# Engaging Second Language Writers in Freshman Composition: A Critical Approach

*Jennifer S. Wilson*

**Abstract:** This article presents the case for using a critical literacy approach to enhance the freshman composition experience for second language writers. As our classrooms become more multilingual and multicultural with each passing semester, we need to move away from thinking of our ESL students as "outliers" and consider them as key participants with specialized linguistic and cultural needs *and* strengths. Using both published examples and her own experiences, the author illustrates how a critical approach can be advantageous to second- language writers and offers ways such an approach might be implemented in actual practice.

During my PhD studies, I took a course that, among other topics, introduced me to the concept of critical literacy. This course was a turning point for me, as I was forced to confront my own lack of "criticalness" as a teacher and as a student, my unthinking acceptance of the banking model of education. As I grappled with different aspects of critical literacy and critical pedagogy, I began to see both how and why these approaches were germane to my professional area of interest: teaching academic writing to university students whose first language is not English. {1}Our classrooms are becoming more linguistically diverse with each passing semester, yet only a small percentage of scholarly work in composition journals and at composition/English conferences (Matsuda, "Composition Studies") and of material presented in instructor training (Williams) focuses on second language writers. Nor was I, as a teaching assistant in freshman composition, introduced to tenets of critical literacy or pedagogy—perhaps because it seems little has been published on these subjects since the 1990s. But I think both critical literacy and second language writing are vital topics for instructors of freshman composition to think about as we interact with students in our diverse classrooms located in the ideologically saturated times in which we live. This paper contains several of the ideas I have been developing over the past few years regarding how and why aspects of critical literacy pedagogy could be implemented in a freshman composition course to enhance the academic literacy development of second language writers. Thus, in this article I not only present my understanding of critical academic literacy, but I also have tried to illustrate the implications of that theory for classroom practice, particularly a multicultural, multilingual classroom.

# Rationale for this article

As is the case for so many of us, my composition teaching career began when I was offered a teaching assistantship during my English graduate studies. I quickly learned that state and institutional guidelines and/or requirements for the content of freshman composition courses are frequently vague and left up to the interpretation of the course instructors, who often have some degree of autonomy in planning their syllabi. Whether the instructors for composition courses are graduate teaching assistants (Iorio and Wilson; Matsuda "Linguistic Homogeneity") or adjunct or tenured faculty (Braine), they generally have little or no specialized training in second language writing theory and pedagogy and little access to such support. In my personal experience not only as a composition instructor but also a writing center administrator and second language writing researcher, I have found—at the risk of generalizing—that graduate student and adjunct composition instructors, at least at the start of their careers, rarely have much exposure to critical literacy theory as well. Thus, the pedagogical illustrations I share below are designed to encourage instructors of freshman composition to consider the practical applications of one literacy theory posited to support the varied academic and affective needs of their multilingual, multicultural students. I hope the ideas contained in this paper also illustrate ways in which we as teachers can learn from our students, an essential aspect of critical pedagogy.

Just as Sarah Benesch acknowledges in her book *Critical English for Academic Purposes*, I do not intend for the pedagogical examples in this article to be taken as concrete models of critical literacy to be followed uncritically but rather as an attempt to exemplify theory in practice. Based on earlier calls of critical theorists, Benesch reminds us that there is "a need for greater specification and contextualization" (59) when writing about critical pedagogy—as opposed to broad claims about student empowerment—a need which I have tried to meet here by situating critical pedagogy in the specific context of a linguistically diverse freshman composition classroom.

# Theoretical framework

Critical literacy takes many forms and has many definitions (Berlin; Lankshear and McLaren; Luke; Fairclough; Shor), but what I am concerned with here is the approach referred to as "critical academic literacy." Like other forms of critical literacy, this concept is based on the idea that "language is a socially constructed phenomenon which is political in nature" (Clarence-Fincham 249). Applying this precept specifically to written language, British literacy scholar Catherine Wallace contrasts critical literacy with "mainstream" literacy by focusing on critical literacy's concern with power relations both in the world and in texts. She also portrays critical literacy as an action rather than a set of skills, an action which requires a meta-awareness developed in educational settings and not generally acquired as a natural process ("Critical Literacy"). Extending this theoretical basis specifically to the academy, Suresh Canagarajah, in his influential text *Critical Academic Writing and Multilingual Students*, elucidates critical academic literacy as "interrogat[ing] the values and ideologies that inform the text; the ways in which the external contexts of production and reception shape the text; the prospects for human possibilities to be limited or expanded by the text; and the ways in which the unequal status and differing identities of writers (and readers) affect the constitution of the text" (6). Writing is an important facet of critical academic literacy, because in writing from a critical stance, authors are not merely interpreting texts but are creating their own rhetoric in which they "bring their own preferred discourses into the classroom, challenge the dominant academic discourses, and creatively reconstruct genres" (181).

