

8. CRITICAL LITERACIES AND LANGUAGE EDUCATION: GLOBAL AND LOCAL PERSPECTIVES

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Increasingly aware of the “critical” turn in our disciplines, we offer a partial survey of scholarship in two key realms—English for academic purposes (EAP) and globalization—where the term “critical literacy” has particular relevance. We begin by addressing some key concepts and ideological tensions latent beneath the term “critical.” We then address the pedagogical priorities that arise from this conceptualization, in particular, the use of texts to distance individual and group identities from powerful discourses. Next, we review studies that demonstrate how different teachers and researchers have engaged in unraveling and cross-questioning the rhetorical influences of various texts types, including multimodal ones. In the final section, we discuss the intertwined processes of homogenization and diversification arising from the economic, cultural, and political strains of globalization with particular emphasis on their implications for critical literacies and language education.

It is prudent practice to begin a review of this type by forewarning readers of the plurality and complexity of the field in question. The notion of critical literacy certainly fits this seemingly unmanageable profile. Still, for researchers, teachers, teacher educators, or policy makers, key unifying themes emerge around our topic. Although a meeting place of many disciplines (e.g., cultural anthropology, cognitive psychology, applied linguistics, literary studies, to name a few), literacy is increasingly conceptualized as a *social practice*. This sociality does not ignore the cognitive and semiotic processes involved in the production and reception of texts. Instead, it is recognition that literacy practices deemed basic, functional, or of a higher-order—or that stand as emblematic of nation or ethnicity—are at root social arrangements, embedded in and constitutive of issues relating to unequal distributions of power within communities and institutions (e.g., Carr, 2003; Gee, 2002; Lewis, 2001; Luke & Elkins, 2002; Nieto, 2002; Rassool, 1999; Reder & Davila, this volume). In this respect, literacy can be seen as doing the work of discourse and power/knowledge (cf. Foucault, cited in Pennycook, 2001). Through schooling, a prominent site we address, literacy practices provide the textual means

by which dominant values and identities (e.g., avid consumers, obedient workers, patriotic citizens) are normalized and, at times, resisted. Because this topic is vast with several intertwining strands, this chapter will selectively focus on (1) delineating some key aspects and conceptual underpinnings latent beneath the term “critical,” and (2) offer a partial survey of research in two key sites—EAP and globalization—where critical literacy has particular resonance.

Laying the Groundwork: Critical Literacy and Its Conceptual Underpinnings

By underscoring the power-related aspects of literacy, critical educators seek to understand meaning making within wider contextual domains: the ideological antecedents and disjunctures of the existing order and transformations in representational technologies that have facilitated histories, imagined and real. As we begin the 21st century, the threats posed and opportunities created by way of political, economic, and cultural globalization present a world context of intense debate, parts of which we will summarize. It is also a contextual domain in which the future of schools, work, and public life—or traditional definitions of literacy and orality—are reconceptualized in light of new digital capacities (e.g., image manipulation, multimedia, and hypermedia) and global information systems (i.e., the Internet) that challenge our perceptions of reality, locality, and community (Darley, 2000; Kramsch, 2000; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; Warnick, 2002; Warschauer, 2004). Critical educators, in response, advocate a pluralized notion of *literacies* and *multiliteracies* to help students negotiate a broader range of text-types and modes of persuasion, not only via print, but also sound, images, gestures, spaces, and their multimodal integration (e.g., Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Hunter & Morgan, 2001; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress, 2003; Lotherington, 2001, 2003; Norton & Vanderheyden, 2004; Quinlisk, 2003; Stein, 2004).

