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## Critical Literacy and Intercultural Awareness through the Reading Comprehension Strategy of Questioning in Business Language Education

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# Critical Literacy and Intercultural Awareness through the Reading Comprehension Strategy of Questioning in Business Language Education

## **Cover Page Footnote**

This article is partly based on a presentation entitled "From Comprehension to Understanding: Critical Reading in the Second Language," delivered at the Joseph H. Lauder Institute of Management & International Studies at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School on September 5th, 2012.

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CRITICAL LITERACY AND  
INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS THROUGH  
THE READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGY  
OF *QUESTIONING* IN  
BUSINESS LANGUAGE EDUCATION

ABSTRACT

This article is situated at the nexus between critical thinking, literacy, and intercultural awareness, and its goal is to extend the curricular and methodological repertoire of business language programs and instructors. To that end, the article introduces an instructional technique for business language classes that will elevate the learners' level of criticality toward second language texts. The approach is based on the reading comprehension strategy of self-generating questions. Instead of responding to questions raised by the instructor or the textbook, students self-generate questions vis-à-vis the assigned texts. After providing a working definition of critical literacy and an outline of previous research that relates to strategy instruction in literacy-centered foreign language education, the article will illustrate this approach and analyze the question sets that two American students generated in response to a German newspaper article on the actions of anti-consumerist advocacy groups.

KEYWORDS: reading comprehension, reading strategies, critical thinking, intercultural awareness, questioning

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, experts in foreign language pedagogy and business education have extended the educational objectives for business language programs.<sup>1</sup> Whereas this learning environment traditionally placed great emphasis on vocabulary acquisition and business correspondence, instruction has increasingly focused on the development of intercultural competencies

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required for navigating global business cultures (see Ellis & Johnson, 1994; St. John, 1996; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). Despite their complex nature, intercultural competencies are learnable in classroom settings and through social–interactive media frameworks, and new approaches continue to emerge (Kelm, 2009; Hager, 2012). Effective communication across languages and cultures depends not merely on language proficiency, however. It requires critical awareness of beliefs, assumptions, and cultural stereotypes. At the heart of intercultural awareness rests critical thinking, which enables discourse participants to perceive others critically within various cultural contexts and themselves within a cultural context that is perceived as foreign by others (Byram, 1997, 1998; Kramersch, 2009).

## 2. CRITICALITY AND READING

Critical thinking is universally regarded as a crucial educational objective.<sup>2</sup> In US collegiate foreign language education, this learning goal has been highlighted most prominently in the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996) and the 2007 MLA report (MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007). These two documents have had an enormous impact on curricula and instruction in collegiate language programs. Both the National Standards and the MLA report connect criticality to literacy and intercultural awareness.

In the absence of a widely accepted definition of criticality, I will turn to a definition proposed by Ira Shor, one of the most influential thinkers in the context of the critical pedagogy movement in the United States. In his 1992 monograph *Empowering Education*, Shor states that critical literacy enables the learner to:

go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse. (Shor, 1992, p. 129)

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<sup>2</sup>For more information on the role of critical thinking in current US educational policy and planning, see descriptions of the *Framework for 21st Century Skills* (Bellanca & Brandt, 2010) and the Common Core State Standards (Kendall, 2011).

Shor's definition of critical literacy is much broader than the concept of reading comprehension. Conventionally, reading comprehension is simply described as the ability to relate incoming information to existing knowledge structures (Kintsch, 1998). For Shor, comprehension emerges in the interaction between reader, text, and context. It has not only linguistic dimensions but is also based on the reader's evaluation of the text's ideological perspectives, authorial intent, the condition of its production, and its effect on the audience. For second-language readers, such a deep understanding of a text must also include a careful consideration of the cultural context of the linguistic input. Language students can only become a genuinely critical reader of an authentic second-language text if they learn to become sensitive to its contexts and the cultural distance between the position of the reader and the origin of the text. Thus, critical reading in a second language not only requires intercultural awareness but also has the potential to advance it. Therefore, the goal of this article is to illustrate how the reading comprehension strategy of questioning can help learners in business language classes to read expository texts critically and to explore the intercultural dimensions of topics introduced through texts.

