



## Developing teachers' critical language awareness: A case study of guided participation



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### ABSTRACT

We explore the role of CLA in teacher development through a high school history teacher's understanding of disciplinary literacy (DL), and his classroom's discourse practices in DL lessons. A Critical Language Awareness (CLA) focus highlights how linguistic practices shape and are shaped by social relations of power. Disciplinary literacy, in this particular case of history, focuses on particular linguistic practices, which are valued in the field and help to understand the discipline as an interpretive community. In this paper, we investigate how CLA can be an effective tool in teacher development. We do this by tracking qualitative changes in the language he produces, we provide linguistic evidence of how a teacher develops a critical language awareness stance, which is ultimately used in classroom teacher talk. Our focus in this paper includes both what changed and how it changed, while the first part of our analysis highlights the qualitative changes in the way he conceptualized the lesson, the second part of the analysis focuses on the types of activities designed showing how his changing understanding translated into particular pedagogical actions; while the last part of the analysis focuses on the teacher's reflection of the designing and using DL lessons.

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### Introduction

Critical Language Awareness (CLA) approaches focus on the development of “operational and descriptive knowledge of the linguistic practices of their world, but also a critical awareness of how these practices are shaped by, and shape, social relationships of power” (Clark, Fairclough, Ivanic, & Martin-Jones, 1990, p. 249). In our work, critical language awareness is part of a functional approach to disciplinary literacy (DL) development in subject matter history in secondary level education. Within this context, this approach to CLA focuses on paying conscious attention to how meanings are made and the consequences these meanings have in terms of disciplinary knowledge construction, and historical understanding. This approach integrates views on how knowledge develops, and the role language plays in this process, as well as the pedagogical strategies that enable knowledge building and language development. A visible pedagogy (Bernstein, 1975), we argue, helps to develop disciplinary knowledge that is constituted as a specialized discourse and creates a space to explore historical texts from a critical perspective. This critical approach to disciplinary literacy and history learning is part of what educators and educational institutions aspire to: teach students how to assess, use, and transform this knowledge. To be able to participate

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in the practices of a community and understand *how* to participate in the particular ways of making meaning of a discipline, teachers and students need to become critically aware of discourse and discourse practices in their discipline.

In the discipline of history, there are particular ways of making meaning that are valued in the field and help to understand the discipline as a discourse community. Historians constitute a discourse community (Gee, 1989) that shares certain practices and has similar goals to examine human experience over time to explain it in temporal and geographical context. Historians commit to scholarly protocols to determine what constitutes appropriate evidence and possible arguments grounded in empirical evidence (Bender, Katz, Palmer, & Committee of graduate education of AHA, 2004) and value particular ways of acting, writing, and talking.

As research in the practices of expert and novices in history has shown (e.g. Leinhardt & Young, 1996; Young & Leinhardt, 1998; Wineburg, 1996; Wineburg, 1998), there are particular ways that characterize expert historians work with texts. To read and write like a historian means dissecting texts (looking closely at wording, syntax, and style); doing multiple readings to search for information, taking into consideration different perspectives and historical context; making classes of documents in order to finally construct a multilayered situation model in relation grand theories. In addition, discourse analysis of the use of language in history (e.g. Coffin, 2006; Martin, 2002; Martin, 2013; Oteiza, 2003; Oteiza & Pinto, 2008; Veel & Coffin, 1996; Unsworth, 1999) has shown that there are unique features that characterize language use in the discipline. This specialized discourse is characterized by particular genres (e.g. recount, factorial explanations), specialized terms (e.g. indentured servant, slave) and technical terms (e.g. culture, society) as well as grammatical patterns (e.g. nominalization, causality in the clause) and voices (e.g. recorder, interpreter). To make this discipline-specific knowledge building resources visible to students requires pedagogic strategies that enable learners to engage in practices similar to the profession and explore how meanings are made in this field (Maton & Martin, 2013).

To be critically aware of how meanings are made in texts and how knowledge is constructed in the discipline requires work that focuses on understanding how linguistic choices construct meanings, and how certain choices naturalize certain perspectives that benefit some, while disadvantage others. This type of CLA entails looking closely at how linguistic choices have historical consequences when analyzing primary source documents (e.g. the declaration of independence or a proclamation); as well as, exploring how secondary sources (e.g. textbooks), which explain the past, construct particular understandings of it that naturalize certain perspectives and have ideological consequences.

What type of work with teachers can provide a learning space to develop this critical language awareness and disciplinary understanding of literacy? We argue that through collaborative work with the teacher, where the teacher and researchers engage in a problem oriented research project that integrates theory, practice, and knowledge construction, professional development can occur.<sup>1</sup> In this case study, through his work in a design experiment<sup>2</sup> that included planning DL lessons, interactions with the researchers surrounding these lessons, and the actual teaching of DL in his history classes, this teacher underwent a qualitative change in his understanding of the complex relationships between texts, history, readers, and language choices. This change can be observed in his ways of talking about the role of language in his lessons and also in the type of DL activities he engaged with his students. In order to track this development in the teacher's conceptualization of DL, we studied the changes in the way this teacher was able to talk about DL when planning and the lessons he taught. By tracking qualitative changes in the language he produced, we provide linguistic evidence of how a teacher develops an attitude toward critical language, or better, a critical language awareness stance, which is ultimately realized in classroom teacher talk and enacted through the design of text analysis activities. Our focus in this paper includes both what changed and how it changed, while the first part of our analysis highlights the qualitative changes in the way he conceptualized the lesson, the second part of the analysis focuses on an activity designed showing how his changing understanding translated into particular pedagogical actions.

### Designing environments for teaching and learning history in multilingual environments

To learn from documents, students need to think not only about *what* is said, but also *how* it is said. History deals with the representation of events and an orientation to them to construct a particular historical gaze (Martin, Maton, & Matruggio, 2010). In teaching history there needs to be a dual focus: on the one hand identifying the representation of reality (*what happened*) and on the other, an analysis and reflection of how those facts are interpreted (*bias and explanation*). History includes both *what* happened as well as an *explanation* of what happened. Developing a concept of disciplinary literacy as a text-based reflection and use of meaning making resources allows teachers and students to explore the power and impact of the choices historians and authors make. We argue that through understanding that historical documents as the product of meaning making practices where language users make choices (conscious or unconscious) from those possible in the system, teachers (and learners) can become more critical about the texts they read and more aware of the choices they make when producing a text.

<sup>1</sup> This project also looked at how this collaborative design process introducing a critical language awareness focus to disciplinary literacy impacted students learning and language development (see Achugar & Carpenter, 2012; Carpenter et al., 2014).

<sup>2</sup> For our work in disciplinary literacy, a design experiment (Achugar & Carpenter, 2012; Brown, 1992; Collins et al., 2004) is one where, in this case, researchers and teachers collaboratively design an intervention based on principles derived from previous research in ways to integrate a functional approach to literacy and then document the implementation and effects of it on student learning and on the teacher's concept of disciplinary literacy.

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