
Critically Reading an ESL Text

Karen Grady

Many educational theorists and practitioners have argued for some time that all education is political (e.g., Apple, 1990, 1992; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1983), but these arguments take on even greater relevance in the area of second language education (Pennycook, 1989) because they are inextricably tied to issues of minority education, the subjugation of particular languages and cultures to the elite status of English, and the economic role that the immigrant work force in the United States plays in providing cheap labor (and new consumers) in a capitalist society. But in spite of ongoing conversations about the political nature of schooling and the issues of power inherent in the ideological constructions of textbooks and pedagogies that are used in classrooms, a critical perspective on what knowledge is legitimated in ESL texts and programs has been slow to emerge in the field of teaching English as a second language.

Most of the challenges to the politics of curriculum and pedagogy in the field have focused on the arenas of adult education and on the teaching of English internationally (e.g., Auerbach, 1985; Pennycook, 1989; Tollefson, 1989). Critical analysis of the politics of secondary ESL texts, programs, and pedagogies is lacking. Reviews of published classroom materials have focused on the effectiveness of particular methods embodied in the design and content of texts, with little consideration for the sociopolitical issues that are part of secondary classrooms and campuses. When researchers described successful language pedagogies as communicative and holistic, there was a corresponding shift to make textbooks more communicatively based, but with few, if any, connections to the lived experiences of ESL students.

Textbook writers incorporated “authentic” reading materials and designed course objectives around aspects of realistic communication situations in which, ostensibly, second language learners would be involved. Included in these types of texts, for example,

An Ideology of Limitations

I would like to view critically a secondary ESL text series that is widely used in the United States and is promoted as theoretically sound. It is the series that was used in the ESL program at the high school where I

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But no textbook space or “practice” is given to the language that most ESL learners must learn in order to deal with the realities of being an immigrant in the United States, for example, the language of who is entitled to medical care in the United States or how to negotiate a system other than that of a private doctor’s office.

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is practice of the language structures deemed necessary for visiting the doctor, going shopping, or making travel plans. But no textbook space or “practice” is given to the language that most ESL learners must learn in order to deal with the realities of being an immigrant in the United States, for example, the language of who is entitled to medical care in the United States or how to negotiate a system other than that of a private doctor’s office. Nor are any models of the discourse of contestation provided in texts for high school students, many of whom face daily challenges to their rights as students, workers, and members of the community.

taught from 1985 until 1994: The Intercom 2000 series (Heinle & Heinle). It was selected by the department partly because it was also being used in many other secondary ESL programs in California. It is representative of the types of text materials that are common in high school ESL classrooms. The examples used here are from Book 3 of the series, the intermediate level. I will argue that the discourse presented in this text represents a limited view of second language learners, of what they are capable of, and of the ways in which they will eventually use English. That is, the language instruction provided can be interpreted not as structured by the English

language skills of the learners who might use this text, but rather as part of an ideology that limits access to social and economic power for immigrant students and that reinforces their marginal position in U.S. society.

On Intercom 2000

The Intercom 2000 textbook series “is a four-level basic course” designed to “develop language skills generally included in elementary through low intermediate programs” (Chamot, Rainey de Diaz, Baker de Gonzalez, Yorkey, 1991, p. vii). As the introduction states,

Communicative competence is the primary goal of the New Intercom English program. Because of this, grammatical meaning and grammatical form are given equal weight. Following a carefully sequenced syllabus, grammatical structures and common communication functions are presented in natural contexts ... students use English to actively communicate in meaningful ways. (p. vii)

Even though the assumptions about language learning underlying the structural syllabus are extremely problematic, I would like to focus on the issues of representation in the series, how learners and teachers are posi-

used, that textbooks in general still “exert a powerful influence on what is taught and how it is taught” (Rogers, 1989, p. 25) or in other words, whose knowledge and what kind of knowledge (what linguistic ability) is of most worth.