Even with a very general idea of the concept of critical academic literacy, it is easy to see what benefits there might be to all students of integrating elements of this view of literacy into a freshman composition course. Regardless of the apparent existence or lack of linguistic and cultural diversity in a classroom, the practices of critical academic literacy can help students recognize the ideologies which construct their own views as well as the views of others: "By asking students to explore the intersection between their individual perspectives and others' similarly constructed viewpoints in the making of meaning in culturally constructed ways, students progress toward more flexible and reflective approaches to knowledge and certainty" (Duffelmeyer 74). In a culturally diverse classroom in a critical reading course in Britain—with demographics similar to composition courses at large public universities in the U.S.—Wallace found that a critical approach fostered an awareness of culture-specific literacy and social practices, which enriched students' understanding of universal values and practices at the same time. She argues that this multilayered perspective on contexts helps to prevent stereotyping and an "overlocalized" view of the world ("Critical Literacy" 212).

The examples above involve students looking beyond themselves at the work of others, but engagement in critical literacy practices also can influence students' inner subjectivities, for instance, by validating their sense of alienation from the academy. In discussing his observations from a composition course he taught to primarily African American students, Canagarajah notes:

> Students sense that certain discourses enjoy more power in social life, and that they are antithetical to the interests of their vernacular communities. Though the discourses themselves don't have greater claim for truth, social and material power are used to impose one group's discourses over others. … Furthermore, students are uncomfortable with representing their identities through academic discourses. They see that they are adopting voices and subjectivities that they abhor, and have been trained historically to suspect or resist. ("Multilingual" 37)

I would argue that the majority of students at the institution where I began my composition teaching career—a large, public, urban, U.S. university—had sociocultural backgrounds (first-generation college, working class, visible minority, etc.) that might lead them to echo the disquiet felt by Canagarajah's African American students.[2] (See Adler-Kassner and Greenwald and Grant for discussions of class issues in higher education.) In fact, when considering the wide variety and combinations of sociocultural and sociolinguistic positions of students in today's colleges and universities, there is a constellation of factors creating such unease about their identities as academic writers. Thus, it seems that incorporating critical academic literacy practices into *any* composition course would benefit students by validating their discomfort with academic discourse and by presenting them with ways to insert their own experiences, voices, and identities into more powerful discourses (Hardin), possibilities which are outlined in the following sections.

But of primary interest for this article is a focus on developing writers for whom English is not the mother tongue. Acknowledging and studying issues of power and politics in and around texts is beneficial to second language students in multiple ways. According to Benesch, a critical perspective can help instructors move from viewing second language writers as outsiders who need to be inducted into the world of academic discourse to treating them

as equal contributors in the interrogation of such discourse(s). Critical literacy practices can foster a similarly positive change in identity within students as well. Discourse plays an important role in identity construction, both the inner language we use to construct our own identity/ies as well as the discourses we hear all around us and absorb. If the surrounding, dominant discourse continually positions learners as deficient or remedial or "other" (as in "speakers of *other* languages"), this rhetoric of deficiency can shape their identities as writers. However, if learners are encouraged to look at the dominant discourse from a critical perspective and begin to recognize the interplay of power and ideology underlying such discourse, then they acquire some space in which to reconstruct their writerly identity in a more positive way. Romy Clark gives an example of a multilingual student who, after studying academic writing from a critical language awareness standpoint, was able to confront a professor in another department about a low grade based on the student's appropriation of certain academic conventions. This student's identity shifted from that of a "non-authority" to someone with the confidence to articulate why he was making certain linguistic choices. Research also indicates that second language writers who reconstruct their identity/ies to feel more comfortable using, adapting, or resisting the dominant discourse(s) are able to engage with these discourses rather than avoiding them out of anxiety or fear. Jim Cummins, a noted researcher in language education and multiliteracies, describes this avoidance as multilingual students "resist[ing] further devaluation of their identities by mentally withdrawing from participation in the life of the school" (3), an outcome no educator wishes to enable.

Finally, as English teachers we are immersed in the business of transmitting "standard" English, particularly to students (like our second language writers) whom we feel "struggle" with standard English; however, doing so without helping our multilingual students develop a critical awareness of the prejudices and values inherent in the idea of a socially preferred dialect is to inadvertently endorse such prejudices (Fairclough), with the potential outcome of disengagement presented above. However, implementing critical literacy practices in which students analyze how language and linguistic conventions are used by authors to construct ideologies not only reveals the hidden assumptions of "standard" English, but also aids the language acquisition of our multilingual students—in ways similar to "form-focused instruction," an important pedagogical approach in language teaching (see Ellis for an overview). Canagarajah claims that teaching grammar from a critical perspective "enable(s) writers to move toward a reflexive, critical, and metacognitive awareness of the language system" (*Critical* 52). In addition, a writing course with critically oriented assignments can provide students opportunities to appropriate these conventions to their own ends. In short, the application of critical literacy tenets allows writing instructors and second language writers in our classrooms to co-construct writing environments in which multilingual students are viewed and view themselves as valuable contributors to the academic community, while negotiating the language, form, and content of academic writing.