### 3. DEVELOPING CRITICAL LITERACY IN THE L2:

#### CURRICULAR AND INSTRUCTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

It might be intuitively appealing to assume that critical literacy simply transfers from the first language to the second language. Indeed, Cummins's (1985) threshold hypothesis claimed that higher-order academic skills—such as critical reading skills—transfer effortlessly into the L2. His widely accepted theory implied that if a learner is able to read critically in his or her native language, this ability will transfer fully and effortlessly into the second language once the learner has reached a certain level of linguistic proficiency in the target language. Empirical research by Bernhardt and Kamil (1995) has demonstrated that transfer plays a significant but much smaller role in second-language reading, however. According to Bernhardt (1991, 2000, 2005), transfer can explain only about 50% of second-language reading ability. This insight has substantiated the understanding that reading needs to be systematically taught in the target language. The curricular context for such a systemic build-up of critical reading skills is a literacy-centered, content-based language program in which students learn the language by experiencing its meaning-making potential from the initial stages of instruction. Bernhardt and Berman (1999) and Byrnes and Kord (2002) document and assess the implementation of undergraduate curricula that integrate language and content

at all levels of the programs. The success of these programs has inspired numerous departments over the last few years to reform their approach to the undergraduate curriculum fundamentally (Swaffar & Urlaub, forthcoming).

Besides the curricular structures that facilitate the acquisition of critical literacy, however, instructors need to extend their repertoire of teaching methods in order to help students to develop critical literacy. To this day, there are relatively few publications on integrated language-culture instruction compared to the large volume of work on integrated language-culture curricula. A notable exception is Swaffar and Arens (2005), who show how learners at the beginning and intermediate stages can develop critical literacy skills by using specific advanced organizers such as the reading matrix and the *précis*. These procedures not only encouraged students to read more critically but also helped them to structure their responses to complex authentic texts in a logical and coherent manner and with sensitivity to cultural contexts and textual implications. This enabled them to explore the intercultural dimensions of texts and topics in a sophisticated way.

In order to expand the options of instructors further, Urlaub (2012, 2013) assessed an approach to foster critical reading and intercultural awareness based on reading comprehension strategy training in second-language literature classes. Urlaub (2012) measured the effectiveness of online training in the reading comprehension strategy of generating questions in an experimental setting and showed that it successfully taught language learners to generate questions that fostered their awareness of the intercultural dimensions of reading a literary text in a second language. The follow-up study (Urlaub, 2013) assessed the effectiveness of this approach based on questionnaire responses from students in the context of an actual program. These studies suggest that training in reading comprehension strategies increases criticality and literary reading skills among beginning and intermediate language learners in higher education. Asking students to self-generate questions in response to literary reading increased their sensitivity to literary genre and helped them to understand texts from within the cultural context of their origin. Although, to date, this teaching approach to critical reading has been developed and assessed in L2 literature instruction, the present article will explore its effects in business language learning environments.

#### 4. READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES

Research on the effects of reading comprehension strategies has been conducted mostly in first-language contexts and in elementary education. Reading researchers consider instruction based on reading comprehension strategies

in first-language context effective (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000, Sec. 4, p. 40).

In addition, researchers have investigated the potential of one particular reading comprehension strategy, namely, the self-generation of questions by the reader. The National Reading Panel has found the “strongest scientific evidence for the effectiveness of asking readers to generate questions during reading” compared to any other single strategy approach (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000, Sec. 4, p. 45). Rosenshine, Meister, and Chapman (1996) identified three advantages of this reading strategy. They argue that it stimulates learners to become more active participants in the reading process, activates existing background knowledge, and fosters self-monitoring. More recently, Taboada and Guthrie (2006) suggested a fourth advantage, namely, that questioning allows readers to recognize and process multiple conceptual levels of a text.

On the basis of Urlaub’s (2012, 2013) work on the reading comprehension strategy of questioning and its effectiveness in advancing critical reading and intercultural explorations in L2 literature classes, this article intends to show the benefits that this approach can bring to a business language learning environment.

