

Critical Language Awareness for English Today

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1. Background

Every country, under-developed, developing or developed, seeks to 'produce' a crop of learners and citizens who will make the country work. This is done, among others, through the country's education system. The standards and principles set in the curriculum should help rear citizens who can help develop the country, to those who should enhance the country's status in the world.

The National Curriculum Statement Grades R – 12 (NCS R – 12) seeks to develop learners who should move our country from the developing stage to the developed stage. This curriculum aims to ensure that children acquire and apply knowledge and skills in ways that are meaningful to their own lives.

The curriculum aims to develop learners such that they are able to:

- identify and solve problems and make decisions using critical and creative thinking;
- work effectively as individuals and with others as members of a team;
- organise and manage themselves and their activities responsibly and effectively;
- collect, analyse, organise and critically evaluate information;
- communicate effectively using visual, symbolic and/or language skills in various modes;
- use science and technology effectively and critically showing responsibility towards the environment and the health of others; and
- demonstrate an understanding of the world as a set of related systems by recognising that problem solving contexts do not exist in isolation.

In supporting the aims listed above, the NCS R – 12 outlines the following purposes:

- equipping learners, irrespective of their socio-economic background, race, gender, physical ability or intellectual ability, with the knowledge, skills and values necessary for self-fulfilment, and meaningful participation in society as citizens of a free country;
- providing access to higher education;
- facilitating the transition of learners from education institutions to the workplace; and
- providing employers with a sufficient profile of a learner's competences.

Furthermore, the NCS Grades R - 12 is based on the following principles:

- Social transformation: ensuring that the educational imbalances of the past are redressed, and that equal educational opportunities are provided for all sections of the population;
- Active and critical learning: encouraging an active and critical approach to learning, rather than rote and uncritical learning of given truths;
- High knowledge and high skills: the minimum standards of knowledge and skills to be achieved at each grade are specified and set high, achievable standards in all subjects;

- Progression: content and context of each grade shows progression from simple to complex;
- Human rights, inclusivity, environmental and social justice: infusing the principles and practices of social and environmental justice and human rights as defined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa.

The National Curriculum Statement Grades R - 12 is sensitive to issues of diversity such as poverty, inequality, race, gender, language, age, disability and other factors;

- Valuing indigenous knowledge systems: acknowledging the rich history and heritage of this country as important contributors to nurturing the values contained in the Constitution; and
- Credibility, quality and efficiency: providing an education that is comparable in quality, breadth and depth to those of other countries. (*CAPS – English FAL and HL*)

In this manner, the curriculum envisages promotion of high quality learning, from which learners should see beyond the given, read between the lines, and duck the wool thrown at their faces. Learners should be able to identify and appropriately respond to all manner of manipulation, domination and abuse of themselves and their country. Learners must be critical thinkers, readers and writers who are able to see through the intentions of the author or the speaker.

It is for this purpose that focus in language teaching, must also be given towards critical language awareness. Learners must be able to read the language, analyse choice of diction, identify the different communicative ploys employed to woo them into a particular position or stance. Learners must be able to read texts as catalysts, prodding them into applying their minds on the given topic, rather than consuming every text as the truth.

2. Critical Language Awareness

2.1 What is CLA?

According to Chileno, CLA refers to consideration of language as critical practice, involving self-consciousness, and as socially enacted, engaged with others...' Clark and Ivanic also state that language cannot be separated from the social contexts which shape it. According to Clark and Ivanic, '...language forms cannot be considered independently of how they are used to communicate in context. Further, individual acts of communication in context cannot be considered independently of the social forces which have set up the convention of appropriacy for that context.'

They further present that what is needed for CLA to take root is a change in the beliefs and attitudes to language learning from a decontextualized, explicit grammar-oriented approach to an inclusion of the political and social dimension in which the language is used.

2.2 Why focus on CLA?

CLA is the means through which language use widens the learning and teaching horizon. CLA advocates the fact language teaching and learning go beyond '... sheer knowledge of text on the basis of grammar.' In addition, as stated by Donmall (1985), language teaching as learning is seen as involving "a person's sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life". Language teaching and learning dealt with as '...an interdisciplinary approach to the study of communication that views language as a form of communal practice and focal point is to study the ways social and political domination are reproduced by written and verbal style.'

Fairclough (1992), in defining Language Awareness, refers to a 'conscious attention to properties of language and language use as an element of language education.'

In relation to NCS R – 12 pronouncements, CLA:

- enhances critical thinking and learning
- emancipates learning
- enhances creativity and modelling 'good' practices
- develops higher order cognitive levels, e.g. critical analysis of a text
- guides translation of skills learnt from texts to enhance creativity; and
- ensures holistic development of all language skills

2.3 CLA Genres

Various text genres are used daily which should develop teaching and learning holistically. From reading to listening, speaking to writing, text development, acquisition and decoding depend entirely on use of language. Due to different contexts, backgrounds, exposure, experiences, etc. a text is open to different interpretations. Consumers of the text refer to choice of words, ploys like font and gestures, etc. to come to an 'understanding' of the text. A photo, a road sign, a signal, cartoon strip, advertisement, etc. 'speak' a thousand words, at times without using any words. Through different insinuations, manipulation, different meanings, a text may divide the audience (argument/debate), influence the position of the audience (manipulation – speeches), convince the audience through factual presentations, use specific diction for specific impact, etc.

The result of interacting with the text to the levels cited should develop rounded learners who are able to state and support their position.

