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READING THE NEWS
A pilot study on Italian students' understanding of English journalistic texts

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Abstract – English newspaper headlines use non-standard morpho-syntactical and lexical features rendering meaning opaque or ambiguous, even for native speakers (Montcomble 2018). Steeped in culturemes and ideological stances, news discourse is constructed in specific socio-cultural contexts and therefore needs considerable cognitive effort and lingua-cultural competence for the non-native speaker to fully understand. Using online newspapers in the L2 classroom is thus a double-edged sword: on the one hand, students are exposed to authentic, situated language that reports on current affairs and socio-cultural issues, thus enriching their learning experience; on the other, the teacher has the onerous task of unravelling the obscurities intrinsic to the language of newspapers. This contribution reports on action research carried out in an L2 classroom of a post-graduate International Studies programme at the University of Pisa. The classroom practice aimed to encourage students to critically engage with news texts, focusing on three learning objectives: 1. to unpack and infer meanings from news headlines; 2. to apply a critical discourse analysis tool kit (Machin and Mayr 2012) to the construal of news discourse; 3. to reflect critically on and discuss the content of selected news articles presented in class. The dataset includes transcriptions of extracts from the classes streamed and recorded on Microsoft TEAMS, and survey feedback from the students who participated on the successes and failures of the classroom practice.

Keywords: critical literacy; critical discourse analysis; EFL teaching; cross-cultural pragmatics; news discourse.

1. Introduction

The defining feature of the Information Age (Castells 1996/2010) is the nexus between power and access to information. English is the major linguistic hegemonic force through which knowledge and information is disseminated across the globe. Considering these two unassailable facts, it is hardly surprising that the international labour market seeks graduates who are proficient in English, especially those possessing "a *higher reading faculty*" (my emphasis) (Park 2011, p. 25). Yet, notions of what "a higher reading faculty" might entail have radically changed since the dawning of the internet. Reading and understanding a digital text requires skills that go beyond mere word recognition and linguistic decoding. The combined effects of globalisation and digitalisation bring non-native speakers into daily contact

with online resources such as news websites, streaming platforms and social media whose comprehension entails not only second language (L2) semantic competence but also multimodal literacy, L2 pragmatic proficiency, and crucially, *critical* reading skills. Park (2011) has argued that critical reading should be an essential part of teaching English as a second language. In her view, L2 critical literacy "should involve meaningful practice that shifts the goal from rote learning to the development of individuals who are able to use cultural as well as text-based linguistic resources to personally generate a number of possible meanings" (p. 24). L2 teaching practice needs to facilitate students' comprehension of underlying suppositions, ideological slanting, and cultural references that can be hidden from a non-native speaker and impede holistic understanding. This article argues that these tenets are particularly relevant in the circulation of international news. Furthermore, developing critical reading skills promotes student engagement with intercultural and socio-cultural issues while encouraging a critical reflection on the themes ensuing from the news text.

Building on Park's (2011) empirical account of teaching critical literacy skills in the EFL classroom at a South Korean university, this contribution reports on a small-scale project of action research carried out on a class of mainly Italian postgraduates completing an International Studies programme at the University of Pisa. The main objectives of the module were to cultivate the students' critical reading of online news discourse and raise their awareness to the ideologically loaded language of the various online anglophone news brands.[1] The data was gathered during a 42-hour (6 ECT credits) module in "English Language" held during the second semester of the academic year 2020-21. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the lessons were streamed on the Microsoft TEAMS platform, and recorded. The entire corpus consists of 42 hours of teaching time.

