

# Critical Language Awareness in the Swedish ESL Classroom

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## Introduction

Knowledge is an ever more important currency on a global market where information flows freely over all national borders. In this international and globalized world English has become the main language in which knowledge transactions takes place, thus becoming a lingua franca of information (Fairclough, 1999; Modiano, 2003; Ali, 2011; Monareng, 2007). As a larger part of our knowledge is created with information received in English through digital media there is a greater need to be able to, as a non-native speaker of English (NNS), read texts<sup>1</sup> in English with critical awareness (the term NNS from Modiano, 2003, p. 35). Fairclough (1999) argues that such a critical language awareness (CLA) even is a prerequisite of the modern democratic society. Huang (2013) and Ali (2011) agree with this and further claim that NNSs' lower level understanding of English texts makes critical reading harder and CLA even more necessary for them than for native speakers. The necessary critical reading can be achieved with specific CLA-teaching and training which in itself corresponds to parts of the Swedish syllabus for English in the upper secondary school (Skolverket, 2011). Therefore, this informational essay aims to demonstrate benefits of teaching CLA, presenting some core theoretical concepts but mainly focusing on practical implications for teaching Critical Language Awareness in the Swedish upper secondary ESL classroom.

## Benefits of Teaching Critical Language Awareness

### *Academic development*

Teaching Critical Language Awareness should give learners abilities and skills useful in the school setting and fulfil parts of the English syllabus for the Swedish upper secondary school. The Swedish syllabus for English in the upper secondary school, states that the different courses (English 5, 6 and 7) should contain teaching of strategies for evaluating sources and/or texts (Skolverket, 2011). According to the studies of both Ali (2011) and Wallace (1999), learners become more critical of and engaged in texts within their learning environment after participating in explicit CLA-training. Huang's (2013) study also shows that learners started viewing texts, both in- and outside of school, in a new way after participating in CLA-studies. The learners had become critically aware after realizing that texts are not natural or neutral but instead a subjective creation with implicit meaning. Therefore, CLA-teaching is to be considered valid with regard to the Swedish curriculum.

### *Personal development*

Taking into account the learners personal development there are several indications that CLA-teaching gives learners increased capacities even outside the academic world. Huang's (2013) study showed that the critical awareness development remained even in the learners' private lives after finishing school with a continued critical stance to texts in general. According to Wallace (1999), the theoretical benefits are not limited to reading but also include increased understanding of others perspectives in general. She writes that optimally

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<sup>1</sup> For practical reasons this informational essay will limited to written texts only.

CLA-training give the learners “a capacity to gain some distance from one’s own identities, experiences and circumstances in light of greater understanding of those of others” (Wallace, 1999, p. 104).

## **Core Concepts**

### *Finding the implicit*

Within the perspective of Critical Language Awareness, no text is objective in its narrative and texts might have both explicit and hidden implicit meaning(s). CLA is the awareness of the subjective author(s) and implicit meaning(s) in a text and the activity of deconstructing the textual language to realize these (Ali, 2011). Alim (2010) explains that: “To think like a critical linguist is to assume, from the start, that language, is never neutral, never simply a ‘means of communication’” (p. 207). This thinking is achieved by reading against the text, i.e. reading from a critical standpoint with certain questions in mind, to examine both the subjective author, how the explicit meaning is conveyed and what possible implicit meaning(s) there is in the language of the text (Monareng, 2007).

### *Revealing power relations*

Using CLA, deconstruction of the different parts of language in a text enables the exhibition of subjective power relations which derives from the theoretical perspectives Critical Discourse Analysis and Language Awareness. Dividing a text into smaller parts and analysing them (e.g. grammatical structures, choice of vocabulary etc.) makes it possible to reveal implicit patterns and structures creating subjective power relationships that without critical analysis might appear objective (Huang, 2009). This deconstruction is used to create an awareness of how the texts narrative create individuals or social groups in a negative way as if this was their natural state. These concepts derive from the theories of both Critical Discourse Analysis and Language Awareness and therefore share several methods and terms with these perspectives (Wallace, 1999; Monareng, 2007; Ali, 2011). However, while the terms are similar and at times interchangeable some researcher use them with slight variations from one another, making direct co-usage difficult (Huang, 2009).