Issues of Representation

The series begins with an introduction of the characters who appear in all four books. There are three nuclear families (one European American, one African American, and one Hispanic), each with a husband, a wife, and from two to four children. Six friends are also part of the ongoing story lines in the series: Gino from Italy, Cristina from Colombia, Gloria from New York City, Toshio from Japan, Nhu Trinh from Vietnam, and Sekila from Zaire. All of the characters are either students or are gainfully employed. The European American family lives in a small, modest apartment, but the family members are “all working very hard” so that they can move into a house. Most of the school-age characters do not work or need to work. The time that they are not in school is devoted to participating in sports and other pastimes.

The representations of family life in the first few pages of the text are already less

and financial resources to pursue their various hobbies, such as going to the movies or playing tennis. The language, then, that is emphasized and therefore valued is the language for talking about leisure activities, the rhetoric of recreation. Most of life appears to revolve around structuring one’s free time in order to keep busy. In one reading, retired people in the United States are described as having a lot of free time during which they travel and try new sports. “For some husbands and wives, retirement is a second honeymoon!” (p. 12).

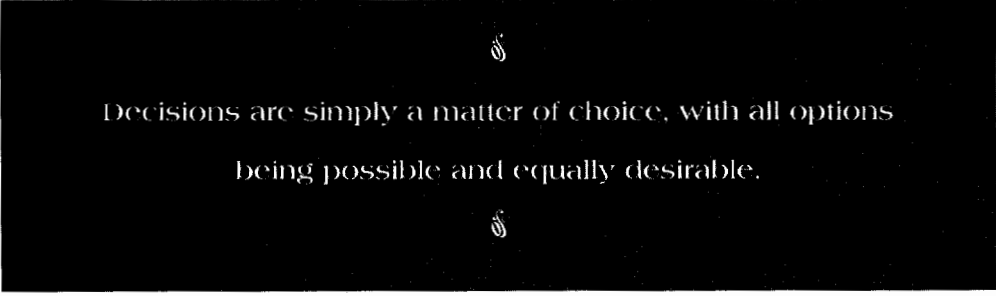
An ideology that is blind to the economic realities of living in the United States pervades the text. Thinking about what one wants to do leads to being able to do it without overcoming any material or social constraints. Decisions are simply a matter of choice, with all options being possible and equally desirable. Students being instructed to use these models to shape their linguistic abilities are positioned as interested in nothing more than what to do with their weekend and as having all choices available to them economically and socially.

Trivialized Discourse

Problems that the characters face are very simplistic and easily solved. For example, Bob Logan, who attends the local community college, is not doing as well in his studies this year as he was previously. The advice given is that he should spend more time doing his homework. In order to do this, he should work fewer hours at his job and see his friends only on weekends.

Work is not portrayed as being necessary for survival, but as an optional activity that should not interfere with studying. Ironically, Bob is a member of the family described as not having a lot of money and wanting to improve their circumstances. The underlying ideology suggests that how much one works and how much money one needs is a matter of choice, not having much to do with economic necessity.

The first five units provide a context for talking about news and using the daily newspaper. News events as constructed in Unit 1 are either announcements (birth, engagement) or summaries of leisure time activities. An engagement announcement about Gino and Cristina is written in as much detail and takes up more space on the page than the story about the “special program to celebrate Black History Month” (p. 6). Black History Month (itself a problematic construction) is trivialized even further by being represented as an event equal in importance to an engagement announcement. Procedural guidelines suggest that the teacher ask students to respond to questions such as, “What show