The first half of the teaching module was specifically designed as a critical literacy course that focused on news discourse. Bearing in mind that the students were not specialists in foreign languages or linguistics as such, a broad-brush introduction to tenets from multimodal critical discourse studies, media and journalism studies and cross-cultural pragmatics formed the basis for the opening lectures. A simplified CDA tool kit adapted from Machin and Mayr's (2012) *How to do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction* was also illustrated. These theoretical and methodological approaches were then applied to the analysis of a series of online news texts carried out during task-based open discussion lessons. For their final evaluation, students were asked to deliver a short presentation on their analysis

[1] The term "news brands" has to a large extent supplanted the word "newspaper" since it incorporates both online and traditional newspaper formats. The term "brand" also lends weight to Fowler's (1991, see Section 3) posit that a news text is a cultural product.

of a news text or texts of their choice and write a short essay on one of the social issues discussed in class. The module therefore attempted a more sophisticated and "critical" version of the presentation, practice, production (PPP) approach to instructional design.

Outcomes indicate that, when guided towards a critical reading of a text, these EFL students were able to apply the analytical tools that CDA affords in order to reveal implicit meanings in news discourse. Furthermore, they were able to recycle lexical resources from the texts discussed and draw on their own cultural and personal experience to support their ideas and raise questions in both written and oral production. In accordance with Park's (2011) findings and in contrast with the view that language learners tend to be passive readers of information, the students in the current study actively voiced their opinions through discussion and response papers. The results from the study indicate that online news articles provide a valuable springboard from which critical thinking in the EFL reading classroom can be stimulated.

The article is divided into five sections. The following section (2) outlines the theoretical approaches underpinning the action research described. Section three provides details of the methods adopted, while Section four discusses a sample of the data and reflects on the outcomes. For the purposes of this contribution, selected excerpts from the lessons are presented in the form of transcribed video recordings of classroom interaction. Other forms of data include the results of a sample survey on student evaluation of the course. The article concludes (Section five) with a reflection on the pros and limitations of the study and directions for future research.

2. Critical points

The term "critical thinking" has many delineations but here it is used with the acceptation of a "reflective social practice" that questions or even challenges conventional attitudes and norms instead of "unwittingly accepting the status quo" (Gieve 1998, p. 124). From this overarching concept, a more refined definition of critical literacy can be carved out as "the ability to engage critically and analytically with ways in which knowledge, and ways of thinking about and valuing this knowledge, are constructed in and through written texts" (Hammond, Macken-Horarik 1999, p. 529). In educational settings, the revised descriptors for the "Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area" (2018)[2] clearly indicate that critical thinking is a fundamental skill required in every academic field at postgraduate level. According to the framework, by the end of this second cycle of higher education, students should

[2] http://ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/EHEAParis2018_Communique_AppendixIII_952778.pdf.

be able to "integrate knowledge, handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete or limited information that requires *analysis and interpretation*" while "*reflecting on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgements*" (my emphasis). This becomes a highly complex issue in the context of EFL. As Park (2011, p. 24) points out, "English has become one of the most important tools for global communication" via texts of various types, and English as foreign language (EFL) students "now encounter information in English through the traditional media, websites, e-journals, and advertisements". From a multimodal perspective, these digital formats also require a broader definition of the term "literacy" to include other semiotic modes that need unravelling beyond the strictly linguistic in order to grasp the full meaning-making potential of a text. *The Common Framework of Reference for Intercultural Digital Literacies* (CFRIDiL) (Sindoni *et al.* 2019) aims to promote the development of multimodal literacy skills in students precisely because:

> everyday communication and interaction in online and digital environments involves a complex and intertwined set of abilities, given that artefacts, texts and interactions (1) involve more than language, as they always combine a wide range of auditory and visual meaningmaking resources (such as still and moving images, music and sounds, fonts, layout and colour, gesture etc.), and (2) take place in multiple interconnected spaces and platforms with potential for transnational circulation and reach, thus requiring intercultural sensitivity and awareness in shaping one's own communications and in making meaning out of those produced by others intended to integrate digital literacies and proficiency in English for international communication that are essential requirements for graduates' access to today's European job market

While the project does not explicitly refer to critical literacy, from the above description of the "complex and intertwined abilities" necessary today for effective communication it is nevertheless clear that discernment, awareness, and critical thinking play a fundamental role.