## **Practical Implications for Teaching**

### *Preparation*

Before the learners engage in CLA-practise the teacher needs to be prepared for discussing power relations, having the class questioned and learners themselves feeling deconstructed. Janks (1999) stresses that CLA-teaching can be strenuous to everyone in the classroom and that it is important to have a good relationship with the learners before commencing. As the learners are taught to be critical and ask specific questions about language usage, it is likely that the very lessons will be critically questioned by the same principles. Janks’ study further showed that learners might feel as if their own language and identity are being deconstructed and creating a safe learning environment beforehand is therefore imperative. As we deconstruct texts and reveal power relations, discussions about social groups at a power disadvantage might arise (e.g. discovering the negative depiction of women in advertisements). Therefore, it is also important to be prepared for this scenario and in the discussions not reproduce social groups as disadvantaged but instead seek to empower them (Wallace, 1999, p. 102).

### *Text Progression*

CLA-teaching requires carefully chosen texts with a progression in length and abstractions level that the learners can read against and analyse from a critical perspective. The texts chosen for analysis are of great importance to the quality of the CLA-teaching and much thought should be put into the choice of texts (Fairclough, 1999; Huang, 2009; Wallace, 1999). The initial texts analysed should be short and easily relatable for the learners, i.e. something they can recognize and understand with ease. One type of texts that could serve as a starting point is transcribed speech from a source previously known to the learners. Another possible text type to start with is parts of scripts from a currently popular TV-shows (Alim, 2010; Huang, 2013.) As the learners get familiar with reading against these short texts and deconstructing them they should move on to longer, more abstract texts as this has proven to give more generalizable awareness both inside and outside the classroom (Huang, 2013; Wallace, 1999).

### *Analysing and discussing texts*

Approaching CLA-training could initially be done by becoming aware of the subjective author and the implicit meaning(s) of a text using analysis and discussions. In the ESL classroom, this can be achieved by having the learners asking certain questions about received texts and discussing them in pairs or small groups (Monareng, 2007; Wallace, 1999). By having the learners ask these questions and discussing them in relation to the content of the texts, first in pairs/smaller groups and later in full class, there should be a significant rise in the general critical awareness. Here are some examples of how such questions could be phrased:

- Who is the subjective author and the intended reader?
- What are the explicit and implicit intention of the text?
- Who would profit and who would lose as a result of this text?
- What content and/or whose views are omitted?

### *Rewriting texts*

Rewriting texts in different ways is an effective way of creating and deepening awareness of power constructions in the language of texts. While reading, analysing and discussing texts generate a general critical awareness, the process of rewriting texts from new perspectives generate explicit knowledge, especially with regards to power relations. Having learners rewriting negative reviews as advertisement or short stories from the point-of-view of different subjects are two ways of achieving this. The learners should be given clear explicit and implicit goals and/or theoretical authors. The learners should analyse how these changes affected the text. These types of exercises in combination with discussions afterwards have been found to be very effective in raising the critical awareness levels (Huang, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

Teaching Critical Language Awareness in the Swedish ESL classroom has clear benefits and can be taught/trained by analysing a variety of texts in different ways. As English has become a lingua franca of information a need has arisen to promote the critical language awareness of NNSs of English. Beside this need, there are clear benefits, both academic and personal, of reaching some critical language awareness. This awareness can be obtained by being mindful of and training to find the implicit author(s), the hidden meaning(s) and also by deconstructing the language of texts to reveal imbedded power relations. This is done through CLA-teaching with careful planning and appropriate texts progressing from short and personal to longer and more abstract. These texts should be analysed by using certain

questions to raise critical awareness and rewritten from new point-of-views and with new implicit objectives to further reveal power relations. In an ever changing world we need ever changing tools to understand it.

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