# Implications for practice

What, then, are some practical implications of the theory discussed above? Based on a combination of my professional experiences teaching a two-course sequence of freshman comp at a large, ethnically diverse public university in the U.S. and the scholarly literature describing successful critical literacy practices in language and literacy education around the world, I have sketched out four important requirements for a freshman composition course with a critical academic perspective: an introduction to critical textual practices, critical talk, community building, and critically oriented writing assignments.

One of my frustrations as I began to read work promoting the adoption of critical practices in university composition classrooms was that few of these texts contained any suggestions for or descriptions of what types of activities might actually happen in a critical classroom. Of course, I could create vague images for myself, based on the principles the scholarly authors espoused, but I was uncomfortable with how these might look in "real life." I understand that part of critical pedagogy is the attempt to refrain from imposing our own ideologies on those whom we are guiding; however, all of the critical theory is for naught if those who are doing the actual work in the classrooms are unsure how to make the theory come to life. To help demystify critical literacy for fellow composition instructors, I have attempted to include specific examples of classroom activities to illustrate the elements described below.

## *Textual practices*

Although we are discussing a course designed to teach academic writing, it is difficult—and almost certainly undesirable—to separate reading and writing development as a part of academic literacy, especially for second language writers (Hirvela, Wooldridge). Because a writing course predicated on critical academic literacy assumes a significant amount of reading on the part of the students, the course can provide second language writers with much

needed strategies for and experience with interacting with texts (Ferris and Hedgcock). Second language writing scholar Linda Blanton asserts that "practices that accomplish critical literacy" (131) include such student-driven textual interactions as questioning texts and linking texts to their own experiences; she argues that a dearth of these opportunities creates a state of "powerlessness" (135) for language-minority readers and writers. Very specific instances of useful textual practices can be found in literature emanating from Australia (illustrated in particular by the work of Wooldridge, and Luke and Freebody), all of which incorporate aspects of questioning the text. Allan Luke and Peter Freebody, although writing to an audience of primary teachers in the document cited here, give a very useful repertoire of practices which they believe necessary for the performance of critical literacy and which they call the Four Resources Model (par. 13); below I have given their title for each of the four "resources," then explained how I see these being translated to a freshman composition course.

1. "Breaking the code" = Writing Conventions. Students consider ways in which the author communicates ideas and assumptions, using tone, style, mechanics, vocabulary, etc. Students pose such questions of the text and each other as: "How does the author use language to make this point?" "Do you disagree with any of the vocabulary or grammar choices?"
2. "Participating in the meanings" = Argument. Students explain what rhetorical devices an author uses to convince readers, in order to explore the construction of the argument as compared to argument structures previously discussed in class. Questions could include: "What is the author's main claim?" "Does she or he present counterarguments?" "What types of evidence are provided?" "Why does the author use this specific structure?" "Are there additional techniques she or he could have used to make this argument more compelling to you personally or to other readers?"
3. "Using texts functionally" = Social Setting. Luke and Freebody call this "traversing the social relations around text" (par. 13). Therefore, students could strive to answer the following questions: "Who is the author's intended audience?" "How do you know this?" "What other audiences could have been targeted, and how might that have changed this text?"
4. "Critically analyzing" = Critical Perspective. Questions growing out of this category include: "How did reading this piece affect your previous ideas about the topic?" "Are there perspectives that the author left out; what and why?" "How might the author's identity have affected her or his ideas?" "Why do you think I [the instructor] selected this piece as a reading?"

In the context of college-preparatory secondary courses, Wooldridge discusses the practice of questioning as well as of framing. Questioning a text is basic to critical academic literacy if we accept the tenet that we as instructors should encourage our students to become aware of how all texts, including our own, contain ideological dimensions. However, Wooldridge's critique of this practice is that questions encourage students only to acknowledge different interpretations of texts but not to develop the ability to construct texts themselves. Thus, she also describes a history unit which relies on "framing" (263), in which students justify in writing their interpretations of two conflicting written accounts of a particular historical event. I have accomplished something similar in the past by encouraging students to find two newspaper articles on the same topic, one from a local paper and one from a university paper. Students then analyze how differences in audience and author could have contributed to differences in the treatment of the topic (e.g., what information the author chooses to include, what is left out, as well as possible reasons for those choices). Such exercises highlight the ways in which a particular view of a topic is constructed by an author and imposed on readers. Additionally, the practice of framing is not simply a passive reading strategy but can provide a jumping-off point for a critically oriented writing assignment, a recommended course element discussed in more detail below.