## 5. ILLUSTRATION

The student data illustrating the questioning strategy were collected at Stanford University in the context of a content-based intermediate-level language class. The course Advanced Language Studies was intended for learners in the third year of the undergraduate program. The course’s goal was to bring learners to the advanced level of ACTFL’s oral proficiency scale and enable them to articulate, critique, and defend positions in the target language. The instructor selected topics and readings that would facilitate interactions that provided opportunities for lively discussions, so that learners could practice articulating opposing points of view in the classroom. Seven participants were undergraduate students, and one participant was a professional student enrolled in Stanford’s MBA program. None of the students had declared a major in German. Four students had entered the upper division as a result of the department’s placement exam, three had gone through the course sequence in residence, and the MBA student was officially an auditor. The MBA student and two undergraduates had participated in study abroad programs before the beginning of the course. Not untypically for a course in the upper-level curriculum, the group was heterogeneous in terms of linguistic proficiency and cultural exposure to Germanophone societies.

Throughout the semester, students progressed through a series of modules and worked on topics such as the German welfare system, immigration policy, education system, and health care in their European contexts. The selected texts for each module usually came from current online editions of German newspapers. Editorials, guest columns, and articles from papers with a pronounced political affiliation provided opinion-oriented texts that maximized students' opportunities to agree or disagree with, and to defend, their positions.

One of the modules in the course was called *Die Macht des Geldes*.<sup>3</sup> This module was intended to provide students with opportunities to discuss the potential influence of critical consumers and their advocacy groups on the economy and public policy. The two guiding questions in this module were as follows: (1) Do critical consumers and advocacy groups have genuine economic and social-political impact by promoting services and goods from organizations, manufacturers, and retailers that are ideologically aligned with their own goals while boycotting others? (2) How can companies strategize to benefit from this situation and build favorable public perceptions?

Linguistically, this module required learners to express various levels of abstraction and uncertainty, such as wishes, possibility, judgment, opinion, conditionality, and necessity, often in relation to actions that had not yet occurred. In German, as in many other languages, the subjunctive is the grammatical mood to express such ideas. Because the learners had already encountered—in previous classes—the grammatical forms required to form the subjunctive and had partial control over the use of the subjunctive, no formal introduction to the grammar was necessary. Instead, the content of the module and the emerging discussions required students to use this subjunctive in context, and the instructors offered linguistic scaffolding only when necessary.

In what follows, I will illustrate the questioning strategy with the help of two learners' question sets in response to the newspaper article "Konsumkritiker rufen bereits zum dritten Mal zum Kauf-Nix-Tag auf,"<sup>4</sup> which was published in November 2006 in the *TAZ*, a widely circulated leftist daily aimed at an educated urban readership.<sup>5</sup> The 390-word-long article describes the actions and motivations of organizers and participants in an anti-consumerist awareness day at the beginning of the holiday shopping season. Inspired by

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<sup>3</sup> Translation: "The Power of Money"

<sup>4</sup> Translation: "Consumer advocacy groups announce Buy-Nothing-Day for the third time"

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.taz.de/1/archiv/archiv/?dig=2006/11/25/a0106>



activists in the United States attempting to raise awareness among citizens in the context of the start of the holiday shopping season on Black Friday, German activists staged protests in shopping districts to call on citizens not to buy anything on that particular day and to rethink their impact as consumers in general.

The text was discussed in class just before the beginning of the Thanksgiving recess. In preparation, learners were instructed to read the texts at home and to generate four questions in German in response to the text. In contrast to Urlaub (2012, 2013), who described learning environments where learners acquired the ability to generate a variety of different question types that facilitated literary interpretations through a Web tutorial at the beginning of the semester, the students in this class were trained to generate questions in response to the assigned readings throughout the semester. The four questions had to be submitted via email to the instructor the night before the class. Table 1 shows the question sets submitted by two individual learners, both in German and with English translations.

## 6. DISCUSSION

The question sets demonstrate that the reading comprehension strategy helped both learners to read the text critically, to consider its implications, and to reflect on the intercultural dimensions of the issues that the text brought up. Both learners show critical interaction with the text on multiple levels: Not only do they consider their personal choices as consumers in an industrialized nation, but they also question the positions and strategies of the anti-consumerist advocacy groups articulated in the text. Moreover, the last question of each question set reveals the intercultural dimension of their critical reflections.