Yet, with regards to developing criticality, Gómez Jiménez and Gutiérrez (2019, p. 92) observe that in ESL contexts "learners are just taught to communicate in the target language (L2) without questioning the underlying messages and power ideologies conveyed through the L2". Engaging with the critical analysis of texts to grasp their explicit and implicit meanings entails great commitment on the part of both instructor and students. Particularly if, as in the action research discussed here, students are presented with a set of analytical tools with which to enhance their understanding of the online texts under examination and exercise their social agency using the target language. Before explaining a little more in detail the approach to this question, first a few words on the role of cross-cultural pragmatics in the negotiation of meaning in L2 contexts.

2.1. Intercultural pragmatics in L2 reading skills: understanding the news

The focus of this contribution is the development of L2 learner's critical reading skills with specific regard to the newspaper genre. The rationale for the study was related to the curriculum of the students who were postgraduates in the department of political science following an international studies programme. It therefore seemed imperative to me that they were guided in how to critically read anglophone news discourse because as mentioned in the introduction, English is the predominant language in global communication. However, journalistic texts are steeped in cultural references and ideological positionings that are largely aimed at a specific news brand's domestic audience. On a pragmatic level, the implicit meanings and presuppositions are interwoven and construed within a specific socio-cultural context. In the case of intracultural communication these assumptions "are typically taken for granted" (Culpeper, Haugh 2014, p. 55) and can be deciphered by an L1 speaker but for L2 students they often impede understanding. As Kecskés (2014, p. 2) points out, "What standard pragmatics assumes about how things work in communication depends on there being commonalities and conventions between speakers and hearers that can hardly be counted on cross-culturally". In other words, news texts containing culturally or ideologically specific information whose presuppositional triggers are easily interpreted by the native speaker will often elude the foreign language student. Grundy's (2007) study on the evolution of pragmatic inference in intercultural communication reflects on the extent to which the focus in second language teaching, particularly at the more advanced levels, should "be so strongly on language and semantic meaning rather than on context and pragmatic meaning" (2007, p. 234). He argues that teaching pragmatic inference should be an integral part of the L2 curricula introduced in four stages that are based on the students' level of L2 competency. Stage 3 corresponds to an intermediate level (CEFLC B2), the same level as the English module that is object of this study. At B2 level, Grundy proposes a methodology of second language instruction whereby

> learners are encouraged to recognize that form, meaning and context are not necessarily in an invariant relationship, that particular contexts license different interpretations of the same form and that different forms may have the same communicative value

In order to unpack the implicit meanings embedded in news texts, alongside the hermeneutical tenets of intercultural pragmatics, I adopted the tools of critical discourse analysis as proposed in Machin and Mayr (2012). Although their simplified approach to CDA is tacitly aimed at an L1 audience, I adapted

their frameworks, streamlining them further for L2 learners of English who are not language students. What follows is a brief outline of the general aims and scope of what is now broadly defined as critical discourse studies.

2.2. Critical Discourse Analysis in the L2 classroom

In his seminal work, Fowler (1991) argued that news is not immutable fact but rather it is socially constructed. The selection of events that are reported in newspapers is not a reflection of their intrinsic importance: the filtering processes adopted are in fact a "complex and artificial set of criteria for selection" (1991, p. 2) in which linguistic choice plays a crucial role. According to Fowler (1991, p 1), news producers manipulate language in order to form ideas and beliefs, affirming that, "Language is not neutral but a highly constructive mediator". In other words, ideological perspectives influence the (de)selection of information and choice of words that represent reality in a certain way to a given audience. Written over thirty years ago, Fowler's posits remain the cornerstones of critical discourse studies, alongside Fairclough (1995), van Dijk (2007), and Wodak (1989). Since then, news production has undergone radical changes due to digitalisation and globalisation, nevertheless the issues surrounding the instrumental (multimodal) representation of events in the news media is just as, if not more, relevant today (cf. Filmer 2021).