At a micro-level, another important textual practice for second language writers is focusing on the linguistic choices of the author. Such an activity should consist of more than simply identifying syntactic and lexical decisions made by an author; students should be encouraged also to consider what might have motivated the author's decisions and what the ramifications of the choices might be in terms of how the author is positioning herself or himself, what social structures are being replicated or challenged, how the readers or the subjects are being positioned. Such practices are exemplified by proponents of critical language awareness (CLA). For instance, Catherine Wallace (*Critical Reading*) explains how she has adapted Hallidayan systemic and functional grammar to her university-level critical reading courses. She has created a framework for text analysis in which students look at the field, tenor, and mode of discourse, and each of these categories contains a section in which students analyze the language and grammar used. Under "field of discourse," which represents the ideational function of language, students are asked to consider "HOW are the participants talked about, i.e. what adjectives or nouns collocate with them?" (39). Later, students might be asked to use this information to identify who they believe the targeted reader is for a text or to identify other ways the text could have been constructed (109, 121). Jenny Clarence-Fincham describes a critical academic literacy course for multilingual students in a South African university in which "students discussed and wrote about ways in which a selection of discrete linguistic structures is used in a range of university texts" (252). In particular, students focused on modality, active and passive voice, article usage, pronoun usage, and lexical choice,

while relating the implications of choices regarding these constructions both to their own essays and to texts such as the Vice Chancellor's matriculation speech. As mentioned above, second language writers can use such processes not only to explore elements of power and ideology within texts but also to increase their understanding of the English language as a part of their ongoing language acquisition.

## *Critical talk*

Although these textual practices, once introduced by the instructor, can be explored by students individually, for several reasons it is preferable for students' textual interpretations to be discussed aloud. Wooldridge points out that these discussions provide students an opportunity to concretize their opinions and judgments, solidify their arguments, and negotiate aspects of individual interpretations. And, as students orally deconstruct hegemonic ideologies and construct their own textual interpretations, they are exposed to and learn from their classmates' views of language and society—and we, too, as instructors, have the opportunity to learn from our students' complexly constructed worldviews. Class discussions also offer instructors an opportunity to explain in detail the CLA tools mentioned in the previous section and to revisit them as necessary. Furthermore, that it is important for both language acquisition and writing development for second language writers to talk in a writing course has been documented by a number of scholars; in particular, Donna Johnson gives a useful summary of such work, and Kate Mangelsdorf includes anecdotal evidence for the power of talk in an ESL freshman comp course. Certainly, this principle of talk is a cornerstone of sociocultural theory (SCT), as it can be applied to second language learning. SCT posits that language is a powerful cognitive tool that allows our external activities to be transformed into internal, cognitive activity. From this viewpoint, as our students verbally construct critical textual interpretations in collaboration with their classmates, the reasoning processes they engage in orally will transform, mediated by their use in language, into automated mental processes, which can then be applied beyond this single context. Linguistically, students also benefit by being intellectually challenged to create "output" (speech) that adequately expresses their ideas, and they are motivated to do so due to their investment in reconstructing and explaining the subject position they are adopting at that particular moment or in relation to that particular text (see Lantolf for more information on SCT as it relates to second language learning).

Another platform for critical talk can be provided by individualized attention in the form of one-on-one writing tutorials. This type of instruction for second language writers is generally assumed to be useful for scaffolding their writing development (see Harris and Silva for a thorough discussion of tutoring second language writers in the writing center, and see Losey for an explicit description of how tutorial sessions allowed Mexican American writers to engage with the content of an academic writing course). But in addition to being useful for general writing instruction, individual tutorials create a space in which a student's consciousness can be raised about the power of language choices, much as happened with Clark and Ivanič's student Sarah as she recognized the subject positions she was projecting to her audience (150). Individual tutorials not only present opportunities for a critical discussion of language and ideology, but they also provide a relevant context (the student's work) around which this dialogue is happening. An important aspect of Canagarajah's view of critical academic literacy is that "students wrestle with the divergent discourses they face in writing to creatively work out alternate discourses and literacies that represent better their values and interests" (*Critical* 15), which he calls the *negotiation* model of writing instruction for second language writers. Since every student has unique values and interests, an individual writing tutorial is an ideal space for an instructor to help a student negotiate the struggle which Canagarajah describes. (Although, of course, tutor talk is also a text to be decoded and critiqued.)

## *Community building*

In some ways, critical talk and community building are a chicken-and-egg proposition: is community building within a class a prerequisite for critical talk to occur or does active critical talk among students create a community? Either way, a sense of belonging and being valued seems to be an inescapable and important aspect of a classroom that fosters critical academic literacy. Ira Shor suggests a cycle that begins with critical talk: by immediately encouraging students to participate in questioning issues and meanings, students are empowered to feel co-ownership of the course, which in turn prompts them to continue to participate actively and vocally in class. In a similar vein, Joseph Heathcott describes a multicultural, remedial, collegiate critical reading and writing course in which he believed that taking a critical view of language and culture at the start "cleared a space in which all of us came to feel safe, in which all of us felt we had a stake" (112), and which he felt empowered his students to engage in critical academic analysis during the rest of the course.{3}

On the other hand, Benesch describes a second-language writing course (linked to an anthropology course) in which

practical activities such as shared note-taking and class discussions about teaching style and assignments created a sense of solidarity among a disparate group of students, which empowered them to engage in critical types of discourse in the anthropology course. (Although this course was not designed specifically to foster critical academic literacy, this example does illustrate the blossoming of a critical consciousness within the context of the academy.)