Arguably, such skills are not just options but necessities, if not forms of self-defense against the intrusiveness of corporate advertising, the growing sameness of cultural products and information from global media empires, and the expansion of sophisticated forms of surveillance and data sharing employed in the name of security (e.g., McChesney, 1999; Rutherford, 2000). Although one could make the argument that such concerns are irrelevant for applied linguists and language teacher education because they have little to do with actual reading and writing, critical literacy practitioners are likely to maintain that multiple texts, modalities, and technologies are crucial to the literacy setting because our job as educators partially entails cultivating a citizenry that is able to negotiate and critically engage with the numerous texts, modalities, and technologies coming at learners, and because we now collectively occupy globalized, interconnected spaces that insist on such critical engagement. Latent beneath such debates, of course, is how we understand the notion of “critical” and how this understanding circumscribes our engagement with the local and global power relations in which texts circulate and acquire their rhetorical potency. The following excerpt from Luke (2004) succinctly sums up some of what the term entails:

To be critical is to call up for scrutiny, whether through embodied action or discourse practice, the rules of exchange within a social field. To do so requires an analytic move to self-position oneself as Other even in a market or field that might not necessarily construe or structurally position one as Other This doubling and positioning of the self from dominant text and discourse can be cognate, analytic, expository, and hypothetical, and it can, indeed, be already lived, narrated, embodied, and experienced. (Luke, 2004, p. 26)

Critical literacies, informed by the previous passage, presuppose fluid and emergent notions of identity that bridge Cartesian dichotomies of mind/body, reason/emotion, and subject/object. Neither the thought processes of the mind nor the self-contained properties of page or screen provide independent foci for an adequate understanding of meaning making. The primary unit of analysis—and the pedagogical interventions it supports—is the “subject-in-discourse,” a conceptual unity illuminated through the lens of various postmodern theories (e.g., feminist poststructuralism, social constructivism, performativity, queer theory, and community of practice models). Individual and collective understandings, in this perspective, do not preexist their linguistic expression but are, instead, created and contested through dominant and subversive language practices (Canagarajah, 2004a; Norton, 2000). Similarly, the possibilities for human *agency*, following Luke, do not preexist discourse, but arise from within and as an effect of its particularities.

By extension, we may think of texts (i.e., oral, written, imaged, or embodied) as multidimensional—not only informational or genre-specific, but also *person-formative*. In understanding how subjects are discursively formed or positioned, we need to conceive of texts as conveying a dual *materiality*. On the one hand, texts both carry and address the “rules of exchange” of the social milieu in which they circulate (cf. intertextuality, Bazerman, 2004). Through implicit and explicit reference, and elements of style and genre, texts give voice to the tensions of their times—the antagonistic, class-based materiality conceived by Marx and running through the *heteroglossia* of Bakhtin, the *multiaccentual, ideological sign* of Volosinov, the *cultural and symbolic capital* of Bourdieu, and the *dialogism* of Freire. On the other hand, materiality also refers to the specific textual modality used. Whether we speak or write, take a photograph, produce a play, or create a website, each communicative vehicle will offer specialized compositional choices whose particular carrying capacities or *affordances* (Kress, 2003) shape what we can mean and how the experience of those meanings will be understood and retained over time (e.g., Goldstein, 2003; Kramsch, 2000). When addressing “subjects-in-discourse,” then, critical practitioners attend to both shifts in meaning potential *across* semiotic modes but also to their fundamental integration. As sites of practice, literacies, texts, even grammars, are conceived *holistically*, in the post-Cartesian sense of integrating a full range of emotive, sensorial, and experiential meanings and not just as discrete, rational systems (e.g., Kress, 2000, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Lemke, 2002; Morgan 2004a, 2004b; Stein, 2004).

In sum, Luke's passage invokes a longstanding critical tradition whereby *self-awareness* precedes and facilitates effective social action; that is, to "read the word and the world" (cf. Freire, 1997) we must begin to "read" ourselves and uncover our complicity in the commonsensical maintenance of social inequalities (cf. hegemony, Gramsci). Toward this end, and through the strategic deployment of texts, pedagogy becomes a process of *unlearning* internalized and habitual ways of seeing and being, naming the world and imagining social futures. Yet the achievement of "uncommon" sense through *dialogue* and *critical consciousness* (Freire, 1997), *meta-awareness* (Ramanathan, 2002), *reflexivity* (Canagarajah, 1999; Morgan, in press) or *problematizing practices* (Benesch, 2001; Pennycook, 2001) is no straightforward matter in classrooms, and key tensions arise in offering guidelines for critical literacies.

