Critical Language Awareness (CLA) through *Sex and the City*: A classroom example

The overall aims of critical language awareness (CLA) are the emancipation and empowerment of students, as outlined by Tainui (2004) in the previous issue of this newsletter. Such aims have a strong appeal for English language teachers who are often working in a context of marginalisation (Kaplan 2000: viii), but 'emancipation and empowerment' may sound too weighty for some teaching situations. For that reason, this article outlines some practical aspects of a CLA approach in a light-hearted context, through the example of some recent one-to-one English teaching.

Rieko had taken time out of her law studies in Japan to study English in Aotearoa New Zealand. She was particularly keen to improve her speaking and listening skills, and was therefore having two months of one-to-one lessons, divided between two teachers. She also wanted to enjoy herself, and in our initial discussions for my half of her classes she identified a wish to understand the last series of *Sex and the City*[1]: a raunchy romp through the romantic exploits of a group of four well-educated, wealthy, white, thirty-something New York women. Screened in the late 'suitable for adults only' timeslot, each episode ran for an hour. Rieko had been taping the episodes so that she could review and try to understand them, and had looked up relevant magazine articles. This level of interest seemed the obvious starting point for a student-centred approach.

Although both Rieko and I had been to New York on brief tourist visits, decoding *Sex and the City* had considerable challenges, and we pooled our complementary areas of knowledge to understand the programmes. I had a better understanding of the language (and the resources to find out many of the unfamiliar usages), and Rieko had a better understanding of the style and fashion references. From our differing backgrounds we managed to piece together a comprehension of the linguistic and cultural content. In spite of the high levels of negotiation of meaning that occurred in each lesson, this was an unusual choice of content area for a language class, as was confirmed by the amused reaction of others when I mentioned it. Their response led me to consider a focus on a CLA.

Classroom examples of CLA tend to be described in contexts where teachers believe social justice is an important focus, such as in Morgan's (1996) description of a lesson focusing on employment issues with immigrant students at a Chinese community centre in Toronto. Examples of tertiary courses with a clear CLA focus are also from situations of social tension, such as Janks' (1999) and Granville's (2003) courses using critical language awareness journals in South Africa. The contexts of these courses align well with the CLA aims of emancipation and empowerment of students. However, as Wallace (1999: 103) points out in relation to her critical reading course in Britain, not all teaching situations are overtly political, and if the principles of CLA are valid they should be able to be applied in all contexts - even a general English course based around *Sex and the City*.

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[1] Now finished, but available on video.

So, how does the busy teacher get from the theory to the practice of CLA? I have found that a good starting point is Roz Ivanič's (1988) checklist of 14 critical objectives for language learning, divided into three areas:
•   critical awareness of the relationship between language and power
•   critical awareness of language variety
•   turning awareness into action
From these objectives, I have developed an evaluation tool for teaching materials, whether in the 'mainstream' or language classroom (Smith 2004: 329-331), and my classes with Rieko were an opportunity to use this tool in a new context.

Once I had committed to incorporating a CLA approach in the class with Rieko, it became obvious that there were plenty of elements to include. I started with an internet search on *Sex and the City*, and located a website which formed the basis of our classes. 'Television without pity' (www.televisionwithoutpity.com[2]) contains scene-by-scene reviews of each episode, and includes much of the dialogue. The reviews are in similar no-holds-barred style to the programmes, and therefore provide a written parallel to the programme itself. Rieko preferred to read and discuss the reviews before watching the programmes. As issues arose I added in other supplementary materials, including some with a more traditional grammar focus, and the benefits of the internet in preparing materials for a one-off course were obvious.

Each of Ivanič's three areas of critical objectives was covered in the following way:

Critical awareness of the relationship between language and power
One of the first differences between *Sex and the City* and other programmes is in the high levels of profane language, and there was a high frequency of 'taboo language' in the first episode we watched. Swear words and censorship on British television are discussed in an informative and entertaining way in Hot English website 'Those bloody Brits: TV and taboo words' on the Hot English website (www.hotenglishmagazine.com, issue 24 - this also provided a whole new perspective on the Mull of Kintyre, as readers will understand if they have a map of Scotland handy). An extensive resource for Japanese 'slanguage' came from Big Knobi Klub's Bad Japanese Words (www.intercom.net/user/logan1/jap.htm). The CLA dimensions were in the censorship decision-making, and the comparison of the origins of profanity in English and other languages, including the Japanese concept of *imikotoba* (www.wordiq.com/definition/profanity and www2.kokugakuin.ac.jp/ijcc/wp/bts/bts_i.html). This led to discussions on the historical power of religion and its effect on language. Other topics included cultural attitudes towards sex, foreigners, physical appearance, and bodily functions. An important feature of Japanese language is the relationship between gender and politeness (Barke 2000), which cut across all of these discussions.

Critical awareness of language variety
Sex and the City has a non-native English speaker as the nanny of one of the main characters, and her communication problems are sometimes used for comic effect. However, the language variety in the episodes Rieko and I watched was most salient in usage by gay and Jewish characters - some of these terms were new and at times a barrier to our understanding. The gay terms we guessed from the context, and our discussions linked back to language and gender mentioned above. The phrase *mazel*

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[2] There are also recaps of many other US television series available on the site.

tov ('good luck'*)*, used at a Jewish wedding led to an interesting kabbalistic explanation of the Hebrew term (www.hebrewletters.com), and again linked back to language and religion. Other Yiddish expressions (*kvell, kvetch, oy*) led to discussions of language borrowings. This is always a relevant topic for Japanese students of English, as they differentiate between the meanings of English borrowings in Japanese and their original English meanings.

Turning awareness into action
The third area of CLA is more challenging to the teacher, because it requires a change from the teacher's role of laying down the law on correctness. Instead, the focus is on explaining what choices are possible and the effects of different usages. *Sex and the City* is a series which focuses on women, and so Rieko and I talked about language change, the different responses to women's use of profane language and language variety, and the use of English by non-native speakers.

By the time our classes came to an end both Rieko and I had learnt a lot; this was a participatory approach to classroom learning (Auerbach 2000). Many of our conversations would not have been possible in most teaching situations, but in a one-to-one situation with two women these lessons were fun, and provided the ideal vehicle for some in-depth CLA discussions.

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank Rieko Tsurii for consenting to this paper being written (and for her comments on the first draft), and the ETC Learning Centre in Palmerston North for providing the teaching context.

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