Van Dijk (2007) has also described critical discourse studies as the study of implicit or indirect meanings alluded to without being explicitly expressed. Providing a wide spectrum of methodologies and theoretical perspectives,[3] CDS offer a series of viewpoints from which to analyse the way discourse is presented, consciously or unconsciously, through linguistic choices. What is common to all critical discourse theory is the aim of revealing ideological manipulation and the power dynamics involved in the propagation of knowledge. While such aims may seem beyond the scope of an L2 language class, on a very practical level, CDA can simply be conceived as a 'set of tools' with which to carry out an analysis of language (Fairclough 1995; Kress 1986; Machin, Mayr 2012; Van Dijk 1991; Van Leeuwen, 1996; Wodak 1989). As Machin and Mayr (2012, p. 2) explain, "CDA helps to understand how speakers and authors use language and grammatical features to create meaning, to persuade people to think about events in a particular way, sometimes even seek to manipulate them while at the same time concealing their communicative intentions". In L1 educational settings, Hammond and Macken-Horarik (1999) point out that the discussion of linguistic choices on text construction and the development of students' metalanguage creates awareness of the ways in which text can be analysed, deconstructed, compared,

[3] https://www.edisoportal.org/debate/115-cda-not-method-critical-discourse-analysis.

critiqued and ultimately reconstructed. They go on to state that "Awareness of what writers have chosen to include, as well as what they have chosen to exclude, assists students in focusing on the kinds of assumptions that writers make and how, as readers, they are positioned by these assumptions" (p. 531). Despite its relevance in contemporary societies, critical literacy is rarely taught across lingua-cultures and research into the possible outcomes of its adoption in the L2 classroom is very much lacking. Predictably, none of the students involved in this study had previously experienced reading English through a critical discourse analysis perspective. Their past encounters with reading in L2 learning environments had focused on comprehension, translation of words and sentences, and the memorization of vocabulary. By encouraging L2 students to examine some of the linguistic features of newspaper articles, they begin to appreciate that language contributes to the ways in which meaning is constructed and to discern between fact and opinion, the boundaries of which are extremely blurred in news discourse.

2.3. Why newspapers?

Fostering an interest in current affairs, developing a critical reading of media discourse, and promoting awareness to the power of language are crucially important aspects to formation of the next generation (Alvermann, Phelps 2005; Park 2011). From a pedagogic perspective, it has long been recognised in the EFL classroom that (digital) newspapers represent an invaluable source of cultural information as they "reflect the culture through language they contain" (Sanderson 1999, p.2-3). Apart from providing original raw material for creating grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension practice (Elmadwi 2014) they also provide a useful way to initiate and develop critical conversations because they offer authentic, meaningful texts through which to explore different cultural and personal interpretations. The advantages of using online newsbrands for instructional purposes can be summed up into two main points. First, they are easily available online, they are multimodal often containing video clips that can be exploited as listening practice. Secondly, they stimulate class debate if chosen strategically to arouse the students' interest.

From an intercultural perspective, as Park (2011, p. 27) points out, "Students bring their own cultural assumptions and experiences to interpreting the L2 text, news articles can enable students to build on and question their own cultural meanings and uses of literacy". Sanderson (1999, p. 2-3) highlights the rich source of cultural meanings embedded in newspaper articles, stating,

> They provide cultural information at a much deeper level. This is achieved through the cultural associations of words, and the shared experiences,

> knowledge, values, beliefs, emotions and attitudes that a writer assumes. Newspapers are an invaluable source of such information, and the more widely students read, the greater understanding of this socio-cultural meaning this would be.

What Sanderson (1999) does not mention is the tribalisation (Orengo 2005) process that news undergoes when it is produced for different news brands "whose readership is positioned in relation to their political orientation" (Orengo 2005, p. 176). In other words, the "framing of international news and events is tailored to different newspaper audiences within a language community, thus addressing different social groups and different ideological slants" (Filmer 2021, p. 18-19). This requires, then, a double level of effort on the part of the student, firstly to grasp the English and the overall meaning of the text and then decipher the ideological and political imprinting of the news bias. This is where a critical reading approach comes to the fore. Having awareness of why and what the writer is presenting is the foundation to understanding. Before attempting a reading of the body of the news article, however, the first hurdle is to grasp the meaning of the headline.