As "subjects-in-discourse," for example, both students and teachers are differentially positioned—gendered, racialized, marked as immigrants or nonnative speakers—in multiple and often contradictory ways that belie simple binaries of oppressor and oppressed. Further complexity arises in the textual forging of schooled voices, the merging—to various degrees of success—of cultural memories and prior forms of language socialization with conscious and unconscious strategies of imitation, accommodation, or opposition to the dominant norms of the academic discourse community (Canagarajah, 2002, 2004b; Casanave, 2002; Bayley & Schecter, 2003). Then there is the unmistakable diversity of English language teaching (ELT) sites and contexts of practice. Across the privileged confines of universities, English in the workplace programs (Goldstein, 2001; Katz, 2000) or in rural village literacy programs (Egbo, 2004; Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000; Sahni, 2001), universal methods and conceptions of power may certainly be inappropriate, as widely acknowledged (Kumaravadivelu, 2003a), but local specificities indiscernible or of marginal relevance to the diversity of life stories unfolding across the globe. Indeed, as Janks (2001) observed in a racially mixed, South African classroom, the pedagogical distancing of self from dominant text may be resented when such texts serve to unify fragile and threatened solidarities.

Other key tensions, paradigmatic in nature, concern assumptions about the world we are empowered to read. Is it a world whose ontological "truths" can be represented or revealed scientifically (cf. emancipatory modernism, Pennycook, 2001), or, is "reality" a textualized illusion (cf., nihilistic deconstructive postmodernism, Shea, 1998) always open to new discursive readings and always dangerous in terms of the new subjectivities and forms of power/knowledge that result? Or, is it something metaphorically in between—a recursive world both real and mediated? Paradigmatic assumptions of these sorts shape how critical literacies unfold. They can influence what teachers accept or reject as valid, emancipatory outcomes of dialogue, for example, or they can contribute to forms of epistemic skepticism in which teachers, newly conscious of the partiality of their knowledge, fear to act. As "subjects-in-discourse" we are each (students, teachers, researchers, scholars in ELT) in positions where we can turn the critical lens on ourselves to where we hold everything about our professional lives to the light: our teaching, choice of pedagogic materials, discipline's orientations, valued genres, socialization

practices. A justification of such self-critical analyses is partially this: By taking deliberate steps to create contexts for ourselves and our learners whereby we begin to critically distance ourselves and analytically reflect on our numerous participations (in hallways, in student conferences, in writing proposals and papers, in conference presentations) we will eventually be in a better position to change aspects of our social and disciplinary worlds that we deem necessary.

Negotiating Critical Literacies in Classrooms: Pedagogical Priorities

In a world imagined through postmodernism, where new orthodoxies of contingency, indeterminacy, and hybridity command our attention, there is strong consensus against prescribed, transmission-oriented methods of critique as well as strong concern for the ideological complacency and paternalism that can arise from such assumptions (e.g., Clarke, 2003, Ch. 6; Johnston, 2003, Ch. 3). Reflecting the interpretive and experiential dynamics that mediate knowledge, transformative practitioners focus on creating possibilities rather than certainties. Critical distancing is not guaranteed through any one specific form of literacy, but arises from articulated practices (Lin & Luk, 2002), when critical moments and memories briefly align in novel ways, and when even seemingly mundane or compulsory reading/writing tasks can be recontextualized and invigorated with an empowering potential, opening up new identity options and new opportunities to subvert or transform institutional power relations (cf. *rights analyses*, Benesch, 2001; the *praxicum*, Pennycook, 2004a). In this respect, the preferred goal of critical literacies is to create space for the agency of others and not to determine if or how that agency will be realized. The space that a teacher might create will vary across educational domains, subject to the application of standardized curricula and high-stakes testing and the relative autonomy afforded local administrators and educators.

