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Use of discourse analysis to enhance students' critical thinking skills

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<p>Este artículo presenta nuestra propuesta de cómo usar el análisis-crítico del discurso para mejorar las habilidades de pensamiento crítico de los estudiantes. Inicialmente esbozamos algunos conceptos relacionados con pensamiento crítico y análisis del discurso y luego proponemos una actividad de lectura donde los estudiantes analizan dos textos que tratan el tema del derramamiento de petróleo, y que está dividida en tres secciones. En la sección inicial sugerimos una actividad de pre-lectura en la cual los estudiantes responden unas preguntas para activar su conocimiento previo. Seguidamente presentamos una actividad de lectura; en ella los estudiantes completan una tabla usando un sistema para el análisis del discurso conocida como “appraisal” (evaluación o valoración) el cual está dividido a su vez en afecto, juicio, y</p>	RESUMEN	
<p>apreciación, los cuales pueden ser positivos o negativos; estos muestran como el autor se siente respecto a las personas o cosas. Finalmente sugerimos una actividad de post-lectura en la cual los estudiantes sacan sus conclusiones basados en el análisis del sistema de valoración (“appraisal”). El objetivo de las actividades propuestas es hacer que los estudiantes tomen conciencia de la forma como los autores usan el lenguaje para manipular los medios con el fin de expresar su punto de vista.</p> <p>PALABRAS CLAVE: Pensamiento crítico, análisis del discurso crítico, afecto, aprendizaje, juicio, apreciación, empoderamiento</p> <p>FECHA DE RECEPCIÓN: 31 DE MARZO DE 2009 FECHA DE ACEPTACIÓN: 13 DE ABRIL DE 2009</p>	ABSTRACT	<p>This paper presents our proposal on how to use critical discourse analysis to improve students' critical thinking skills. Initially we briefly outline some concepts of critical thinking and critical discourse analysis, and then we propose a reading activity in which students analyze two different and contrasting texts that deal with oil spill issues. The activity is divided into three sections. In the initial section we suggest a pre-reading activity, in which students answer some questions to activate background knowledge. Secondly, we present a reading activity; in this reading activity students complete a table using a system for analyzing discourse, which is known as “appraisal”. In turn “appraisal” is divided into affect, judgment, and appreciation, and each one can be either positive or negative; they show how the author feels about people and things. Finally, we suggest a post-reading activity in which students draw some conclusions based on their “appraisal” analysis. The objective of the activities proposed here are to make students aware of the way authors use language to manipulate media in order to express their point of view.</p> <p>KEY WORDS: Critical thinking, critical discourse analysis, appraisal, affect, judgment, appreciation, empower and dis-empower.</p>

New trends in education nowadays are focusing on developing critical thinking skills. Fisher (2001, p.1) asserts that “in recent years critical thinking has become something of a buzz word in educational circles. For many reasons, educators have become very interested in teaching thinking skills of various kinds in contrast with teaching information and content.” However, a common complaint among educators, and people involved in the educational field is that students show a lack of critical thinking skills. We believe that, although textbooks and teachers demand that students perform tasks involving critical thinking skills, they are not really equipped with strategies that would enable them to become more critical thinkers.

The main purpose of this paper is to propose the use of critical discourse analysis to enhance students’ critical thinking skills. Initially we will be briefly defining the concept of critical thinking according to different authors, and identifying its elements; secondly, we will highlight some elements of Critical Discourse Analysis, which in our opinion could help students realize how language is used to convey ideologies and achieve certain purposes. Our hope is that with these elements, students become more aware of authors’ hidden intentions and do not accept as a general truth everything they read in the newspaper or watch on the media. After reviewing some key concepts related to critical thinking

and critical discourse analysis, we propose an activity in which students analyze two texts with contrasting points of view about the effects of oil spill to the environment. The purpose of this activity is to help students notice how the authors use language to convey their ideologies and convince readers about their point of view.

Let us start by considering this initial definition of critical thinking: “Critical thinking is the art of thinking about thinking while thinking in order to make thinking better. It involves three interwoven phases: It analyzes thinking; it evaluates thinking; it improves thinking”, (Paul & Elder, 2006, p. xiii). This definition initially suggests that critical thinking is a complex process that requires the person’s introspection and willingness to reflect about the process of thinking and take this process to the highest level. Secondly, this definition proposes that the improvement of critical thinking skills is at least a three-folded one. First of all, one must question oneself about one’s thinking; secondly, we need to examine and assess how critical we are, or up to what extent we have reached higher order thinking skill; finally we need to make decisions and take steps to reach higher levels of criticism.

