In the Classroom/En classe

Developing Critical Consciousness Through Film

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Recent instructional trends in the field of TESOL emphasize teaching language through course content. The dual focus of content-based English instruction (CBI) provides a way for language teachers to engage learners with challenging material while increasing their linguistic proficiency. This article describes a unit in a CBI course at a Japanese university that was designed to promote the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 2005) through the analysis of a film. Students identified race- and gender-related issues, engaged in discussions about these issues, and finally wrote a critical response paper to the film.

Certaines tendances pédagogiques récentes dans le domaine de TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) mettent l'accent sur l'enseignement de la langue par le contenu. L'enseignement fondé sur le contenu fourni aux enseignants un moyen de présenter du matériel stimulant à leurs élèves tout en leur donnant les outils pour améliorer leurs compétences langagières. Cet article décrit une unité d'un cours fondé sur le contenu et conçu pour stimuler le développement d'un esprit critique par l'analyse d'un film.(Freire, 2005). Le cours se donne dans une université au Japon. Après avoir identifié les enjeux liés à la race et au genre, les étudiants en ont discuté et ont rédigé un compte-rendu critique portant sur le film.

Introduction

In this article, I describe a unit from a content-based instruction (CBI) course that focused on United States culture. The main goal of the unit was to develop learners' critical consciousnesss (Freire, 2005) and ultimately increase their target-language proficiency. In order to achieve this, students viewed *The Color Purple* (Spielberg, Kennedy, & Marshall, 1985), engaged in discussions about the film, and wrote a critical response to it.

Content-Based Instruction

The goal of CBI is to increase language proficiency through the medium of a content area. Through CBI, students continue their academic development while increasing their language proficiency. Pally (2000) coins the term *sustained content-based instruction* in reference to exploring one subject area over

an extended period: a dual focus on the exploration of a single-content area coupled with language-learning provides optimal opportunities for learners to increase their language proficiency. A common way to approach this is to use CBI as a vehicle to teach one of the four skills (Fluitt-Dupuy, 2001; Heyden, 2001). Evidence suggests that CBI is effective, as students exit these courses with improved language abilities and content-area knowledge (Stoller, 2004).

Although content-based instruction is an appropriate tool to facilitate increased linguistic proficiency, it does not specifically target enhancing critical thinking and writing ability. In fact analysis has demonstrated that content-based textbooks may have embedded ideologies such as stereotypical representations of racial and ethnic minorities (Case, Ndura, & Righettini, 2005). In one story, for example, a slave was depicted as *strong* and *powerful*. Unfortunately, the textbook authors did not ask students to question the validity of these stereotypical representations in the chapter questions and activities. As research has demonstrated, ESL students benefit from learning how to address racial, social, and educational inequalities in their lives (Case, 2004; Grady, 1997; Kubota, 1999). The development of *critical consciousness* (Freire, 2005) that I am advocating is one way to link content-based instruction with attention to relevant social issues.

Critical consciousness extends beyond the concept of critical thinking; Giroux (2000) notes that whereas critical thinking focuses on the acquisition of particular skills or techniques, critical consciousness includes learning to theorize and to make evidence-based judgments in the broadest sense. Thus Freire (2005) stresses the necessity of empowering students in the learning process; yet he does not suggest that teachers should transfer all their authority to their students. The teacher plays a pivotal role in facilitating the development of critical consciousnesses.

Through the process of scaffolding, teachers can facilitate learning in students' *zone of proximal development* (Vygotsky, 1978), or the gap between a learner's current and potential developmental level, and move toward critical consciousness. In order to bridge this gap and help learners move toward critical consciousness, I have broken down my unit on the *The Color Purple* into the pre-viewing, while-viewing, and post-viewing stages; this basic structure would also be applicable to other films employed for similar pedagogical purposes.

Critical consciousness is a useful tool that students can use as they encounter social inequalities in the future. It has been noted that the development of higher-order skills may be particularly important in Japan, where the educational system tends to emphasize rote memorization (Rohlen, 1983; White, 2002), but clearly the benefits of teaching critical skills are not limited to any one national or cultural context. Thus this lesson both addresses

deficiencies in traditional CBI and provides invaluable knowledge and skills that will benefit students in the future.

Research has demonstrated the various benefits of film as an instructional tool. Besides serving as a source of target-language input, it can be used to enhance pragmatic development (Washburn, 2001; Kite & Tatsuki, 2005) and sociocultural awareness (Carter & Miauchi, 2005). Therefore, using film can prevent language classrooms from becoming "impoverished learning environments" (Kasper, 1997). Film studies is an emerging discipline with limitless possibilities in the foreign-language classroom.

Teaching the Unit: Selecting the Film

In selecting a film, I wished to identify one that dealt with racial and gender equality issues because these are major themes in the course. My students possess a minimal level of knowledge about racial issues in the US and about the interplay between race and gender that is portrayed in this film. Therefore, studying this film may be considered a way to fill gaps in learners' cultural schemata.

