THE CONSTRUCTION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING
IN MEDIA TEXTS: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS
OF A NEWSPAPER ADVERTISEMENT

Truong Bach Le
College of Foreign Languages, Hue University

Abstract. In this paper, an attempt is made to trace the construction of English language learning in a newspaper advertisement through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). It begins by stating the needs for critical understanding the construction of English language learning in the texts produced by/for English language institutions including media texts. After the expressed stance of analysis, Fairclough's widely adopted CDA model is introduced briefly followed by the actual moves of analysis of the selected advertisement.

1. Introduction

There is no denying that the number of English language learners is increasingly on the rise in Vietnam. The reasons for this phenomenon are well known: socio-economic and political benefits as well as prospects associated with this international language. Instrumental in boosting this popularity of the English language are the English language institutions which both legitimate their educational practices which, in their turn, regulate learner’s lives. The practices of the institutions are embodied in their texts of all kinds including curriculum guidelines, textbooks, notices and media representations. In this sense, apart from official documents, advertisements produced by or for English language institutions can serve to represent their version of reality, i.e., instructional activities and the sort of person the learner is expected to become. Recognizing this opaque relationship between the projected educational reality and media texts, i.e., educational advertisements, requires a critical approach to reading. In this assignment, I attempt to explore this issue by doing a critical discourse analysis of an advertisement from an international English institution in Vietnam- the Apollo Centre. This centre put up an advertisement for its Summer English program for young learners in the April 21, 2006 online version of The Vietnam News Daily (See Appendix), a national English-language newspaper. My assumption is that exploring what these institutions say about their programmes in the advertisement from the perspective of discourse analysis will give insights into how they construct English learning, how they will implement their intentions and how their ideology and practices may influence learners’ identity and the wider society.
2. The stance brought to the text

In approaching the text, I assume that it was written for certain purposes and must be meaningful. The language features in the text should embody the English institution’s representations of the reality and experience of language learning, of its practices, the learners, and its attitudes to language learning as well as its relationships with the reader. In this regard, Halliday (1985) argues that language is a resource for making meanings in order to realise social purposes – language as social semiotic. He defines text as “language that is functional” (ibid., p. 10). Halliday put forward the notion of choice where language, or any other semiotic system, is construed as ‘networks of interlocking options’ (Halliday, 1994: xiv). This resource of options enables language users to create a piece of text – either written or spoken – to communicate meaning. The meaning conveyed is directly dependent on what option within the system is chosen or not chosen. I believe that the language of the text bears traces of its institutional and social contexts, reflecting the constraints of contexts. Halliday (1985, p. 11) says text is “an instance of the process and product of social meanings in a particular context of situation … which is encapsulated in the text, not in a piecemeal fashion, nor in a mechanical way, but through a systematic relationship between the environment and the functional organisation of language”. Another assumption I have about this text is that the information it gives about the English programme will give an idea of how the discourse of English learning and teaching is construed by the institution. The discourse of English learning and teaching here is understood in Foucault’s terms (in Hall, 2001, p. 72): “a group of statements which provide language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment.”

In summary, I attempt to uncover the implicit ideologies of the text as it shapes and is shaped by social practice. In this way, the project needs to examine how the text constitutes the world of English language learning and teaching and vice versa.

3. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

In order to examine the ideological underpinnings in the text, I will use the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is a critical theory of language, which sees the use of language as social practice. Fairclough and Kodak (1997, p. 271-280) summarise the tenets of CDA as follows:

1. CDA addresses social problems
2. Power relations are discursive
3. Discourse constitutes society and culture
4. Discourse does ideological work
5. Discourse is historical
6. The link between text and society is mediated
7. Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory
8. Discourse is a form of social action

Fairclough (1995, p. 132-3) defines CDA as an approach which seeks to investigate systematically:

“[CDA is the study of] often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power.”

I will use Fairclough’s (1992, p.73) three–dimensional model to analyse the texts. In this model, every instance of language use is a communicative event consisting of three dimensions:
- it is a text (speech, writing, visual image or a combination of these);
- it is a discourse practice involving the production and consumption of texts; and
- it is social practice,

This model has been discussed and adopted widely as a tool for text analysis, e.g., Fairclough (1995), Janks (1997), and Jorgensen & Phillips (2002).