The metaphor of *bricolage* might aptly describe the context-sensitive, improvisational strategies suggested here, but there is also recognition that critical literacies need explicit support through the provision of text-analytic tools—a *metalanguage*—for print, visual, and multimedia (e.g., Bazerman & Prior, 2004; Cooke, 2004; Cope & Kalantsis, 2000; Corbett, 2003, Ch. 6; Cummins, 2001, Ch. 5; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; New London Group, 1996; Rutherford, 2000, Ch. 1) as well as the thick description of case studies from which practitioners might adapt their own critical pedagogies (e.g., Comber & Simpson, 2001; Edelsky & Johnson, 2004; Toohey, 2000).

Still, as Wallace (2001) notes, “there is little consensus about what *kind* of metalinguistic knowledge is facilitative of enhanced critical awareness” (p. 213, italics in original). A “politics of access” (cf. Pennycook, 2001)—the modeling of powerful genres and texts—on its own, may presume a degree of disciplinary stability and textual uniformity at variance with the co-constructed dynamics observed in discourse communities (e.g., Ramanathan, 2002; Casanave, 2002). Furthermore, as Toohey and Waterstone (2004) observe, power does not inhere to text types, alone, but obtains, as well, from the social and institutional status of text *users*. On the other hand, a “politics of voice” (cf. Pennycook, 2001)—the

affirmation of minority literacies and vernaculars in schools—on its own, may be irresponsible preparation for a world in which textual chauvinism often provides a defensible justification for racial and ethnic discrimination. Many researchers suggest that we combine elements of access and voice by encouraging critical negotiation of identities and literacies within institutional hierarchies and by providing analytic tools that link the micro features of texts with powerful, local and global discourses (Canagarajah, 2002, 2004a; Carr, 2003; Cooke, 2004; Lin & Luk, 2002). In support, researchers also recommend that we openly discuss systemic forms of discrimination and validate students' experiences and forms of resistance within syllabus design (e.g., Benesch, 2001; Canagarajah, 2004b; Kubota, 2004; Goldstein, 2003).

Such discussions are themselves, distancing or Othering, following Luke, in that they illuminate how we *language* our realities into existence—how discourses and power/knowledge operate on and through our micro-interactions with students, and how the labels we assign them (e.g., nonnative speaker, low achiever) are also systemic and discriminatory, functioning, in effect, to *produce* the social and educational margins that they name (e.g., Harklau, 2003).

Critical Literacies in English for Academic Purposes: A “Tool-Kit” in Action

The rules of a social field both limit and create their possible transgressions. In the field of EAP, one of the central rules of instruction is to help students manage unfamiliar disciplinary content and text types. Situated within these cognitive demands, critical EAP develops as an embedded, co-occurring literacy strategy—to raise students' awareness of how academic content “manages” them, in the person-formative sense stated earlier, shaping their desires, world views, and life chances beyond the school. So conceived, critical EAP literacies invigorate, rather than replace, conventional academic skill sets, as convincingly argued by many researchers (Benesch, 2001; Cummins, 2001; Schleppegrell & Colombi, 2002; Starfield, 2004). Through distancing strategies that denaturalize and demystify disciplinary content, “subjects-in-discourse” become aware of the partiality—hence contestability—of the dominant knowledge claims in their chosen fields of study. Moreover, through literacy acts of reading, writing, interpreting, and debating concepts, subjects/students become aware of their integral role in the practices that (re)constitute the academic discourse communities to which they seek membership (Canagarajah, 2002; Ramanathan, 2002; Varghese, 2004).

The following set of points capture both some distancing practices in EAP and some general purposes they are intended to serve, as well as an abbreviated sense of a critical literacy “tool-kit” in action:

1. The use of narratives/autobiographies to link personal experiences with sociohistorical and institutional power relations.