2.4. Making sense of headlines

Headlines play a central role in the comprehension of news texts (van Dijk 1988). According to Molek-Kozakowska (2013, p. 185), "headlines are primary semantic framing devices. This means that their lexical choices and syntactic patterning are instrumental to how [the] subsequent text is to be comprehended and evaluated". Considered one of the most creative areas of journalistic writing (Crystal 1987, p. 388), and a form of text macrostructure (van Dijk 1988, p. 77), headlines aim to orient reader's attention and guide perception during the reading process. They are, however, notoriously cryptic. Linguistically, "headlinese" employs non-standard morpho-syntax and lexical choice in such a way as to create ambiguity and render meaning opaque, even for an anglophone audience (Montcomble 2018). The obscure cultural references, puns, and the "distinctive telegraphic syntax" (Bell 1989, p.185) render their understanding particularly challenging for foreign students. However, their persuasive function is paramount, and consequently from a linguistic point of view are valuable resources in the classroom. For this reason, considerable time was devoted to decoding the meanings interwoven in the headlines of the texts analysed in class so as to reap the full meaning making affordances. Students were first introduced to the posits of critical discourse analysis, and then guided in the comprehension of headlines through examining the strategies adopted by news producers; noun strings, deviant syntax, ellipsis, nominalisation, alliteration, metaphor, verb forms used in headlines, etc.

3. Research methodology – data and setting

The main aims of the module were for the students to gain ownership of what they read and to develop a critical approach to reading news texts written in English. The course was designed as an ESP module for a postgraduate programme in International Studies. Lectures were not obligatory as is the norm in Italian Universities but a consolidated group of approximately twenty-five students regularly attended lessons. The course was held remotely in accordance with the emergency measures in place at the time due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The lectures were streamed on the Microsoft Platform, TEAMS and recorded. The corpus of classroom interaction consists in 21 lectures for a total of 42 hours. For space constraints and for the ends of this qualitative study, examples of exchanges have been extracted from particularly productive lessons focusing on the students' participation and comments. Alongside the video recordings, an online survey of students' feedback, plus their written essays allow for a triangulation data sources. As explained in Section 1, the course began with a series of framing theoretical lectures to situate the analyses that were to follow.

The following critical discourse analysis tools (Machin, Mayr 2012) were explained and illustrated with authentic examples drawn from recent newspaper articles:

1. How lexical choice influences meaning-making;
2. Language and identity: representational strategies such as the classification of social actors; nomination versus functionalisation (van Leeuwen 1996); suppression; "us" versus "them" divisions;
3. The art of persuasion: metaphor and rhetoric;
4. Committing and evading: truth, modality and hedging in news reporting;
5. Representing what people say, quoting verbs, reported speech, and translated quotes of foreign elites in news discourse;
6. Nominalisation and presupposition

Subsequently, an overview was provided of the different genres and ideological stances of the most important British and American news brands. Having established the foundations and aims of the course, the second part of the module was devoted to open class discussions in which students were guided in the application of the critical discourse frameworks they had studied to an ad hoc selection of news texts on social issues and themes that were represented from different ideological perspectives. During the discussions, I performed two functions: conversation facilitator and intervener. As conversation facilitator, I listened, took notes, and asked questions to prompt students to elaborate their ideas. As intervener, I asked the students to examine certain assumptions they had made further. I also openly shared my own cultural assumptions to make them aware of the fact that we are all susceptible

to cultural filters. In this way, teaching critical thinking is "neither an unguided free-for-all nor a didactic lecture but a balance between extended student contributions and gentle challenges by the teacher" (Benesch 1999, p. 578).