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tioned by the text, how communicative competence as a kind of knowledge is defined and constructed and how other kinds of knowledge are excluded. I am proceeding with caution here because an analysis of what version of reality or whose knowledge is represented in a text is not necessarily the meaning that is made by teachers and students using the text in the classroom. Students and teachers actively construct the meanings of the educational processes in which they participate. As Apple (1992) argues, “Teachers have a long history of mediating and transforming text material when they employ it in classrooms. Students bring their own classed, raced, and gendered biographies with them as well. They, too, accept, reinterpret, and reject what counts as legitimate knowledge selectively” (p. 10). But I would also argue that a great deal of interaction in second language classrooms is shaped by the textbook that is

than representative in that they portray a very Eurocentric and idealized version of what family is. Family as represented in this series means having a mother and a father and a few, but not several, siblings. Minorities have very good jobs and lots of opportunities. The pragmatics of language seemingly have nothing to do with material conditions. Gino and Cristina, for example, are described as not having a lot of money and work as a chef and a cashier, respectively, yet somehow are able to go to Europe for their honeymoon.

Very few high school-age immigrants to the United States would see themselves or their social and economic experiences represented in this text. Nor would students have the opportunity to acquire the language that will enable them to talk critically about the social contexts surrounding them. All of the characters in the series have enough free time

will Albert Eaton perform?”, with the correct answer being “MLK: The Life and Times of Martin Luther King” (p. 6). The combination of the two discussion questions for the unit further illustrate a view of linguistic competency as separate from political discourse. “Why is Martin Luther King an important person in American history? Possible answer: He was a black civil rights leader in the 1960’s” and “In your native country, how do people announce births?” (p. 7).

Students are not expected, nor encouraged to make connections between the actions of

English is to position students as not being very aware of or concerned about the world in which they live. Unless the teacher problematizes the content of the unit, the text creates no opportunity for analysis or critical discussion or even the generation of important questions because the unit equates current events with birth and engagement announcements. Not surprisingly, this text actually mirrors the lack of distinction between news and gossip or news and entertainment that one sees in the mainstream media.

that the teacher should “make sure that students are stressing *do*, *does*, and *did*” (p. 49). Vital political discussion of important social issues such as poverty need not engage learners in any other way than mastery of the form of emphatic *do*. As Freire points out, by not acknowledging the political aspects of education and by separating the word from the world of students, we help sustain a set of institutional practices that serve those who are already members of the dominant class (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Several other news events, mostly crime and disaster stories, are represented in the following three units. At the beginning of Unit 5, two of the characters are reading the Sunday paper and talking about the headlines about crime. Gloria states that it is impossible for the police to control crime. The dialogue ends with her roommate, Sekila, suggesting that it is better not to read the newspaper, in essence, to remain uninformed.

Four of the fourteen chapters in Book 3 address the topic of visiting medical professionals. But two of these chapters deal with health problems as issues of weight control, and students learn how to talk about meals, among other language skills. Medical problems are trivialized, and instant medical care from a private physician is readily available. Patients who call for an appointment are seen right away, and the care is highly personalized. In a dialogue between the receptionist and Dr. Young, we see that “Mrs. Khan called. She couldn’t get her prescription because it cost too much. She wants you to call her” (p. 111). One need only call a doctor if medical care is unaffordable and presumably, the doctor will take care of it. No one fills out any forms or is asked to pay for services. Health care is just there for the taking. The only linguistic skills needed for obtaining medical care are those for describing the symptoms of the flu. The “model” of language and action for unaffordable health care is to telephone the doctor (see Auerbach, 1985, for similar examples).

The topic of Unit 12 is travel plans. In this unit, Dr. Young makes plans to attend a public health conference in Kenya. An interesting change from the original Intercom series (Yorkey et al., 1984) is that previously Dr. Young also planned to visit a wild animal park because of her interest in endangered species. In the new edition she has lost her concern for wildlife and plans to go shopping after the conference. Dr. Young is constructed as a woman whose social conscience is a work-related obligation; she goes to the conference because she has to. The teacher is directed to ask questions that focus on Elinor’s trip to the market to buy jewelry,

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Martin Luther King and current issues in U.S. society. The discussion questions posed will not facilitate any kind of critical reflection on the status of civil rights in the United States or students’ own experiences with civil rights issues. The student knowledge and experience that is legitimated as part of the classroom discourse is conversation about weddings and births, not conversation about social action, which in this example from the text, is meaningful only as an historical event. The argument that students do not have the linguistic ability to discuss a topic any more complex than how births are announced masks the assumption that language minority students do not need to use or are not capable of using language for any other purpose than that of comparing customs.