In community of practice and feminist poststructural thought, self-writing evokes an experiential authenticity that has rhetorical potency for counter-discourse (e.g.,

Granger, 2004; Kanno, 2003; Pavlenko, 2004). Vandrick (1999), for example, explores the common threads of cultural and linguistic superiority and paternalism running through her missionary past to her current role as an ESL scholar and teacher, indicating “the possibility of a ‘colonial shadow’ over our profession” (p. 63). Wihak’s (2004) personal narrative, a reflection on her teaching experiences with the Inuit in Nunavut, becomes a vehicle to examine white privilege and systemic racism in Canadian society. In Pavlenko’s (2003) language teacher education course, autobiographical assignments provide the means for reimagined life chances, whereby nonnative speaking students come to reflect on and recognize the intercultural and bilingual expertise they bring to their future profession. In Casanave and Vandrick’s (2003) edited collection, contributors reveal the often-perilous road toward scholarly publishing through personalized accounts that encourage new scholars to persevere.

2. The juxtaposition of texts in ways that question and subvert received disciplinary knowledge.

As conceptualized by Benesch (1998, 2001), EAP classes are not subservient to the functional language needs of more prestigious disciplines in the university. In a linked, undergraduate EAP-psychology course she taught, Benesch used readings and essay assignments in ways that problematize the topic of anorexia, presenting its source as gendered and socialized—linked to impossible images of feminine beauty—and not simply as an individualized pathology as often foregrounded in psychological discourse.

Teacher talk, itself, is a text and an immediate resource for juxtaposing classroom materials in ways that encourage multiple meanings or oppositional readings. As Wallace (2001) both argues and demonstrates, strategic interventions by teachers bring about the kinds of revisions and recontextualizations that are essential to the reading process and a key component to critical literacies. Even at the primary school level, as Dyson (2001) observed, teacher talk can have a crucial, mediating effect on the reception (or rejection) of dominant gender norms as conveyed through children’s stories and popular culture.

3. The pluralization and denaturalization of dominant cultural codes and historical representations.

In an EAP workshop, Thompson (2002) introduced visiting students to one of Australia’s most contentious issues: aboriginal land claims. Four short texts on the origins of aboriginals—of distinctive historical genres, and two by indigenous authors—were closely analyzed in ways that support critical evaluation of academic research materials. Yet through this analysis, and as a cumulative effect of the workshop structure, participants were encouraged to reflect on their own cultural biases and the politics of representation—how textual choices shape our judgment of historical truth and, consequently, our willingness to rectify past injustices.

Toward comparable objectives, Kubota (2001) introduced a unit on World Englishes to a group of U.S. high school students, native speakers of English, with several related goals: to raise students awareness of the global spread of English, the linguistic features and varieties of English, and of their shared responsibility in negotiating cross-cultural communication with speakers of limited English proficiency and nonstandard varieties. As Kubota argues, prejudice against nonstandard varieties is challenged, and the status and confidence of their users enhanced, when these varieties become the focus of classroom instruction, a crucial point that similarly underscores a participatory curriculum on Cape Verdean language, culture and history for U.S. immigrants from the former Portuguese colony (Brito, Lima, & Auerbach, 2004). In the Cape Verdean program, as in the critical approaches used by Thompson and Kubota, the foregrounding of linguistic differences is only a starting point from which colonial histories, attitudes, and their persistence are examined and from which power relations within and between communities are potentially transformed.

4. Use of multimodal, semiotic strategies.

The use of visual, digital, and embodied texts for distancing and repositioning “subjects-in-discourse.” Multimodal, semiotic theories invigorate critical literacies and multiliteracies in fundamental ways. The conceptualization of “reading” as an active process of sign-making, and not just information retrieval, supports both creative and oppositional meaning making. Semiotic analyses expand our metalinguistic tool-kit in that they apply across spoken, written, visual, and spatial modalities, also drawing attention to the unique capacities of modes in isolation and on the shifts in meaning potential that occur across modes or in their combination (cf. *synaesthesia*, Kress, 2000, 2003). Thus, when critical practitioners choose or combine materials from among books, audiotapes, photographs, a play, or a website, they do so not just for variety purposes, but also in the expectation that each text type will engage identities and the imagination in provocative ways unmet through other textual resources.