The examples above emphasize the role that classroom community building can have in enhancing critical talk and/or critical *reading*. Canagarajah's article on "safe houses" for minority writers in academia demonstrates how students from a cultural minority group can use a "safe" community space to become more critical *writers*. By appropriating an online discussion tool in their networked classroom, students found a space where they could use their vernacular language and argument style to explore ideological issues within the university as well as society at large. Canagarajah argues that "[n]ot only can the safe house keep alive the vernacular or oppositional discourses that get encoded in the writing, it can also help develop certain complex strategies of negotiating competing discourses" (188), which he sees reflected in his students' ability to adopt typical academic writing conventions while incorporating aspects of their vernacular rhetoric and addressing controversial topics.

Canagarajah's use of technology in this particular composition course highlights its possible contributions, via community formation, to the development of critical academic literacy for second language writers. Many U.S. universities have purchased access to programs such as WebCT and Blackboard, but even without those tools instructors can set up wikis, blogs, Yahoo! Groups, or course websites for free (although the security of the site can be an issue in providing second language writers a "safe" writing space, as mentioned below). These options allow for out-of-class interaction between students and the instructor, and they encourage participation by everyone in the class, regardless of their oral confidence (Warschauer), an important consideration for some multilingual students. Thus, adding a technological learning space to a course provides a forum for all students—particularly those who might feel marginalized in a face-to-face setting—to engage in critical textual practices and forms of critical talk in a participatory, community building manner. Joel Bloch, a researcher in computer-mediated language learning, found that Chinese participants in an online discussion group used the forum to deconstruct what they felt were American stereotypes of Chinese immigrants and to create a collective response to a particular CBS news story. (Bloch also found, as in Canagarajah's "safe house," that writing in cyberspace allowed his participants to incorporate rhetorical strategies beyond those of traditional, Western academic writing.) Another issue for second language writers is that some come from cultures and/or countries where expressing oneself in a critical manner is potentially dangerous. A completely secure online writing environment could then provide the first "safe" space these writers have experienced, and watching their classroom peers participate in online discussions with no negative repercussions could provide these students with the confidence to join in the discussions.{4}

## *Critical writing assignments*

Finally, the fourth feature recommended for such a course is critically oriented writing assignments—after all, we are discussing freshman composition. And, for most theorists, critical academic literacy consists not only of the practice of decoding ideologies embedded in texts but also the practice of using rhetoric to create a space in one's writing for one's own values and beliefs. On a practical level, academic writing assignments with a critical bent can give students an occasion to use established academic writing conventions in a manner that also encourages them to draw on and incorporate their own voice/ideas/ideologies. This type of appropriation is essentially what happened in the composition course Canagarajah describes in "Safe Houses": for instance, "Donnie gets away with making some extreme accusations against the academy by carefully choosing his citations" (187). For second language writers in particular, who are often positioned (by the academy, instructors, peers, etc.) as novices in or apprentices to the production of academic discourse (Benesch, Hardin), such assignments can allow them to position themselves instead as experts, as they are given the opportunity to use their own knowledge and beliefs about language, power, and society as a basis for their writing. Second language writers have the possibility to "come to see themselves as powerful users of language with additional insights about language and its potential, in comparison to monolingual students" (Cummins 89).

In a similar vein, Heathcott points out that students who feel like outsiders in academia can benefit from such assignments because they learn that they have "the ability to think critically and put together complex arguments," while not making a "radical break from their pasts" (121); in other words, critically oriented writing assignments can help second language writers preserve their sociocultural and/or sociolinguistic identities while gaining confidence within the sphere of the academy. Linda Adler-Kassner makes a similar point from a Deweyan perspective–she argues that for students "whose real lives don't match academic culture particularly well" (101), assignments that empower students to connect their own experiences to course readings motivate them to invest effort into the assignments.

To illustrate more clearly what a critical writing assignment might entail, below is a list of elements that, alone or matched together in various ways, would promote a critical perspective while fostering the academic writing development of multilingual students.

**Welcoming the student's point of view.**
Joe Marshall Hardin states as one of his two required outcomes of resistance composition that "students learn to produce text that uses rhetoric and convention to give voice to their own values and positions" (7; emphasis added). Incorporating this element can be as simple as designing assignments that encourage students to select their own research topic (Benesch), to turn their complaints about a situation into a writing topic (Benesch), or to draw on their lived experiences in analyzing and responding to academic texts (Clark and Ivanič; Leverenz).