Finally, the evaluation of learning outcomes was based on three aspects: the students' participation in class debates; a PowerPoint presentation prepared and delivered on the critical analysis of a news text (or texts) of the student's choice applying the CDA tools that had been discussed and illustrated during the lectures; a short discursive essay (approx 500 words). As a pre-oral exam filter (those not reaching the pass mark on the essay could not accede to the final oral exam), four essay titles were given on themes that reflected the module contents:

1. The human right to live…and to die? Discuss with reference to abortion, euthanasia, culture and religion.
2. Globalisation: what are the positive and negative aspects of this socio-cultural, political, and economic phenomenon?
3. Defamation and the freedom of speech: how far can we go? Discuss with examples and reference to new media, social media and the traditional press.
4. Crime and Punishment: is there ever any justification for the death penalty?

The four topics were amply debated during the classes through a carefully selected range of online news texts from different sources that dealt with the chosen themes from different ideological and newspaper genre perspectives. The texts were first skimmed in order to get the gist of the contents and overall meaning and then examined using CDA tools, focussing on headlines, choice of language, and representational strategies. Students were encouraged to voice their opinions and discuss not only the language but also the ideological implications of the way news is presented.

In accordance with Benesch (1999), the present study affirms that ESL instruction in higher educational settings can be enhanced through a dialogical approach to critical thinking. English language needs and the development of social and political awareness can and should be approached simultaneously, especially in the educational context in which this study was carried out, the Department of Political Science. As Benesch (1999, p. 576) explains, "Teaching critical thinking dialogically allows students to articulate their unstated assumptions and consider a variety of views. The goal is not just to exchange ideas but also to promote social justice". Soliciting non-native speakers to articulate sometimes complex ideological positions in halting, less than fluent English may be viewed as counterproductive in the foreign language classroom. It is argued here, however, that students often make a special effort to communicate their ideas and beliefs, despite linguistic limitations, precisely when they hold views on potentially controversial and

sensitive issues. This study falls within the domain of action research, which is teacher-initiated and entails a reflexive approach towards classroom practice with the aim of improving teaching methods and enhancing the quality of student learning (Edge 2001). As Clark et al. (2020, p.7) affirm, action research offers a path to more "deliberate, substantial and critical reflection that can be documented". What follows are some qualitative samples and analytical comments that exemplify classroom interaction and provide cues for further investigation.

4. Findings and discussion: the data

This section presents some examples of responses and reactions to the news texts discussed with the students during lessons, highlighting their critical engagement with textual and cultural practices portrayed in the articles. Discussion questions helped students compare and contrast opinions. The guided analyses were designed to prime the students for the presentations they were expected to prepare as part of their final evaluation.

The articles to be discussed in class were uploaded on the course webpage before each lesson so that the students could read them beforehand. They were asked to focus on the linguistic choices and make notes in order to exchange ideas in class. For space constraints, I have sampled and commented on one class debate and analysis to illustrate the approaches adopted in the classroom. The news texts selected demonstrate the socio-cultural stereotyping embedded in anglophone news discourse (Conboy 2006), and the very different ways that the same news is represented in two ideologically opposed news brands.

4.1. Discussion and recycling of lexicon from the texts

Two articles on domestic news dealing with related discursive events were compared and analysed from a CDA perspective in the classroom. The first digital news text entitled "Pharmacist refused to give morning after pill on a Sunday 'for personal reasons'" was taken from *Metro* (Olsen 2019),[4] a free tabloid distributed in most urban centres across the UK. The second dealt with a very similar incident that took place a year later and was reported in the left-wing quality news brand, the *Guardian* (Blackall 2020),[5] under the headline "Lloyds Pharmacy apologises again for emergency contraception refusal". This type of exercise aimed to highlight the ways in which language can be

[4] 18 June 2019, *Metro*. https://metro.co.uk/2019/06/18/pharmacist-refused-give-morning-pill-sunday-personal-reasons-9972138/.

[5] 7 October 2020, the *Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/oct/07/lloyds-pharmacy-apologises-again-for-emergency-contraception-refusal.

manipulated in news reporting to construct reality according to different ideological perspectives. I selected these texts as material for analysis and class debate because the themes dovetailed with essay title number one on the ethical issues surrounding women's right to choose regarding their bodies. The articles bring into sharp relief issues of interculturality, ethics, and the right to access emergency contraception, or so-called 'morning after pill'.[6]

For EFL students, dealing with such culturally embedded discourse presents enormous challenges. The difficulty does not lie in the "translation" of individual lexemes, but in the cognitive effort required to "fill in the cultural gaps", and at the same time decode the implicit message transmitted via journalistic discourse.