Innovative analyses and practices integrating film (Mackie, 2003), advertising (Corbett, 2003; Quinlisk, 2003), video games (Gee, 2001), rap and hip hop music (Ibrahim, 2003), teen magazines (Young, 2002), and comic books (Norton & Vanderheyden, 2004) seek to develop critical engagement with these multimedia while building on the cognitive skills that arise from students’ investments in popular cultural forms. Dramaturgical texts have also been innovatively adapted. In a multilingual, English medium high school, where racial tensions over Chinese students’ use of L1 was prevalent, Goldstein’s (2003) play, *Hong Kong, Canada*, became a pedagogical resource for “represent[ing] everyday dilemmas and tensions in ways that allow performers and spectators to participate more fully in the emotional process of resolving conflicts” (p. 39). Through Goldstein’s encouragement, students wrote and performed their own plays, these “performed ethnographies” giving public voice to the experiences of otherwise marginalized students at the school. Nelson (2002a) similarly used the theatrical medium as a forum to express subjugated identities in ESL. Inspired by queer theory, Nelson’s

script goes beyond issues of inclusion for gay and lesbian students, engaging both actors and audience in collaborative reflection on the social construction of *all* sexualities, and on heteronormativity as a powerful discourse in our lives.

Conceived by Nelson and Goldstein, a play serves as both public spectacle and as a vehicle for identity negotiation, in the *performative* sense theorized by Judith Butler (e.g., Nelson, 2002b; Pennycook, 2004b). As communicative medium, the dual effectiveness of a play can be attributed, in part, to its multimodal, embodied, and interactive affordances—the interanimation of sounds, spaces, movements, and spontaneous reactions that contingently shape the force of words and their reception. This holistic and dynamic conceptualization of performance aptly describes Stein’s (2004) examination of storytelling and Morgan’s (2004b) discussion of teacher identity as pedagogy, both studies exploring the notion of the body as text, as an effect of discourse, but also as a multimodal source of agency.

Embodied experiences of intimacy, community, and reality are displaced and reconfigured by way of digital texts and information systems, a point that makes computer-mediated communication (CMC) a promising tool for distancing practices in second and foreign language education. Linked CMC classes facilitate global conversations or virtual “contact zones” that create the appropriate conditions for seeing oneself in “strange” ways. Still, this technological achievement does not ensure intercultural understanding, as Kramsch and Thorne’s (2002) study clearly shows. The ease of global communication, in fact, may inadvertently create conditions by which presumed commonalities (i.e., a global youth culture) are ruptured, exposing and exacerbating nationalistic ideologies that prevent dialogue from progressing.

A critical literacies tool-kit is enhanced by way of digital technologies (Warnick, 2002; Warschauer, 2004). Through the Internet, subjects-in-discourse have access to an expanded range of oppositional texts not available through mass media. Through various synchronous and asynchronous environments, students/citizens also gain access to virtual discourse communities mobilized in service of global environmental and social justice initiatives (Rassool, 1999). Kramsch and Thorne’s study, however, offers a countervailing microperspective on the tensions that pervade globalization processes and the technoscapes and mediascapes (cf. Appadurai, 1996; Warschauer, 2004) that seem both unifying and divisive in ways unforeseen. The appearance or promise of commonality—a linked CMC class, for example—can, in effect, be polarizing. Conversely, the appearance of diversity can, in effect, be superficial and assimilative. The thousand-channel, digital universe, for example, is meaningless if the majority of programming reflects the same cultural formulae. We examine these types of tensions and their implications for critical literacies in the following section on globalization.

Globalization, Critical Literacy, and Language Education

The multiplicity and breadth of textual practices in the previous section reflect, in part, a pervasive assumption characteristic of postmodern inclinations.