**Including student language and culture.**
Another way to accomplish the prior point, yet important particularly for multilingual students, is to help second language writers find ways to incorporate their language and culture into their writing, thereby working toward the critical ideal that students hold authoritative knowledge in their own right. Various ways to achieve this element in writing assignments might include giving students opportunities to write in their first language(s) (Cummins), to investigate language use in certain communities, societies or cultures (Cummins, Pennycook), or to research cultural heritage or customs (Dean).

**Investigating language and power.**
This CLA-based element takes language-based research a step farther in a critical direction than the previous one, in order to "look at how power is produced, maintained, and resisted in relation to different language forms" (Pennycook 104). Such an assignment could build from a previous one in which students research language use in a community, then identify ways in that community in which language affects the flow of power. Another possibility would be to have students draft a written analysis of the language in one or more texts, using a version of Wallace's systemic/functional grammar analysis mentioned earlier.

**Incorporating "local" topics.**
Pennycook gives a number of examples of critical literacy and language scholars who believe that centering instruction around "the local conditions and concerns of people" (101, 161) will enhance students' language learning. I believe the idea of "local" can be enlarged to include common matters of interest based on students' ages, languages, or physical location in order to motivate students to engage in writing. These topics can be used in conjunction with a critical perspective, such as when Heathcott asks students to critically analyze the arguments made in rap music or when Clarence-Fincham's students scrutinize the language in a university administrator's speech. Using local topics of interest to students also makes it more likely that students will write from their own point of view and makes student authorship more relevant.

**Providing opportunities for student authorship.**
Critical pedagogy is concerned with minimizing the power differential between student and teacher; in composition classrooms one way for students to maximize their voices is to publish their work in authentic ways. Such authorship also achieves the critical goal of encouraging students to see themselves as legitimate participants in written discourse, and, depending on the assignment (such as writing to a university administrator with proposals to improve campus life), public authorship could effect positive change in students' lives. For second language writers, publishing their work carries the added benefit of renewed focus on linguistic output and language forms, knowing that their work will be read by an audience other than the instructor. Myriad possibilities exist for publishing student work, such as creating class or individual websites or service learning projects (Warschauer), and writing letters to editors of campus papers or newsmagazines or creating reports or letters for campus administrators (Johns).

Two final notes: First, Canagarajah rightly reminds us that "the teaching of critical writing cannot be reduced to a set of axioms, methods, and procedures guaranteed to succeed universally in all classrooms" (*Critical* 42). The illustrations cited throughout this paper simply represent various possibilities for integrating a critical approach into a multilingual, multicultural freshman composition course. Second, for a host of reasons—students are uncomfortable with questioning a published author; they want to learn a writing "formula" that will allow them to gain entrance into mainstream society and do not wish to question the ideologies of that society; they are apathetic about material that does not relate to their major or career choice—students may resist the imposition of critical literacy (Hardin) or of a particular topic (Benesch). In such cases, input from students can be used by the instructor to structure future activities and assignments to encourage deeper student engagement with topics or even to allow for meaningful student contribution to future curricular decisions. (Benesch gives a very useful description of her experiences with student resistance in Chapter 5 of *Critical EAP.*)

# Conclusion

Peter Elbow has said about college freshmen learning to write that "learning new intellectual practices is not just a matter of practicing them; it is also a matter of thinking and talking about one's practice" (149). Advocates of critical academic literacy would extend this stance to include the necessity of thinking and talking about the practices of others *and* considering how these established practices intersect with students' own values and interests. Adopting a critical literacy approach not only fosters our multilingual students' academic writing and language skills but it encourages them to question the very construction of these skills—the construction of "literacy" in the academy.

On the other hand, no one claims that guiding students to a critically literate awareness is easy or simple, which perhaps is why there is a dearth of literature that provides concrete, accessible examples of composition pedagogy based on critical academic literacy principles. I certainly violate some principles of critical literacy/critical pedagogy in this paper: for instance, critical pedagogy calls for a high degree of student input into the design of the course or the activities, which I have not addressed. For those of my readers who feel comfortable with that level of student participation, I certainly encourage you to pursue these contributions (see Wallace's account in *Critical Reading* for how she incorporated student-selected texts into a critical reading course). On the other hand, my intended audience consists of instructors who, like me, are taking small steps on the road to critical pedagogy and who may not feel confident attempting a full-blown critical approach at this point.