According to Fairclough, all three dimensions should be covered in a discourse analysis of a text. The analysis should focus on (1) the language features of the text (text), (2) processing relating to the production and consumption of the text (discursive practice); and (3) the wider social practice to which the text belongs (social practice). The analysis of the language features of text will overlap with analysis of the discourse
The construction of English language learning in media texts…

practice; the relationship between texts and social practice is mediated by discourse practice. The social conditions (social practice) have to be taken into account to explain the choice of text features. Thus, in CDA, “text analysis alone is not sufficient… An interdisciplinary perspective is needed in which one combines textual and social analysis.” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 66).

Fairclough’s (1992) model is informed by different theories. The text level draws on Halliday’s functional grammar and Hodge and Kress’ (1979) perspective on modal choices. At the discourse practice level, Bakhtin’s notion of intertextuality is used. At the social practice level, Fairclough uses Foucault’s notion of discourse and power/knowledge and Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. Halliday’s functional grammar that Fairclough adopts in his framework is based on the relationship between the context of situation and the text as shown in the diagram below (Halliday, 1985, p. 26).

Relation of the text to the context of situation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SITUATION: Feature of the context</th>
<th>TEXT: Functional component of semantic system</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Field of discourse (What is going on)</td>
<td>Experiential meanings (transitivity, naming, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenor of discourse (who are taking part)</td>
<td>Interpersonal meanings (mood, modality, person, etc)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode of discourse (role assigned to language)</td>
<td>Textual meanings (theme, information, cohesive relations)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fairclough uses Bakhtin’s notion of intertextuality to trace the historicity of texts as Bakhtin says:

“The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes one’s own only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word exists… in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from these that one must take the word, and make it one’s own”


This model should fit my assumptions about the text under study for the reason that it offers a tool that refers to both text and context, facilitating comprehensive deconstruction of the text so as to reach a deep understanding of its underlying messages. It is important that Fairclough (1992) provides a detailed list of questions for analysis helpful for treating the text. The order of my analysis will proceed from text to social practice but there may be overlaps in the process if I find it necessary to refer to
the social context to interpret the results of examination of the linguistic features in the text. I will draw on Fairclough’s (1992, pp. 232-238) analysis guide:

**Text**

Interactional control, cohesion, politeness, ethos, grammar (transitivity, theme, mood, modality), word meaning, wording, metaphor

**Discourse Practice**

Interdiscursivity, intertextual chain, coherence, conditions of discourse practice, manifest intertextuality

**Social Practice**

Social matrix of discourse, orders of discourse, ideological effects of discourse (systems of knowledge and belief; social relations, social identities)

4. **Text Analysis**

I will make use of Fairclough’s text analysis questions on cohesion, grammar (transitivity, mood, and modality), word meaning, wording and metaphor. What I do not draw on is interactional control, politeness, and ethos because these features apply to conversational analysis.

**Cohesion**

It is remarkable that the whole text has only one pronoun “they” referring to prospective learners. The lack of pronoun “we” conveys the impersonality of the text producer. There is no surface conjunction marker in the text though it reads smoothly. Fairclough (1992, p. 177) says cohesive markers need to be seen from the view of the text producer: text producers actively set up cohesive relations of particular sorts in the process of positioning the interpreter as subject. In this text, the word most frequently repeated is “fun” (e.g. “fun in the sun” in the title and in “They will enjoy fun, appropriate and easy-to-understand syllabuses”). The repetition of this word suggests the image of learning English as an enjoyable activity. This notion is again reflected in the string of synonymy (e.g. fun, exciting, studying and playing), and in the collocation links (e.g. fun in the sun, Effective-Exciting-Safe, fun, (Summer) camp(s), easy-to understand syllabuses, studying, playing, learning).

A coherent interpretation of this article requires inferential work, which involves reconstructing collocation links. In setting them up, the producer seems to assume a reader subscribing to picking up these collocation relationships. In this text, the lexical cohesion suggests the prominence of learning English as fun for young Vietnamese learners.