Kate, a 20-year-old undergraduate student majoring in art history and industrial design, reflects with her first question on the difference between the consumption of essential goods and unnecessary luxury items. By suggesting that there are goods essential for survival, this query exposes the fact that the activists' call to buy nothing for one day is largely a symbolic act. Her question provided the class with an opportunity to list items and services that they would consider either essential or luxurious. Students did not always agree, but different opinions gave the class opportunities to argue about, and defend, their viewpoints. Her second and third questions indicate that she identifies with the activists' cause. By choosing the second-person-plural personal pronoun, "was koennen *wir* tun,"<sup>6</sup> she not only suggests that

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<sup>6</sup> Translation: "what can we do"

TABLE 1: QUESTION SETS FROM TWO LEARNERS

Name†	Question in German	English translation
Kate	Es ist unmöglich, gar nichts zu kaufen. Was müssen wir kaufen, und was koennen/sollen wir nicht kaufen?	It is impossible to buy nothing. What do we have to buy, and what can/shall we not buy?
	Ausser <i>Kauf-Nix-Tag</i> , was koennen wir tun, um Menschen zu zeigen, wie sie weniger konsumieren kann?	In addition to the <i>Buy-Nothing-Day</i> , what can we do to show people how they can consume less?
	Was wuerde zu der Menschheit passieren, wenn wir unsere Verbraucherbewegunen nicht aendern?	What would happen to humanity, if we do not change our consumer habits?
	Es gibt kein <i>Thanksgiving</i> in Deutschland. Warum gibt es in <i>Black Friday</i> ?	There is no Thanksgiving in Germany. Why is there <i>Black Friday</i> ?
Erin	Existiert <i>Kauf-Nix-Tag</i> nur fuer Umweltgruenden, oder ist es mehr eine allgemeine Behauptung gegen grosse Konzerne?	Does the <i>Buy-Nothing-Day</i> only exist for environmental reasons, or is it more a general statement against big corporations?
	Hat dieser Tag wirklich eine anhaltende Wirkung auf das Benehmen von Leuten und wie sollen Firmen reagieren?	Does this day really have a permanent effect on people's behavior and how should companies react?
	Wuerden Sie an „Kauf-Nix-Tag“ teilnehmen?	Would you participate in <i>Buy-Nothing-Day</i> ?
	Ist das Kaufbenehmen von jungen Menschen in Deutschland genau so wie in den USA? Ich glaube nicht...	Is the consumer behavior of young people in Germany identical to that in the United States? I do not think so...

†The names were changed to protect the participants' identities.

further actions need to be taken that go beyond symbolic acts described in the article, she also associates herself with the advocacy group and disassociates herself from ordinary consumers, whom she describes simply as “Menschen.”<sup>7</sup> Both questions encouraged her peers to take the role of anti-consumerist activists, to formulate possible actions, and to hypothesize the outcome of such activities. As a result, students not only thought more creatively and critically about activism, they also had ample opportunities to use the subjunctive mood. Kate’s fourth question articulates an intercultural observation that initially appears to be rather superficial, but it triggered an important discussion. The observation that both Black Friday and the Thanksgiving Holiday do not exist in Germany inspired a discussion about the rather odd strategy of the anti-consumerist advocacy group to “import” their protest, adopting a format closely linked to traditions of a uniquely American holiday. One student remarked that the anti-consumerist advocacy groups appeared to be as hegemonic as many of the corporations they criticized. Others went further and read this strategy as an interculturally insensitive action by the advocacy groups.

Erin’s questions are more varied than Kate’s. They are also more skeptical of the motives of the activists. A 26-year-old graduate student enrolled in an MBA program, her first question raises doubts that the advocacy groups’ actions are solely motivated by environmental concerns and suggests that more general anti-capitalist tendencies are the driving force behind the protest. Although some learners expressed the view in the subsequent discussion that these two ideological positions are largely inseparable, it was important for all students to understand that there may be a number of different but potentially interrelated reasons for activists to call for a boycott of retailers on Black Friday. The discussion also allowed students to hypothesize conditions that would motivate corporations to adopt environmentally sustainable practices within the framework of a free market economy. Erin’s second question further shows that her views tend to be more strongly aligned with the perspectives of corporations. Although the question expresses doubt about the long-term effects of the boycott on consumer behavior, she focuses on possible strategies for retailers and manufacturers to minimize potential losses in revenue as a result of an increasingly environmentally aware citizenry. Her last question introduces an intercultural dimension by challenging the text’s assumption that young people in Germany and the United States are similar in their behavior as consumers. This intercultural observation was a result of

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<sup>7</sup> Translation: “people”

her more critical view of the motivations and impact of the anti-consumerist advocacy group's activities.

