of staff expect students to read all their primary texts. (I was surprised that no-one contested this assumption: for Part II students might it not be better for them to be selective in their course reading and research some authors/topics more closely?) However, it was also apparent that staff are obviously unclear and divided about the role of secondary reading in the study of English Literature. Obviously there is no agreed Departmental policy regarding the role of secondary reading at different stages of the degree course. This means that students are liable to widely different subjective responses and, at present, students on both Part I and Part II might be rewarded or penalized for using secondary reading.

It was interesting to see how few staff regarded secondary reading as 'integral' to the learning process, when many humanities/social science subjects would regard the negotiation of secondary materials as central to training within academic discourse. We might understand this as a particular feature of 'English' as a discipline; behind the statistics, and in many of the comments, there is a residual liberal-humanist critical rationale which believes in 'originality of thought' etc.

Despite the evident theoretical/ideological divisions, it was nevertheless encouraging to see that the Department recognises a responsibility to provide students with strategies for reading. However, it was clear from the comments that respondents made that, while some staff regard such support as integral to critical practice, others see it as some form of elementary or remedial work which is not their responsibility.

In conclusion, it was recommended that disciplines I departments should hold an open forum on the role of 'reading' in their pedagogical practices, and agree on certain recommendations and guidelines which can then be communicated to both staff and students. Departments would need to advise their staff of new work in this particular area of academic practice and indicate its central importance and students should be provided with training in critical reading (especially the critical reading of secondary texts) commensurate with the Department's expectations. Finally, it was suggested that discussions should take place across departments/faculties on the role of critical reading in academic studies.