**Transitivity**

An examination of the transitivity system of the text shows that the Apollo
institution and its components (e.g. *The Apollo Education and Training organization, Apollo’s summer schedule, the young learners’ courses, syllabuses, etc.*) outnumber learners as Participant and occur in more agentive roles than the learners. The analysis of the transitivity indicates that the Apollo institution seems to assert its role as service provider who organizes the courses and activities for the learners. The following are examples of the analysis:

- *The Apollo Education and Training organization (Actor) is ready to welcome (proc: material) Vietnamese students (Goal) during the summer holiday with a programme entitled Fun In The Sun With Apollo.*

- *The young learners’ courses (Kindergarten, English for Juniors and English for Seniors) (Actor)) will allow (proc: material) students (Goal/Actor) to use (proc: material) English (Goal) as much as possible.*

- *The camps (Actor) target (proc: material) students (Goal) from nine to 15 years old whose English knowledge will be improved through studying and playing with English mother-tongue speakers.*

- *The Singapore Summer Camp (June 11- 24) with the motto Effective-Exciting-Safe (Actor) will bring (proc: material) students (Goal) from nine to 17 years old to the cleanest country in the world.*

Conversely, learners mostly occur as Goal affected by the Apollo institution and its components in material clauses:

- *The Apollo Education and Training organization is ready to welcome Vietnamese students during the summer holiday with a programme entitled Fun In The Sun With Apollo.*

- *The young learners’ courses (Kindergarten, English for Juniors and English for Seniors) will allow students to use English as much as possible.*

- *The camps target students from nine to 15 years old whose English knowledge will be improved through studying and playing with English mother-tongue speakers.*

- *The Singapore Summer Camp (June 11- 24) with the motto Effective-Exciting-Safe will bring students from nine to 17 years old to the cleanest country in the world.*

At the end of the text, there is nominalization, giving a sense of impersonality (*All information about the summer camps will be available there*).

**Theme**

Thematisation in this text obviously adopts the perspective of the Apollo...
Institution. The theme progression of the text is dominated by the Apollo institution and its components which are reflected in topical themes starting each sentence (e.g. Apollo, The Apollo Education and Training organization, Apollo's summer schedule, The young learners' courses, Apollo's three Vietnam Summer camps, The camps, The Singapore Summer Camp). The reiteration of Apollo and its components seems to remind the reader of Apollo as service provider.

**Modality**

It is noteworthy that the entire text is dominated by the modal auxiliary will and the simple present tense, which realises categorical modality. The Apollo Centre expresses high affinity with the reader as well as high certainty about the learning it organizes, as can be seen with the modal auxiliary will in the following sentences: The young learners' courses (...) will allow students to use English as much as possible; They will enjoy fun, appropriate and easy-to-understand syllabuses...; The camps target students from nine to 15 years old whose English knowledge will be improved through studying and playing with English mother-tongue speakers; Students will engage in useful learning and sports activities; The Singapore Summer Camp (June 11-24)...will bring students from nine to 17 years old to the cleanest country in the world.

The simple present tense is used in the headline (Apollo offers fun in the sun), the summary (The Apollo Education and Training organisation is ready to welcome Vietnamese students ....) and the sentence containing information about discount offer (Apollo also offers various discounts and promotions for students wishing to attend). In short, the dominant use of the modal auxiliary “will” conveys the high commitment of service of the Apollo Centre to the prospective customers while the categorical modality (the simple present tense) in the sentences about the admission of Vietnamese students and the discount offer seems to affirm the propositions of the institutions about the social identities of the prospective learners.

**Word meaning, wording and metaphor**

The “key words” in this text include words and expressions about modern English learning such as “develop confidence and fluency in communication” and “appropriate... syllabuses”. Another expression that attracts prospective learners is the assumption of the benefits in learning with English-native speakers (e.g., studying and playing with English mother-tongue speakers). In addition, the title itself “...Fun in the Sun” suggests an implied contrast with the classroom-bound learning dominant in the traditional approach to language learning. These words and expressions are a selling point positioning Vietnamese parents to see this institution as a prestigious international English language teaching institution to send their children to.

The wording patterns reveal several intertextual relations drawn on in the text: the discourse of modern language teaching (developing students' confidence and
The construction of English language learning in media texts...

fluency in English communication), the marketing discourse that conceives English language as commodity (...syllabuses designed with young learners' interests in mind), the military discourse embedded in the promotional discourse as in the metaphor “target” in (The camps target students from nine to 15 years old...), the academic discourse(Apollo will present a seminar...), and also the promotional discourse in (Apollo also offers various discounts and promotions for students wishing to attend). So, ELT as commodity is the dominant discourse in this news article.