The question sets show that learners can direct their criticality toward a variety of discourses. As we can see, Kate clearly identifies with the actions of the anti-consumerist groups and is critical of retailers and manufacturers who maximize profits by engaging in practices that threaten the environment. This is a perhaps more conventional understanding of criticality and ideologically more in line with Ira Shor's position because it questions fundamental principles of our economic system. By contrast, Erin's criticality targets the motivations and actions of the anti-consumerist groups themselves. This shows that questioning is a strategy that allows readers to become critical without being ideologically confined to a position that opposes the economic and political status quo.

## 7. IMPLICATIONS

The comprehension strategy of self-generated questions to foster critical literacy and intercultural awareness in the context of a business language class generated a number of insights that relate to the specific learning environment of a business language class.

First, the student responses to the newspaper article displayed critical stances and showed the multidirectional nature of critical literacy. Students used the strategy not only to criticize excessive consumerism and the role of large corporations but also to question the motivations and effectiveness of the anti-consumerist advocacy groups. The questioning strategy provided learners with the foundation to form a critical position with the characteristics of Shor's (1992) definition of critical literacy above.

The question sets submitted by the two students illustrate that this teaching approach gives learners opportunities to connect criticality with intercultural awareness. Both learners used the questioning strategy to compare and contrast issues raised in the German newspaper text with their perceptions of their native country. Not only did this process raise the intercultural awareness of the learners, it also helped them to initiate discussions that revealed the cultural insensitivities of both international corporations and consumer advocacy groups. Moreover, formulating intercultural observations in the form of questions had the advantage that the learners avoided cultural stereotypes and clichés.

The described approach created a student-centered classroom, since students rather than the teacher raised the questions when discussing the texts, and in doing so they shaped the classroom discourse to a large extent.

Because individual students had different perspectives and positions on issues raised in the text, the technique created a classroom that gave learners an opportunity to express their reaction to a text in the form of questions that led to the discussion of a broad variety of viewpoints. In this process, the instructor's role shifted from raising questions to moderating exchanges based on the students' questions. If instructors serve as facilitators, learners are more likely to take the initiative (Finkel, 2000).

Introducing controversial topics through expository texts has great potential in advanced language classes. Biased texts are more complex to process, because students not only have to comprehend the language and the socio-cultural context, they also have to understand the author's intentions and the publisher's motivations. Without developing this interpretive ability, learners will not be able to read texts critically in a large range of genres. Texts that discuss controversial topics have the potential to elicit stronger reactions from students, who feel the urge to defend or oppose the positions expressed in these texts. Unfortunately, textbook publishers are often reluctant to use authentic texts that introduce controversial topics or that represent a distinct point of view. Admittedly, some students have a tendency to respond more emotionally and less analytically to a text that they perceive to be biased. Others may be reluctant to express opinions in opposition to those expressed in the text because they assume that the selection of the text indicates the political opinions of the instructor. The questioning strategy, however, allows students to approach controversial topics without immediately having to take, and defend, a position. It helps them to approach controversial topics more analytically, and by requiring them to interrogate the texts' viewpoints critically, students feel less reluctant to express opinions that stand in opposition to those expressed in the readings.

## 8. CONCLUSION

This article introduced and analyzed the effectiveness of the reading comprehension strategy of questioning to foster critical literacy and intercultural awareness in business language education. Originally developed to advance literary reading in a second language, the self-generation of questions stimulated learners to interact critically with an expository second-language text on the actions of anti-consumerism advocacy groups. In addition, students used questions to make intercultural observations. This approach helped learners to avoid expressing their observations in the form of stereotypical statements. Questions not only foster the criticality of learners, they also stimulate classroom discussions. Allowing learners to generate questions

results in a student-centered learning environment. Instead of initiating discussions, the instructor shifts toward moderating and offering linguistic scaffolding when necessary.

The reading comprehension strategy of questioning can help instructors to generate learning environments that help students to become more critical readers and more interculturally aware discourse participants. Business language instructors who value students who can generate, formulate, defend, and tolerate multiple viewpoints vis-à-vis a broad variety of topics will benefit from asking their students to self-generate questions in response to their course readings.

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