The specific reason I chose *The Color Purple* is for its rich and engaging content. It truly has stood the test of time (Fluitt-Dupuy, 2001) and still generates a high level of interest among students despite being produced in the 1980s. The complex themes addressed in the film provide an abundance of rich material that can be used to raise social awareness.

Pre-Viewing

In order to activate and facilitate the development of schemata related to this film, students are instructed to search the Internet for information about the film. Typically, they find information about the film's production; interviews with Alice Walker, author of the original novel; and film reviews among other things. These materials are used in cooperative group work during the next class.

Cooperative group work is one method to scaffold learners effectively within their zones of proximal development as they acquire new knowledge. Vygotsky (1978) maintains that a learner can extend the capacity of his or her zone of proximal development through interaction not only with adults, but also with capable peers. Teachers need to decide whether they themselves will divide students into groups or will allow them to self-select their groups. Students then present their findings to small groups of their peers. In addition, they are responsible for selecting a reporter who will summarize each group's main findings to the whole class.

The individual presentations that form the basis of our class discussion in this lesson further build schemata related to the film. Reader-response theory has established that readers' construction of meaning is contingent on the "content and structure of the author's message and the experience and prior

knowledge of the reader" (Chase & Hynd, 1987, p. 531). For this reason it is necessary to support the development of learners' schemata related to this unfamiliar topic by using multiple methods.

While-Viewing

Showing the whole film in class has benefits such as ensuring that students view it in one sitting and allowing the teacher to take a more active role in facilitating comprehension. The fact that literacy is not simply an internal, psychological process, but also a social practice provides further justification for watching the film with others (Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Nevertheless, time constraints never allow me to show the entire film in the class. So students are required to watch the film outside class and prepare answers to a set of questions (Appendix). These questions form the basis of our classwork and subsequent analysis of the film.

Post-Viewing

Much class time is devoted to instructional scaffolding in order to facilitate learning within students' zones of proximal development. This parallels Krashen's (1982) concept of comprehensible input, which rests on the assumption that learners benefit from being presented with language just beyond their current levels of competence. With this in mind, I have designed questions that target higher-level thinking processes such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bloom, 1956). At the same time, the questions are general enough that learners with varying levels of linguistic proficiency can answer them, and the subsequent class interactions allow the students to support each other's understanding of the film.

The post-viewing stage is an ideal place to develop critical consciousness further. Hadaway, Vardell, and Young (2002) point out that although the post-reading stage is strongly emphasized, teachers often ask students lower-level questions: their words of caution apply to the post-viewing stage of a film unit as well. Therefore, it is crucial in this stage to challenge students to engage with the text critically.

In order to illustrate that students are indeed engaging critically with the text, I discuss the post-viewing questions (see Appendix). These are general enough to apply to other films as well.

The purpose of the first two questions is to discourage essentialist thinking and demonstrate that people are not only victims, but continually shift positions in relation to others and varied social contexts. Indeed, social actors who are powerfully positioned in one context may well be relatively powerlessly positioned in another (Foucault, 1980; Weedon, 1997). So although in the world of this film a character is powerfully positioned in terms of gender (i.e., a man), he can be marginalized in terms of race (i.e., African-American). The second question gives students the opportunity to connect this in some

way with their own lives. Students often cite the example that although their fathers are powerfully positioned at work, they rely heavily on their wives to mange the entire household.

The interplay between freedom and oppression can be illustrated with examples from the movie related to gender and race. As research has demonstrated, race interacts with gender as social actors perform masculinities and femininities (Archer, 2001). In terms of the jobs they can occupy and how they are treated by members of the white community, the African-American characters in this film are marginalized.

Nevertheless, in terms of domestic arrangements, individual African-American families may reflect another balance of power. For example, one of the main characters in the film, Albert, uses physical violence to control his wife Celie. Like race, gender may position social actors variably depending on the local level of specific social interactions (Connell, 1987, 2002). At the same time, broader forces regulate one's place in specific gender regimes such as schools, workplaces, and families (Connell). Although Albert may exercise brutal control over Celie, his employment opportunities are limited to manual labor in a white-dominated society. Challenging students to consider the oppositional terms of freedom and oppression encourages them to go beyond binary thinking and to discover the interplay between gender and race.

Another place where gender can place varying constraints on social actors is in relation to normative conceptualizations about sexuality. For example, Albert has a longstanding extramarital affair with Shug, a blues singer who is regarded as sexy by the men she performs for and as a slag by the women and some of the other men in the community. Although Shug is positioned powerfully as the object of men's desire, her sexually provocative performances, extramarital affairs, and late marriage position her as violating normative femininity defined in the Christian tradition endorsed by some characters in the film. This contrasts sharply with Albert, whose infidelity and cruel treatment of Celie are never problematized by members of the community. His use of violence is intended to ensure that Celie knows her place. In sum, social actors are free to perform gender in varying ways; nevertheless, there are both material and symbolic constraints on those performances. Material constraints, for example, ensure that women's incomes are less than men's (Connell, 2002). Symbolic constraints can materialize in the form of a double standard like that applied to Shug.