Through enhancing acquisition of CLA, learners should end up critical thinkers by the end of their learning tenure. According to CAPS stipulations, CLA should address the following:

- facts and opinions
- direct and implied meaning
- denotation and connotation
- socio-political and cultural background of texts and author
- the effect of selections and omissions on meaning
- relationships between language and power (*staff only/exit/entrance*)
- emotive and manipulative language: bias, prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, language varieties, inferences, assumptions, arguments, purpose of including or excluding information
- Interpretation of visual literacy

The question is how?

A brief look at the advertisement and visual literacy should answer the above question.

2.3.1 Advertisement

'The word advertisement derives from the Latin 'adverte', which means to 'turn towards'. The way in which advertisements encourage consumers to 'turn towards' them is through the use of persuasive language...' (*Marked by the Teacher*)

In an attempt to woo the target audience, the advertiser plays on the emotions, 'weaknesses' and interests of the target audience.

The purpose of a classroom study of advertising is to raise the level of awareness about the persuasive techniques used in advertisements. One way to do this is to analyse advertisements in microscopic detail. Advertisements can be studied to detect their psychological hooks, they can be used to gauge values and hidden desires of the common person, they can be studied for their use of symbols, colour, and imagery. Also, the simplest and most direct way to study advertisements is through an analysis of the language of the advertising claim. The "claim" is the verbal or print part of an advertisement that makes some claim of superiority for the product being advertised.

After studying claims, students should be able to recognize those that are misleading and accept as useful information those that are true. A few of these claims are downright lies, some are honest statements about a truly superior product, but most fit into the category of neither bold lies nor helpful consumer information. They balance on the narrow line between truth and falsehood by a careful choice of words.

(The Language of Advertising Claims by Jeffrey Schrank)

Font size and punctuation also play an important role in most advertisement. For an example, in the advertisement on the insurance for women only, 'man' is written in a bigger font.

2.3.2 Visual Literacy

Wileman (1993) defines visual literacy as "the ability to 'read,' interpret, and understand information presented in pictorial or graphic images" (p. 114). Associated with visual literacy is visual thinking, described as "the ability to turn information of all types into pictures, graphics, or forms that help communicate the information" (Wileman, p. 114). A similar definition for visual literacy is "the learned ability to interpret visual messages accurately and to create such messages" (Heinich, Molenda, Russell, & Smaldino, 1999, p. 64). The ERIC definition of visual literacy is "a group of competencies that allows humans to discriminate and interpret the visible action, objects, and/or symbols, natural or constructed, that they encounter in the environment" (<http://searcheric.org/>). Donna Knoell also states that Visual literacy encompasses the ability to observe, interpret, and comprehend the meaning that is communicated by visual images.

Texts like cartoons, photos, signs, etc. make up visual texts. Furthermore, gestures, facial expressions, 'movement expressions' and body language also add to the list of visual texts.

According to Donna Knoell, it is important to teach students to observe and learn from the many visual images that surround them. Teachers need to help students identify and recognize the image, its purpose and its meaning.

(Donna Knoell, Ph.D. The Role of Visual Literacy to Enhance Social Studies)

What is it that learners must be taught?

- Language is used to express a text. For example, signs exert authority, power.
- Author's intention – sarcasm, humour?
- Reading and interpreting 'language' broadly
- Linking the information flowing between frames
- Critique the text.
- Link printed text to images or non-verbal text.

Practical exercise



Frame 1

Frame 2

Frame 3

Read Frame 1 and answer the following questions:

1. Explain the irony in the postman's use of 'Ho! Ho! Ho!'
2. Do you think Bumstead is happy to meet the postman? Give a reason to support your answer.
3. What tone of voice would Bumstead use in his response?

Refer to Frame 2

4. Give any two indicators which suggest that the postman is in control of the situation.
5. How do you know that Bumstead did not expect to be challenged?

Refer to Frame 3

6. Would you agree with the suggestion that the postman is a pessimist? Give a reason for your answer.
7. How does the cartoonist convey the message that Bumstead is extremely upset with the postman? Mention any Two things.
8. How do you know that the postman is happy with what he has done?
9. Explain the line 'I also enjoy setting the tone for the new year' in your own words.
10. Were you the cartoonist, how would you have concluded the conversation between the two characters?

2.3.3. Practical application of integration in the CLA classroom

Activity 1: Analysis of a written text, e.g. political speech by the teacher

- Identify and comment on use of the features of the genre, e.g. emotive language, persuasive language
- Comment on use of punctuation to enhance the intended effect
- Read the text aloud to demonstrate the effect
- Use of tone, mood and pace
- Choice of words

Activity 2: Preparation and presentation of persuasive speech by learners

- Employ the ploys learnt from the political speech

Activity 3: Prepare and participate in a debate

- Employ persuasive ploys learnt

Activity 4: Write an argumentative essay

- Employ the ploys learnt from the speech
- Use of persuasive and emotive language

Activity 5: Write a newspaper article analysing the political speech.

- Persuasive ploys used in the text, e.g. we, our
- Choice of diction

Activity 6: Analyse a cartoon based on a political scenario.

- Cartoonist's intention, e.g. sarcasm, humour
- Position of cartoonist in relation to the subject, e.g. ridicule, does not support, etc.

3. Conclusion

The presentation above attempts to demonstrate that if learners can be guided to see, read and listen beyond what is presented to them, then we stand, as a country, to harvest critical thinkers who can grow our country. Learners should be helped to become independent, critical thinkers who are able to present their position in the wake of what is presented. Furthermore, learners should be guided to suggest their own solutions to the problems rather than swallow everything whole. Their agreeing to anything should be based on their having interrogated the subject and finding common ground with the author.

References

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