5. Analysis of discourse practice

This section examines the discourses (e.g., ways of using language, styles, and genres) that the text producer uses in creating the text. This analysis may overlap with the observations made about the discourses in Wording above. This newspaper article is a hybrid text (intertextual chain) which both gives information on and advertises the Apollo Summer programme. As a news article, it has the layout of a news article containing a title, a summary, the development and elaboration. All the sentences are statements, manifesting a news-giving nature. But the title (e.g. Apollo offers fun in the sun), which has a rhyming expression, has the style of an advertisement. As the article is providing “news” about the Apollo Summer Programme, it uses the vocabulary of this institution’s curriculum. Indeed, checking Apollo’s website at http://www.apolloedutrain.com, one can see course names such as Kindergarten, English for Juniors and English for Seniors. The appearance of this advertisement in the Vietnam News is due to the fact that the Apollo Centre wants to publicise its English programmes among English-literate Vietnamese parents who are mostly social elites willing to buy an opportunity for their children

6. Analysis of social practice

The examination of the formal features of the text allows observations about its ideological effects in terms of systems of knowledge and belief, social relations and social identities. In other words, this section will draw on the text and discourse practice analyses conducted above to reveal the roles assumed, and typical activities engaged in by people who are sympathetic to the constructions of Vietnamese young learners of English, the instructors and the training institution and ways of learning and teaching English that the text invites one to subscribe to.

Beliefs of English learning

Analysis of lexical cohesion, wording, word meaning, shows that the text producer construes an image of English learning for young learners. In this projection, learning English is associated with learning with native-English speakers, playing, and travelling (e.g. The Singapore Summer Camp (June 11-24) with the motto Effective-Exciting-Safe will bring students from nine to 17 years old to the cleanest country in the world).
Social relations

It can be said that the social relations between the text producer and the reader is rather ambivalent. On one hand, there is affinity with the reader reflected in the dominant use of modal auxiliary “will”. On the other hand, the use of all statements gives an impression of information-giving power. There is also impersonality articulated in the lack of the use of the pronoun “we” and “you”.

Social identities

Construction of the Apollo Centre and the learner

In this text, the Apollo Centre is a service provider which arranges everything for prospective learners. It takes much more agency as can be seen in the analysis of transitivity. In contrast, the learner is represented with less agency. Under the organization of Apollo, learners are exposed to the version of reality in which they would be communicative learners living in a globalised world (e.g. The Singapore Summer Camp (June 11-24)...will bring students from nine to 17 years old to the cleanest country in the world). The lack of pronoun “we” conveys the impersonality of the text producer.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I had the opportunity to practise CDA as a multidisciplinary tool for analysing social issues. The analysis has uncovered the ideological underpinnings in an advertisement of an English language programme for young learners in Vietnam. The exploration has demonstrated how language can be used to perpetuate the influence of educational institutions’ views on learner’s lives. In this project, the English programme under examination constructs learners’ identities and their learning through the language in an advertisement which looks like an announcement. The results of analysis were not necessarily the most plausible but only the interpretations carried out by one person following a systematic approach.

References


**Appendix**

**Copy of the advertisement from The Vietnam News**

**Apollo offers fun in the sun**

(21-04-2006)

The Apollo Education and Training organisation is ready to welcome Vietnamese students during the summer holiday with a programme entitled Fun In The Sun With Apollo.

Apollo’s summer schedule officially starts on May 29 with various courses focusing on developing students’ confidence and fluency in English communication. The young learners’ courses (Kindergarten, English for Juniors and English for Seniors) will allow students to use English as much as possible. They will enjoy fun, appropriate and easy-to-understand syllabuses designed with young learners’ interests in mind.

Apollo’s three Viet Nam Summer camps will be presented at Ha Tay Province’s Dam Long resort (June 18-24 and June 25 - July 1) and the Phuong Nam resort in Binh Duong Province (June 18- 24). The camps target students from nine to 15 years old whose English knowledge will be improved through studying and playing with English mother-tongue speakers. Students will engage in useful learning and sports activities. Apollo also offers various discounts and promotions for students wishing to attend.

The Singapore Summer Camp (June 11- 24) with the motto Effective-Exciting-Safe will bring students from nine to 17 years old to the cleanest country in the world.

Apollo will present a seminar entitled Fun In The Sun With Apollo this Sunday at the International Press Centre at 11 Le Hong Phong Street, Ha Noi. All information about the summer camps will be available there. — VNS