A view of power as contested and negotiated through social interaction can help prevent students from making broad generalizations about inherent racial and gender differences while also promoting insight into the specific conditions under which race and gender constrain individuals. We see examples of this tendency to dichotomize men and women in popular culture with books that emphasize the natural differences between the sexes (Gray,

1992; Tannen, 1990). This type of essentialist thinking can result in damaging stereotypes such as that women are natural caregivers and thus best suited to raise children. A view of power as shifting encourages students to see the interplay between race and gender, which they might not otherwise associate.

In addition to supporting the development of critical consciousness, the classwork discussed above supports the improvement of listening, speaking, and reading skills. Reading is required in the initial research that the students complete about the film. Listening and speaking skills are used both in small groups and during the class discussions. Although the larger goal is to develop learners' critical consciousness, this unit also supports other aspects of second-language acquisition.

Critical Response Paper Assignment

Students are allowed to respond to the film in a response paper that may take any form that they choose except a plot synopsis. This relatively free rein provides students with a certain level of autonomy over what they can write. Indeed, allowing students to choose the books they read and the genres they write is one way to encourage even reluctant learners (Atwell, 1998). Students are likely to have a higher level of personal investment in their writing if they can exercise a certain degree of choice over what they write.

The first stage of the writing component requires that students outline their response papers. They are asked to highlight specific scenes from the movie that illustrate the particular points they wish to make in their papers. The outline is submitted as a homework assignment on which I comment and return to them.

In the following class, we examine two model response papers. I instruct the students to form groups before distributing the model papers; these same groups later become their writing groups. Each model paper is distributed to roughly half the class. Students are instructed to read the paper and identify reasons why it is an effective critical response paper. Although they may read the papers silently before discussing them, I encourage them to take turns reading them aloud so as to use both speaking and listening skills.

During the next class, each group's reporter presents the results of the discussion. Some of the elements of effective papers that emerge are clear organization, insightfulness, discussion of themes, and discussion of symbols. Students are then provided with copies of the critical reaction paper that they did not receive during the previous week. I record the students' points on the board and make additional points. In this way both the students and the teacher collaborate to expand learners' zones of proximal development further.

Once the students have received the teacher's feedback and studied two model papers, they are instructed to revise their outlines. The remainder of

class is devoted to this task. For homework they are instructed to prepare their first drafts along with sufficient copies for the other members of their writing groups.

The next class is dedicated to students reading their papers aloud in their writing groups. Then the other members provide both oral and written feedback to each writer. The students are reminded that because they have ownership of their writing, the decision to make any changes rests solely with the author of the paper. They revise the papers, and I collect their drafts at the beginning of the next class.

I like to read two drafts of the students' papers before they submit a final copy. When I read the first draft, I look for strong organization, critical insights, and references to specific scenes from the movie: higher-order concerns. During the reading of the second draft, I mainly focus on editing. At first I did not require students to hand in two drafts; however, this resulted in submissions that were simply plot synopses. In order to avoid this, I go through the process of first looking at their outlines and a couple of drafts before they turn in the final paper.

Plagiarism sometimes becomes an issue in the course of this unit. Although it is not required, some students consult other sources in the process of writing their papers. This situation provides an ideal opportunity to engage in the kind of contextualized teaching advocated by supporters of the process-oriented approach to writing (Atwell, 1998; Graves, 2003). Students can be presented with examples of plagiarized writing and taught about appropriate citation practices.

Teacher's Reflections

Student responses to this unit have been positive. *The Color Purple* is just one example of a film that can be used for critical examination of important social issues. As an educator striving toward critical consciousness, I make every effort to transcend essentialist thinking and encourage students to see how people can be somewhat powerless in one situation, yet comparatively powerful in another. This may be particularly important in more collectivist cultures such as Japan, where there is a tendency to create strong in-group and out-group distinctions (Sugimoto, 2003). Finally, the high level of interest that this film generates among students makes the goal of moving toward critical consciousness more attainable.

Conclusion

CBI allows instructors to teach language through the medium of interesting content. Moreover, it leads to deeper engagement with content sources, meaningful content learning, and improved language abilities (Murphy & Stoller, 2001). Educators striving to take this one step further can develop learners' critical consciousness through critical film analysis as outlined here.

Critical consciousness extends beyond mastery of specific thinking skills to the multidimensional analysis of the complex interplay between phenomena such as gender and race. The type of sophisticated thinking involved in striving toward critical consciousness supports the development of both second-language proficiency and higher-level thinking skills.

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Appendix

1. Discuss the difference between "freedom" and "oppression."
2. Give an example of how someone can be both free and oppressed.
3. How are the African-Americans portrayed in the film both free and oppressed?
4. How do assumptions about normative sexuality position the male and female characters in the film?