There are other issues with a critical approach to freshman composition. Sharon Crowley "doubt[s] whether it is possible to radicalize instruction in a course that is so thoroughly implicated in the maintenance of cultural and academic hierarchy" (235). Based on my personal familiarity with various iterations of freshman composition courses, I concur, which is one reason I am not writing a paper extolling the virtues of a radical critical pedagogy in which students are encouraged to "fight the power of 'the man.'" After all, as both Crowley and Pennycook point out, "empowerment" is a vague concept that might not be desirable or even attainable as an end in itself. As Michel Foucault views power, it is not something that one group can acquire and use against another for harm, but something that pervades all society and is necessary for the production of reality (Pennycook). But I will leave those arguments and definitions to the critical theorists and scholars. Instead, I simply hope this paper can be useful to composition instructors who are grappling with how, when, and why to incorporate critical literacy practices into their own courses, particularly those who are searching for ways to support and engage their second language writers.{5}

# Notes

1. These students are by no means easily described by a simple label nor do they constitute a homogeneous group in any way. The vast linguistic diversity of students in composition courses is documented in the CCCC Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers, and this diversity is yet another reason why we should adopt the critical principle of learning from our students rather than assuming we know what/how to teach them. In addition, much of what I discuss in this paper is applicable to students whose socioeconomic status, race or ethnicity, and/or home dialect places them outside the power structure of middle class, monolingual English speaking America. However, I am attempting in this paper to focus specifically on students whose lives have been enriched by learning another language or languages before they began to learn English. These students face some specific linguistic challenges in the U.S. academy that I believe can be moderated through exposure to critical academic literacy. For clarity's sake, I will refer to these students as second language writers or multilingual students in this article. (Return to text.)
2. In no way do I wish to minimize or downplay social/cultural/political differences between majority and minority students or between voluntary and involuntary minorities. However, Canagarajah's quote does seem applicable beyond the specific context he is describing. (Return to text.)
3. Readers with experience teaching second language writers will recognize that simply asking open-ended discussion questions will not magically encourage our students to speak up in class. However, both Shor and Heathcott describe carefully planned activities which did elicit responses from their students, activities structured in a way which I believe would engage second language students as well as native English speakers. For specific details, see these references. (Return to text.)
4. On the other hand, Blair and Monske remind us that "the extent to which [electronic] networks are empowering is in fact context-based, requiring analyses of pedagogies, ideologies, and student and teacher subjectivities—and recognition that these variables, as part of any action or teacher-research methodology, are often not generalizable to every electronic learning environment" (449). (Return to text.)
5. I would like to thank Kyung-Hee Bae, Christian Chun, Jim Cummins, Mario Lopez-Gopar, and Jennifer Wicks, all of whom read at least one draft of this manuscript. In my struggle to become a more critical teacher and researcher, their assistance and insight have been invaluable. I also appreciate the useful suggestions of the anonymous reviewers. (Return to text.)

# Works Cited

Adler-Kassner, Linda. "The Shape of the Form: Working-Class Students and the Academic Essay." *Teaching Working Class.* Ed. Sherry Lee Linkon. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1999. 85-105. Print.

Benesch, Sarah. *Critical English for Academic Purposes: Theory, Politics, and Practice.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2001. Print.

Berlin, James A. "Literacy, Pedagogy, and English Studies: Postmodern Connections." *Critical Literacy: Politics, Praxis, and the Postmodern*. Eds. Colin Lankshear and Peter L. McLaren. Albany: State U of New York P, 1993. 247-69. Print.

Blair, Kristine L., and Elizabeth A. Monske. "*Cui Bono*?: Revisiting the Promises and Perils of Online Learning."*Computers and Composition* 20 (2003): 441-53. Print.

Blanton, Linda Lonon. "Classroom Instruction and Language Minority Students: On Teaching to 'Smarter' Readers and Writers." *Generation 1.5 Meets College Composition: Issues in the Teaching of Writing to U.S.-Educated Learners of ESL*. Eds. Linda Harklau, Kay M. Losey, and Meryl Siegal. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1999. 119-42. Print.

Bloch, Joel. "Second Language Cyber Rhetoric: A Study of L2 Chinese Writers in an Online Usenet Group."*Language Learning and Technology* 8.3 (2004): 66-82. Web. 24 Oct 2007.

Braine, George. "ESL Students in First-Year Writing Courses: ESL versus Mainstream Classes. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 5.2 (1996): 91-107. Print.

Canagarajah, A. Suresh. "Safe Houses in the Contact Zone: Coping Strategies of African-American Students."*College Composition and Communication* 48.2 (1997): 173-96. Print.

———. *Critical Academic Writing and Multilingual Students.* Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2002. Print.

Clarence-Fincham, Jenny. "Responding to Academic Discourse: Developing Critical Literacy at a South African University." *Negotiating Critical Literacies in Classrooms*. Eds. Barbara Comber and Anne Simpson. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2001. 245-57. Print.

Clark, Romy. "Principles and Practice of CLA in the Classroom." *Critical Language Awareness.* Ed. Norman Fairclough. London: Longman, 1992. 117-40. Print.

Clark, Romy, and Roz Ivanič. *The Politics of Writing*. London: Routledge, 1997. Print.

Crowley, Sharon. *Composition in the University: Historical and Polemical Essays*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1998. Print.

Cummins, Jim. *Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society*. 2*nd* ed. Los Angeles: CABE, 2001. Print.

Dean, Terry. "Multicultural Classrooms, Monocultural Teachers." *College Composition and Communication* 40.1 (1989): 23-37. Print.

