

## Critical Literacy Framework

Workshop by David Hyatt

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Nineteen participants from six institutions across Singapore attended David Hyatt's workshop held at Temasek Polytechnic on Saturday 07 September 2002. It was a worthwhile and stimulating session that revealed how powerful language can be.

David Hyatt, the University of Sheffield's MELT Course Director, began the workshop by quoting Widdowson's two premises, "as language teachers we are in a better position to do our jobs if we understand what is going on in the language", and "what we think is going on in the language is not always what is actually going on" (1996). David discussed the role of language in the way we perceive the world and the way we use language to help us construct the world. Referring to this constructionist view, as well as to Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, David noted that language doesn't exist in isolation, so we must know the context and go beyond grammatical rules to understand the choices we make to create meaning. He also mentioned Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, which links language and power. These ideas were described as the theoretical underpinnings for his work.

David's critical literacy framework consists of twelve components:

1. pronouns
2. passive/active forms
3. time — tense & aspect
4. evaluation — adjectives, adverbs, nouns, verbal processes, semantic prosody
5. metaphor
6. presupposition/implication
7. medium
8. audience
9. visual images
10. age, class, disability, gender, race/ethnicity, and sexuality issues
11. reference to other texts, genres, discourses, and individuals
12. text in its temporal context

Each of these components was explained and illustrated with numerous examples. It would be impossible to share all of them here, but I would like to highlight a few. For instance, David reminded us that using the pronoun "we" suggests shared experience, norms and values, while the pronoun "you" implies a difference in status; hence, in advertising, political speeches, media language, etc., the choice of pronoun can be very revealing.

In examples regarding tense and aspect, David explained that tenses are more than just time markers. The use of the present simple presents something as indisputably true, the present perfect suggests that something was, and still is, true and important now, while

the past simple implies that something was true in the past but is no longer true now. The past perfect shows more than a chronology of events in the past; it can also carry an explanation, evaluation or comment, as in, "You see, the alarm clock hadn't gone off".

Evaluation can also be made through choice of vocabulary. Here David gave examples of semantic prosody, whereby certain lexical items carry inherently negative or positive evaluations. For instance, the word "provide" is used to denote a positive 80% of the time (provide shelter, provide help, etc.), while the word "cause" is almost always used in a negative sense (cause stress, cause cancer, etc.). Other examples of evaluation were the respective implications of "students/clients/customers/learners".

Throughout the twelve components of the framework, we were reminded that, even in simple descriptions, the language is not neutral but carries implications, evaluations, and presuppositions.

Using the framework as a tool, we then worked in groups to critically analyse the language in a newspaper article. It took some time for us to sort out the context and socio-cultural background of the news item because it was taken from a British tabloid and reported details of a foreign political and educational system, unfamiliar to many of us. This reinforced the notion that knowing the context is crucial for creating meaning. Once we got going, it was easy to pick up examples of language that carried implications and evaluations and after an hour and a half, we shared our ideas in a lively discussion.

Although it was conceded that that we normally don't spend 90 minutes reading one article, the exercise made us aware that we need to help our students to understand the meaning and the context of language as they read, and we must encourage them to question in order to promote critical literacy.

### Note

David Hyatt has spoken to an appreciative audience at Temasek Polytechnic before and STETS was fortunate to get some of his valuable time during this visit. We recommend that members keep an eye out for future engagements with this speaker.