The Critical Thinking Community defines critical thinking, from now on CT, as “the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/ or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation,

experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action.” (Paul & Scriven in The Critical Thinking Community, 2007). The previous concept summarizes the elements that comprise CT. Critical Thinking has as starting point our own experiences of the world and how we perceive it.

Let us examine now the following definition of CT, by John Dewey, who is considered the father of modern critical thinking tradition:

Active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which it tends. (Dewey, 1909: 9, in Fisher, 2001: 2).

In recent years there has been a shift in the way education is conceived. In contrast to traditional education, in which students were expected to store a great amount of meaningless information and facts, educators nowadays have been trying to enhance students' critical thinking skills. Memorizing facts is not regarded as important as unpacking them and find the hidden intentions embedded into texts. The definition above suggests what we usually expect our students to do when facing different types of texts. Educators expect their students not to take all ideas presented for granted; instead they are expected to develop higher order thinking skills which would enable them to carefully consider the

supposed form of knowledge they are presented with and evaluate it accordingly. Later in this article, we present one of the many plausible ways for students to develop these higher order critical thinking skills.

Educators should have a clear picture of what those critical thinking skills are. Edward Glaser elaborated a more or less comprehensive list of abilities which comprise CT. We reproduce this list below:

(a) To recognize problems, (b) to find workable means for meeting those problems, (c) to gather and marshal pertinent information, (d) to recognize unstated assumptions and values, (e) to comprehend and use language with accuracy, clarity and discrimination, (f) to interpret data, (g) to appraise evidence and evaluate statements, (h) to recognize the existence of logical relationships between propositions, (i) to draw warranted conclusions and generalizations, (j) to put to test the generalizations and conclusions at which one arrives, (k) to reconstruct one's patterns of belief on the basis of wider experience; and (l) to render accurate judgments about specific things and qualities in everyday life. (Glaser, 1941: 6, in Fisher 2001: 7).

In the light of this critical thinking trend in education, it is essential for educators to show and teach students resources, models, strategies and techniques that would enable them to acquire and further develop the critical thinking skills stated above. We believe

that critical discourse analysis would provide students with some of these useful models, resources, and strategies to help them become more critical, appraise statements, and discover how language is used to disempower or to empower.

Critical discourse analysis is concerned with what we do with language and how we do it. Halliday's Functional Grammar carries out this kind of analysis. Thompson (1996: 8) explains that:

Functional Grammar sets out to investigate what the range of relevant choices are, both in the kinds of meanings that we might want to express (or functions that we might want to perform) and in the kinds of wordings that we can use to express these meanings; and to match these two sets of choices.

Thompson adds later that "what we aim to uncover through a functional analysis are the reasons why the speaker produces a particular wording rather than any other in a particular context." The way the speaker/writer words a piece of discourse and the register that he or she chooses clearly has an intention. When we speak or write we evaluate events, people and things and we also express our attitude towards them. The main purpose of critical discourse analysis is to unveil how the author of a text uses

language to convey certain ideology and persuade his or her audience. In this respect Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000: 10) assert that:

The primary interest of critical discourse analysis is to deconstruct and expose social inequality as expressed, constituted, and legitimized through language use – notably in the public media such as newspapers, radio, television, films, cartoons, and the like, but also in settings such as classrooms, courtrooms, news interviews, doctor-patient interactions, as well as in everyday talk. Critical discourse analysts believe that discourse tends to become normative with repeated use and thus appears to be neutral: however, in actual fact, discourse is never neutral. It must thus be analyzed in terms of the political ideology, social history, and power structures that it embodies and expresses, explicitly or indirectly.

In order to be able to deconstruct discourse and reveal the most hidden intentions embedded into it, it is necessary to know the systems used to negotiate meaning. In the reading activity that we will propose here, students will be exploring ways to unveil the appraisal embedded into two texts assigned. Maloof (2007: 6) summarizes the concept of appraisal as a system comprised of grammatical resources and evaluative lexis that we use to express how we feel towards people and things.

In what follows we will describe a reading activity that has been designed

to help students foster their critical thinking skills through critical discourse analysis. This activity is intended for Level Four students of English in the International Business School of Universidad del Norte in Barranquilla, Colombia. Level four was designed in order to enhance critical thinking skills in students; in fact the name of the subject is "Critical Thinking". The students for whom this activity has been designed are expected to have an intermediate or upper intermediate level in English.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITY

Pre-reading activity

Before giving students the texts, they are asked to work with a partner and answer the following questions:

1. Does oil spill cause permanent damage to the environment? If so, which are those consequences?
2. What could be done to solve this problem?