The vocabulary presented in the unit is the vocabulary of the society and sports pages: “engagement, get engaged, reception, wedding, announcement, score, and win” (p. 8). At the end of the unit students write a news article about a sports event. Political and social issues in the lives of students are removed from the realm of legitimate discourse. My point here is not that students should not be able or be encouraged to talk about customs and social events. But presenting social activities as serious news items for discussion and as central to life in a new country and central to acquiring fluency in

In Unit 2, “Another Look at the News,” the sections of the newspaper represented are those that include information other than what was represented as current events in Unit 1, namely, advertisements and the TV schedule. After the vocabulary practice related to reading housing advertisements, the procedural guidelines suggest that the teacher “relate words to students’ lives by asking them questions: ... Do you have a laundromat on the premises where you live?” (p. 19) The textbook poses a superficial and insignificant concern about housing as the only worthwhile point of discussion.

The textbook represents all types of issues and all types of discourse as not requiring much thought or action beyond the decision as to the appropriate grammatical structure—everything is reducible to form. Some would argue that this is a problem of the pedagogical assumptions underlying the course design. I want to argue that the ideology undergirding this pedagogy is that communicative competence is (or should be) apolitical. In the practice exercise on page 49 students are to “disagree with each sentence” as a means for talking about an upcoming election. In pairs one student says “Senator Tunnel doesn’t want to help poor people.” According to the model, the partner then responds, “What do you mean? He does help poor people.” Notes to the teacher caution

rather than on what students might know or want to know about public health or Africa or conferences.

Throughout the entire textbook, the emphasis on a "disinterested" knowledge supports the assumption that students' lives and interests and knowledge do not matter. As the story of Dr. Young attending the public health conference continues to develop, students learn the language forms for asking and answering questions about the lecture schedule of the conference. These questions are based entirely on who is speaking in which room at what time. "Whose lecture are you going to on Tuesday morning? Dr. Hamilton's. Whose lecture are you going to?" (p. 168). Students are instructed that if they are both going to the same lecture, they should agree to go together. The only information provided in the text are the names, times, and locations of lectures. The assumption here is that people decide what they want to learn as a matter of scheduling, not based on what is important or meaningful to an individual. The ideological stance is that all knowledge is disinterested, all perspectives are equal, and that the learners (in this case, the conference participants) should give no more thought to what they want to learn than what is involved in looking at a timetable.

Reading Critically—A Beginning

What does it mean to represent knowledge and learning choices in this severely limited way? What are the implications of trivializing the content of ESL textbooks and constructing "communicative competence" for immigrants such as the ability to describe a wedding or use a TV schedule? Such language practices will not help immigrants who are living on the periphery of U.S. society gain access to political and economic power. Maintaining the status quo of great inequity and limited possibilities for language minorities was not the likely goal of the authors of this language series, but it most certainly supports that end in any classroom where the teacher and students use the series as it was apparently designed to be used.

If the intent of the authors was not to position language teachers and their students as mindless consumers who have no lives or interests of their own worth discussing, the reduction of language learning and teaching to tightly controlled, "neutral" competence contributes to the construction of teachers as mere technicians and offers students linguistic knowledge of simplistic, yes/no decisions, but not knowledge of the discourses that will enable students to actively participate in transforming their lives. This construction, in

turn, interacts with the existing ideological values in society to perpetuate economic, political, and social arrangements that privilege certain groups over others. If we, as teachers, learn to read critically the words we use in our classrooms as well as the world in which these classrooms exist (Auerbach, 1995), we will be taking significant steps toward broadening what is possible for the students we work with each day.

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