Focusing on critical discourse analytical tools such as nomination, nominalization, representational strategies and presupposition, we began by unpacking the explicit linguistic coding and the implicit meanings contained in *Metro*'s headline and lead, below. The italics are mine and indicate where the students demonstrate the ability to use analytical terminology and recycle vocabulary acquired during the course.

> **Pharmacist refused to give morning after pill on a Sunday 'for personal reasons'**
> A mum was told she couldn't have emergency contraception because it went against the beliefs of the only pharmacist working that Sunday. Siani, 41, visited her local Lloyds Pharmacy at Sainsbury's on Lewes Road, Brighton, when a female member of staff refused to give her the morning after pill for 'personal reasons'.
>
> Instructor: What do you notice from the headline regarding these themes: nomination, nominalization, representational strategies and presupposition?
>
> S1: "Well, the agent is clear, the pharmacist, so there is no *nominalization* and the verb is a very *strong reporting verb*."
>
> I: "why do you think the newspaper has chosen to focus on this particular agent?
>
> S1: "The newspaper is trying to *spark outrage* because we have one person, that is the pharmacist, a figure that everyone relates to, and when we read "pharmacist refuses" something the first instinct is to be angry about it. Why would a pharmacist refuse anything? Then, we see what it is he refused and everything gets worse, basically.

[6] A cultural note: in the UK, emergency contraception is available over the counter in any chemist's without a prescription. At the time of the event, Lloyd's Pharmacy apologised for the 'distress and frustration caused by the experience', to the customer in question but said they adhere General Pharmaceutical Council guidelines which 'allow pharmacists to refuse to dispense medication that goes against their personal beliefs *if there is adequate alternative care available for the patient*' [my emphasis].

A couple of points here are worth noting. Firstly, the student recycles the expression "spark outrage" found in an article we had previously analysed and appropriates it for their own discourse. Secondly, on a gender issue, the student makes the lingua-cultural assumption that the pharmacist is a "he". It was in fact a woman. On the question of cultural assumptions, I then tried to elicit why "On a Sunday" was an important piece of information.

> I: So here we have quite a lot of information in the headline. "On a Sunday" why is this relevant do you think? Why is it in the headline?
>
> S2: Well I don't know if this fits, but Sunday is after "Saturday night", so maybe it's a kind of judgement on the woman's behaviour"…?
>
> S3: I think it's because on Sunday many pharmacists' are closed

Student 2 makes a very interesting observation regarding the possibly evaluative condemnation of women's sexual activity on a Saturday night. My interpretation was more related to access to medical treatment. Student 3 had understood this inference. I explained that the information "on a Sunday" could be an attempt to arouse indignation in the reader and legitimize the newspaper's negative stance towards the pharmacist's behaviour, given that most pharmacies in the UK are closed on a Sunday. Moving on to the final phrase on the headline, S1 contrasts the way information is interpreted differently in the *Guardian* and *Metro:*

> S1: Then here in *Metro* we have 'for personal reasons', comparing with the other article [the *Guardian*], which specifies 'for religious reasons', we might think that it was just for the Pharmacists volition, without real motivation
>
> S1: …and I have a last observation: the use of morning after pill in the headline instead of emergency contraceptive…and it is to make the article more relatable to people and more easy [sic.] to understand
>
> I: Moving on to the first paragraph, S2, what struck you?
>
> S2: At first glance there is the agent, the mum, so someone who is respectable.
>
> I: In CDA what are we looking at here?
>
> S2: *Anonymization*? No, *functionalization*, representing people, the impact of a mum…because mums are generally considered to be respectable, it is generally accepted that a mum is a figure of respect. We use "mum" in this context because it's informal and the paper is a tabloid.
>
> I: How does this information affect the information in the text?