The objective of this step is to initially activate their background knowledge and secondly to gather students' opinions and ideas regarding this matter. After students finish discussing these questions, the teacher elicits their opinion, and as s/he does so, s/he organizes the ideas on the board. This step of the activity also contributes to develop two of CT abilities identified by Glaser (op. cit.): To recognize problems, and to find workable means for meeting those problems.

Reading activity

The class is divided into two groups. One group is assigned the text entitled "The truth about oil damage", and the other group is assigned "Oil spill: Consequences for wild life". After students have read the assigned text, they are asked to report the author's point of view about oil damage.

The next step in this task aims at having students examine how language systems are used to convey ideology. As we said before appraisal is one of the systems used to express how the author feels about people or things. In turn appraisal is divided into affect, judgment and appreciation.

Martin and Rose (2003: 24-25) refer to **affect** as the "resources for expressing feelings." Martin (2000), in Hunston and Thompson (2000: 148), defines affect as "a semantic resource for construing emotions." These authors seem to agree that these feelings and emotions can be positive or negative, and they can be expressed either directly or indirectly.

According to Martin and Rose (2003: 24), **judgment** is "a resource for judging character." Judgment has mostly a moral connotation and it refers to what we think about people's behavior, performance and attitude. Martin and Rose (2003: 28) classify judgment in personal judgments of admiration or criticism and moral judgments of praise or condemnation.

Martin and Rose (2003: 24) define **appreciation** as "the resources for

valuing the worth of things.” In other words, appreciation refers to how we feel about things, that is to say, our attitude and reaction towards tangible and non-tangible things such as art and abstract concepts. Appreciation also involves our attitude towards natural phenomena. Like affect and judgment, our appreciation about things can be positive or negative.

Students have to read the texts again, identify how the writers use language to express affect, judgment and appreciation, and finally they complete the table below.

Table 1

	Positive	Negative
Affect		
Judgment		
Appreciation		

Post-reading activity

Once the students have identified the authors' points of view, and how language is used to convey their ideology, students are asked to draw some conclusions about oil spill damage to the environment and express their own point of view.

CONCLUSION

Texts from different sources and media empower some and disempower others. This might not be exceptionally clear for the readers, listeners or viewers unless they have developed certain level of critical thinking. This empowerment and disempowerment are achieved by using language in certain way. Students can develop the critical thinking skills they need to unveil the hidden intentions of a text through numerous ways.

Our belief is that by teaching students some techniques to conduct this kind of analysis they could become more critical of what they read, listen and watch. In this paper, we suggest that Critical Discourse Analysis could provide students with some useful tools, which would help them identify when texts have their bias. An example that we propose in this paper is the analysis of appraisal in texts, which in our opinion is an excellent tool when we want to reveal the intention hidden behind language. It enables us to detect when the use of certain language resources is attempting to manipulate our thoughts, empower some and disempower others.

To sum up, we expect students to become better and critical citizens by helping them achieve a clearer understanding of how people use language to achieve certain purposes and the effects that the way language is used might cause.⁽²⁾

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Appendices
The truth about oil damage



Gordon Boyer
March 31, 2003

In 1964 Ronald Reagan said, "The problem with liberals is not that they are ignorant, the problem is that they know so much that is not so."

Liberals know so much that is not so about oil drilling, it could fill a large book. The liberals spread these myths to stop oil drilling in Alaska. The *San Francisco Chronicle* is one of the biggest spreaders of oil mythology. It is time to tell the truth about oil.

One of the liberal myths about oil is that oil spills damage the environment. We can look at history and discover that no oil spill has caused long-term damage to the ecology or the environment. Santa Barbara, California, had one of the largest oil spills in history. Today you can visit the city and its beaches, and you would never know a spill took place. The Exxon Valdez sunk off the coast of Alaska, no sign of damage today. The real proof is that during World War II, thousands of ships were sunk off coasts all over the world, no sign of damage today. Over twenty ships were sunk in Pearl Harbor, no signs of damage today.

The evidence is overwhelming. Oil has been flowing out of the center of the earth under the sea for thousands of years. It has been shown on underwater cameras on the Discovery Channel. The oil dissipates. Do I have to repeat the obvious? There is no long-term damage from oil spills.

Today, the oil companies have technology that reduces the chances of oil spills, and it also has much better clean up procedures. No one should fear oil spills. If the media told the truth, they would help educate America about the lack of danger. Instead, they lie and distort.

Another myth is that oil spills will kill animal species. This is an easy one to dispel. Ask an environmentalist to name a single species that no longer exists because of an oil spill. They can't name any. Do animals die when an oil spill occurs? Yes. Is it more important for America to gain more oil independence or to save a few animals? The answer is obvious. The truth is that animal species are thriving around oil drilling in Alaska. The liberal Leslie Stahl proved this on 60 Minutes last year. Would she lie? Don't answer that. This time she was not lying.