Specifically, because our realities are so very different, if not incommensurable, by default critical literacies must always be provisional, emerging from new contexts of struggle. Globalization, and the preeminence of English flowing through it, however, complicates such assumptions. Our divergent realities are in fact closely intertwined in ways that elude categorical explanation. Indeed, ELT debates on whether the globalization-English nexus encourages heterogeneity or casts a homogenizing blanket over divergent realities are themselves literacy acts, “semiotic struggle[s] to control the definition of reality” (Hassan, 2003, p. 437). These definitions, when reified in policy, reflect the performative work (cf. Butler) we do as applied linguistics. Languaged into existence, such debates invite the same critical examination as other semiotic signs, not only for their veracity but also for the self-interests they serve, particularly in a profession prone toward lingua-centric remedies.

One recurrent theme that seems to resonate through the literature relates the learning of languages—English in particular—to market-oriented concerns, with education viewed as being constructed within and by capitalist social relations (Atkinson, 2002; Corson, 2002). The capitalistic push toward viewing our world as a “shrinking global village” given the numerous ways in which landscapes (Appadurai, 1996) are being connected through global forms of communication and mass media seems to highlight the homogenizing and diffusing tendencies of globalization, where borders and boundaries between realities collapse. When the scene is languaged in this way, schools run the risk of being rendered as powerless agents in effecting change, relegated to the provision of human “capital” for a global marketplace, where the quality of something is decided according to the price it can fetch” (Corson, 2002, pp. 5–6), and where notions of *equality* and *freedom* are narrowly equated with “equality of opportunity” and “freedom to consume” (Spring 2001, p. 12).

Threaded through this subnarrative (of the capitalistic tendencies around the globalization and English nexus) are the implications for what this means for literacy. Atkinson (2002), for instance, suggests that market-based practices are latent beneath L2 compositional practices, where our collective emphasis on “clear writing” might be seen “as part of a functional system in which efficiency and speed of delivery are central—in which knowledge is defined as a movable, transposable, commercial phenomenon—literacy as commodity” (p. 52). If “effective, clear” communication is the new norm for literacy, then we as language educators have to consider not only the extent to which stressing particular ways of speaking, teaching, and interacting with texts are a part of capitalistic tendencies (Block & Cameron, 2002; Cameron, 2002) that we can and need to critically address and pull back from, but also ways in which we are collectively contributing to this focus by our writing and speaking of it in particular ways. This self-conscious examination of how we are simultaneously both subjects and agents, of how these “realities” are both perceived by us and construct us in turn is crucial, especially if we wish to keep from both perpetuating the profession’s “McCommunication” tendencies, a term Block (2002) uses for the instrumental, utilitarian approaches typically advocated in “negotiation

of meaning” research, whose primary focus has been the enhancement of speaking skills.

These globalizing/capitalizing tendencies also seem to have wrought a change in how literacy, especially English language literacy (because narratives about globalization assume English as their undertow) is perceived with a decided shift away from a generally “universalist” position that tended to stress the norms of grammatical and phonological accuracy to a “differentialist” one where English is viewed as plural (“Englishes”) with diverse and local ways in which it is entrenched, learned, and appropriated (Kramersch, 2000; Kumaravadivelu, 2002, 2003b; Pennycook, 2003; Toohey, 2000). Such a view of English literacies not only opens up the possibility of viewing English as a language that is simultaneously a syncretic language that makes room for vernacular codes in local varieties, but also as a language that binds “diverse periphery and centre communities together” getting remolded for a variety of purposes (Wallace, 2002, p. 112). In the realm of language teaching, this has meant forays into ways in which ELT can be decolonized: that we go beyond “teaching methods” to “decentering the authority Western interests have over the ELT industry” by partially “restoring agency to professionals in the periphery communities” (Kumaravadivelu, 2003b, p. 540), to recognizing and valuing local vernacular modes of learning and teaching (Canagarajah, 1999, 2004a), of the continuing vernacularization of English in postcolonial contexts (Ramanathan, 2004, 2005), and of uncovering the politics beneath the ELT textbook industry (Gray, 2002). In each of these cases, the authors are arguing for a self-conscious, critical examination of the Western-based ELT practices by turning the critical lens on the profession itself, even its historical propensity toward wholesale change in the name of progress, a point that is picked up by Morgan (2004b, p. 540) who speaks of the need to “expand the knowledge base and interdisciplinary scope of our profession—but in an *intradisciplinary* way, grounded in familiar contexts of language research and practice” (p. 174).