Duffelmeyer, Barb Blakely. "New Perspectives: TA Preparation for Critical Literacy in First-Year Composition."*Composition Forum* 13.1-2 (2002): 67-80. Print.

Elbow, Peter. "Reflections on Academic Discourse: How It Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues." *College English*53.2 (1991): 135-55. Print.

Ellis, Rod. "Introduction: Investigating Form-Focused Instruction." *Language Learning* 51.1 (2001): 1-46. Print.

Fairclough, Norman, ed. Introduction. *Critical Language Awareness.* London: Longman, 1992. 1-29. Print.

Ferris, Dana, and John S. Hedgcock. *Teaching ESL Composition: Purpose, Process, and Practice.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1998. Print.

Greenwald, Richard A., and Elizabeth A. Grant. "Border Crossings: Working-Class Encounters in Higher

Education."*Teaching Working Class.* Ed. Sherry Lee Linkon. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1999. 28-38. Print.

Hardin, Joe Marshall. *Opening Spaces: Critical Pedagogy and Resistance Theory in Composition*. Albany: State U of New York P, 2001. Print.

Harris, Muriel, and Tony Silva. "Tutoring ESL Students: Issues and Options." *College Composition and Communication* 44.4 (1993): 525-37. Print.

Heathcott, Joseph. "What Kinds of Tools? Teaching Critical Analysis and Writing to Working-Class Students."*Teaching Working Class.* Ed. Sherry Lee Linkon. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1999. 106-22. Print.

Hirvela, Alan. *Connecting Reading and Writing in Second Language Writing Instruction.* Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2004. Print.

Iorio, Josh, and Jennifer Shade Wilson. "Instructors' Attitudes about ESL Composition Students." Unpublished study, 2004. Print.

Johns, Ann M. "Opening Our Doors: Applying Socioliterate Approaches (SA) to Language Minority Classrooms."*Generation 1.5 Meets College Composition: Issues in the Teaching of Writing to U.S.-Educated Learners of ESL*. Eds. Linda Harklau, Kay M. Losey, and Meryl Siegal. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1999. 159-71. Print.

Johnson, Donna M. "Enriching Task Contexts for Second Language Writing: Power through Interpersonal Roles."*Richness in Writing: Empowering ESL Students.* Eds. Donna M. Johnson and Duane H. Roen. New York: Longman, 1989. 39-54. Print.

Lankshear, Colin, and Peter L. McLaren. Preface. *Critical Literacy: Politics, Praxis, and the Postmodern*. Ed. Colin Lankshear and Peter L. McLaren. Albany: State U of New York P, 1993. xii-xx. Print.

Lantolf, James P. "Introducing Sociocultural Theory." *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. Print.

Leverenz, Carrie Shively. "Peer Response in the Multicultural Composition Classroom: Dissensus—A Dream (Deferred)." *Composition Theory for the Postmodern Classroom*. Eds. Gary A. Olson and Sidney I. Dobrin. Albany: State U of New York P, 1994. 254-73. Print.

Losey, Kay M. *Listen to the Silences: Mexican American Interaction in the Composition Classroom and the Community*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1997. Print.

Luke, Allan. "Critical Literacy in Australia: A Matter of Context and Standpoint. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 43.5 (2000): 448-61. Print.

Luke, Allan, and Peter Freebody. "A Map of Possible Practices: Further Notes on the Four Resources Model."*Practically Primary 4.2* (1992). Web. 20 Nov. 2006.

Mangelsdorf, Kate. "Parallels between Speaking and Writing in Second Language Acquisition." *Richness in Writing: Empowering ESL Students.* Eds. Donna M. Johnson and Duane H. Roen. New York: Longman, 1989. 134-45. Print.

Matsuda, Paul Kei. "Composition Studies and ESL Writing: A Disciplinary Division of Labor." *College Composition and Communication* 50.4 (1999): 699-721. Print.

———. "The Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity in U.S. College Composition." *College English* 68.6 (2006): 637-51. Print.

Pennycook, Alastair. *Critical Applied Linguistics: A Critical Introduction.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2001. Print.

Shor, Ira. *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992. Print.

Wallace, Catherine. "Critical Literacy in the Second Language Classroom: Power and Control." *Negotiating Critical Literacies in Classrooms*. Eds. Barbara Comber and Anne Simpson. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2001. 209-28. Print.

———. *Critical Reading in Language Education*. Houndmills, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Print.

Warschauer, Mark. "Networking into Academic Discourse." *Journal of English for Academic Purposes 1.1* (2002): 45-

58. Print.

Williams, Jessica. "ESL Composition Program Administration in the United States." *Journal of Second Language Writing* 4.2 (1995): 157-79. Print.

Wooldridge, Nathalie. "Tensions and Ambiguities in Critical Literacy." *Negotiating Critical Literacies in Classrooms*. Eds. Barbara Comber and Anne Simpson. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2001. 259-70. Print.