The truth is, oil spills cause no long-term damage. Spills do not kill off animal species. The chance of oil spills is greatly reduced by new technology. There is no reason not to drill for oil anywhere. Now you know the truth. Go out and educate America.

Gordon Bloyer has a television show on Channel 4 in Portage, Indiana, on Monday at 6:30 p.m. The show can also be seen on Channel 44 in Portage, on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday at 6:30 p.m., and on Saturday at 10 a.m. His letters and articles have been printed in many publications, including the San Francisco Chronicle, San Francisco Examiner, Washington Times, USA Today, Monterey Herald, San Mateo Times, San Jose Mercury, Gary Post-Tribune, Hammond Times and the San Francisco Progress.

In 1986, as the San Francisco co-chairman of the grassroots lobby Citizens For America, Gordon spoke out for the Reagan administration on all the San Francisco radio and television stations, and as a result Ronald Reagan invited him to the White House to thank him.

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<http://www.renewamerica.us/columns/bloyer/030331>

Taken from: <http://www.renewamerica.us/columns/bloyer/030331>

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Oil spill: Consequences for wildlife



Gannets taking off

The coastal waters of north-west Spain support rich marine and bird life - virtually all of which is threatened by the Prestige oil spill.

Experts are warning that if oil reaches some parts, it could be many years before certain species and habitats recover.

The original damage to the Prestige happened almost directly over an area called the Galician Bank, 100 kilometres off the Spanish coast.

At this point, a sub-sea mountain rises from the seabed. In the upwellings of water which surround it, life thrives.

The area is acknowledged as one of the most ecologically important along the Spanish coast. Stephan Lutter, the head of the World Wildlife Fund's North East Atlantic Programme, told BBC News Online: "It's an area very rich in fish, and as such, a source of food for seabirds."



Oiled bird are the first impact

Robin Law, a marine scientist from the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (Cefas), told BBC News Online that while it was unlikely that fish stocks would be seriously damaged by fuel oil near the surface, seabirds would be exposed to it when they tried to feed. So far, examples of 18 species of seabird have been found oiled by volunteers.



Balearic Shearwater: Numbers falling

These include gulls and gannets, many of them migratory species common in the UK. However, scientists are concerned about the threat to the Balearic shearwater (*Puffinus mauretanicus*), which is already facing extinction.

This species is now listed as critically endangered following a recent revision of its status to be published in the Spanish Red List of Threatened Bird Species.

In 1991, the population was estimated to be approximately 3,300 breeding pairs, but by 2000 this had been reportedly reduced to between 1,750 and 2,125 pairs.

At the coast

When the oil reaches coastal waters, it wreaks far more damage on fragile ecosystems, some of them vital to local human economies.

While much of the coastline of this part of Spain is rocky, there are sheltered inlets, or seas, mudflats and saltmarshes which are particularly vulnerable.

Robin Law says: "With fuel oil, when it reaches shallow waters, quite a bit will pick up sand and sink.

"Every time there is a storm, fuel oil is released out of the sand again."

Particularly under threat are filter-feeders - shellfish such as mussels - which live in this mud or sand.

They may simply be smothered by the oil as it settles, or suffocated by the oil as they try to pass tainted water through their delicate gills and feeding apparatus.

It is possible for shellfish to be tainted by the toxicity of the oil over periods of years.

This has severe implications for not only the shellfish populations themselves, but the creatures, including birds and humans, which feed on them.

A good example of this happening is a relatively small spill of fuel oil in Buzzard's Bay, US, in 1969.

This caused tainting of shellfish which was persistent many years after the incident.

While the rocky shore may be cleaned relatively quickly by storms and normal wave action, the tranquillity of the seas could delay this yet further.

Even saltmarsh plants, if severely oiled, can take up to a decade to recover fully.

According to Robin Law, efforts to clean up sensitive areas such as this can be as damaging as the oil itself.

Experts say the balance of nature on north-west Spain's rocky shores could be damaged by the spill.

Nature's repair work

Dr Paul Gilliland, a marine policy adviser with English Nature, says subtle changes could take years to correct themselves.

He said: "A common reaction is that limpets will die off.

"This may allow the growth of certain seaweeds that weaken groups of mussels.

"These could simply be washed away in the next big storm. It can take years for even rocky coasts to recover."

He said that, painful as it might be, in some cases it could be better simply not to intervene, and let nature do the repair work.

"It's human nature to want to do something, but sometimes it's better to leave it."

Taken from: BBC NEWS

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/2491965.stm>

Accessed date: December 10, 2007

Table 1
Analysis of appraisal

	Positive	Negative
Affect		
Judgment		
Appreciation		