Language and literacy practices around the globalization-English nexus, then, are key contested sites with anxieties being articulated not just about its homogenizing or heterogenizing tendencies—whether to stress processes of assimilation and monoculturalization (e.g., Mondiano, 2004; Heller, 2003) or to emphasize diffusion and hybridization (as partially evident in phenomena like rap/hip-hop music; Pennycook, 2003)—but about how all of it is being languaged, as well, simultaneously constructing and reifying our realities even as we are in the midst of them. If the globalization currents are, indeed, making us “commodify” language (Harris, Leung, & Rampton, 2002; Heller, 2003), or overstress its communicative “efficiency” (Cameron, 2002), then it is imperative that we language teachers find small ways of countering these discursive processes in our literacy practices.

Conclusion

Given the thick strains of uncertainty that flow through all critical work—where all “givens” and “default” positions in the field are held up to cross-

examination— we end this piece by raising some fundamental concerns about critical literacies *per se*. In an interconnected, transnational world, where theories and their consequences have expanded reach, critical educators rightfully scrutinize their actions and responsibilities through a discursive lens. Under this close scrutiny, advocates of critical literacies have often written about the need to divest them of their Eurocentric assumptions—to decolonize them in ways more relevant to postcolonial settings.

Although we certainly support the need for locally relevant pedagogies, we also wish to draw attention to the paradox that arises in the decolonizing impulse. That is, the appropriation of critical literacies carries a latent assumption that critical literacies do not and have not existed in non-Western realities and as such have to be imported into local contexts. We feel that it would be more pedagogically productive to suppose that all realities, Western and non-Western, have versions of oppositional readings, cross-examinations, and self-conscious, self-analytic orientations in them. While these may not transpire in the same ways as they do in the West—in classrooms, or in English—or may not get extensively reported in the West—for a range of socioeconomic and political reasons—they do occur, and we applied linguists, Western and non-Western alike, need to not only be open to recognizing and interpreting them as such, but to reflecting on and revising our own assumptions and practices. By distancing ourselves from “dominant text and discourse,” and by opening ourselves to new sites and possibilities, we engage in the simultaneous learning and unraveling that is so central to critical literacy.

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Assuming the classroom as its primary site, this volume offers a diverse array of readings on various aspects around critical literacies: how they are fostered through classroom interactions, problems and tensions around them, and the local forms they take in different cultural contexts.

Gee, J. (2001). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. New York: Palgrave.

This volume offers an in depth argument and justification for why critical visual literacy is so crucial today, and why it is imperative that we teach children to critically navigate the videogames they play. The book stresses the fluidity inherent in all literacies and ways in which divergent images/videogames position us to “read” these “texts” in different ways.

Jewitt, C., & Kress, G. (Eds.). (2003). *Multimodal literacy*. New York: Peter Lang.

This anthology presents readings that complicate our takes on literacy by closely examining how meanings are made, distributed, and reinterpreted through a variety of signs and modes. Assuming a generally social semiotic approach, the authors wrestle with issues related to how readers/viewers make sense of images/texts/signs coming at them, and how meaning making occurs in the dynamics between viewer-reader and text/sign/image.

Norton, B., & Toohey, K. (Eds.). (2004). *Critical pedagogies and language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This volume offers a wide range of readings on the ways in which power is embedded in various nooks and crannies of all aspects of education: in pedagogic practices, in entrenched notions and bodies of knowledge in the field, in feedback offered by teacher-educators to student-teachers. The negotiation of identities within and through various textual practices is a prominent theme in many chapters. Several chapters, as well, take up a multimodal/multiliteracies framework. A common, underlying theme across these readings is the pluralistic and transformative powers of critical literacies.

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