> S3: When we call this person a mum, we, we *create tension* when we see a mum asking for emergency contraception. Of course, a mum can ask for emergency reception but I think it's a weird *lexical choice*. I would like to specify that it was about the lexical choice. She is a woman, not just a mum.
> I think it was written in that way to create empathy it wasn't a man who refused but a female, a woman, who should show more sympathy – this is the message".

We went on to discuss the question of empathy, sympathy, apathy.

> S4: She is called mum to gain the sympathy of the reader, maybe she's a mum who already has many children and is poor
>
> S5: I agree with you [S3] that [being] a mum doesn't mean that she can't have emergency contraception. I think that of course the term is *filtered by the culture* but not because the mum cannot have a morning after pill but because I cannot understand why they need to say she is a mum. It's a use of lexis to create these two poles, these two positions, the poor mum against the cruel pharmacist.

We then compared the above with the *Guardian* headline. First, I elicited a linguistic unraveling of the telescopic adjectival phrase, "emergency contraception refusal" – a refusal to provide emergency contraception – before moving on to the pragmatic and CD analyses.

> **Lloyds Pharmacy apologises *again* for emergency contraception refusal**
> Firm says sorry after pharmacist would not dispense product 'for religious reasons'
>
> S3: So, first we have the personalisation of Lloyds pharmacy. A pharmacy cannot apologise. This may be because we don't know exactly who apologised. Then we have "again", because this is something that happened after so there is an element of *presupposition*, that we know about the previous episode…
>
> S2: ...when we read "emergency contraception refusal" we tend to think of a more generic thing, not a specific event, maybe a fact that repeats over and over again
>
> I: Exactly, so you are explaining to me the effect that the linguistic choices have, which is good, but I'd like you to explain to me how they are achieved linguistically and why.

The students discussed this point but were not quite able to explain the "why". I offered my interpretation: as a left-wing news brand, the *Guardian* was less likely to point an accusing finger at the woman pharmacist, who was probably Muslim. By using the noun "refusal" instead of the verb "refuse", the news producer adopts a strategy of nominalization, which avoids agency, shifting emphasis away from individual responsibility of the pharmacist towards accountability on the part of the company.

S2: so if we compare 'for personal reasons' with 'for religious reasons', I think it's different. Religious reasons sounds more reliable...erm not reliable...er like more justifiable?

I: so we could say legitimization?

S2: Yes, because religion is like an institution, not for personal reasons which could be I hate you, I don't like the colour of your hair, or something stupid like that.

S2: Then, in the Guardian we have the subject of the story which is just 'a woman' [as opposed to a mum], and I found it interesting, quite a vague way to introduces an agent.

S6: then 'a woman was refused', this indicate[s] passivity, concealing the agent.

S2: They could have used refused, but they used would not dispense, perhaps because they want to be more formal? It sounds more objective rather than refuse

S4: *Metro* is saying mum and emergency contraception while in the *Guardian*, the similar story has 'a woman' aged 41 but no mention of children.

Moving on to the contents of the text, I asked the students to make a supposition and suggest what religion the pharmacist might be, that would have caused her to refuse emergency contraception over the counter. I asked this based on my own culturally informed suppositions and was curious to compare. The first response was "Catholic", and three other students agreed with this. One student replied, "we simply don't know, it could be any religion". I confessed to the students that I had made the huge supposition that the pharmacist was a Muslim, mainly based on my own cultural knowledge and background, i.e., that a large number of pharmacists in the UK are of Pakistani origin and therefore Muslim. I used this personal example in order to explain how supposition works on a subliminal level triggering feelings and attitudes in and towards news texts. Furthermore, the lexical choices in the *Metro* article worked to support the "mum" Siana against the "offending" pharmacist. In contrast, the *Guardian*'s representation of reality used linguistic strategies to cloak the agency and identity of the pharmacist, thus shielding her. From this premise, I asked the students about their perception of bias in the two news stories:

I: I have a question for you. If we were trying to give an unbiased account of reality around this event, what is missing from both news stories?

S5: I think the opinion of the pharmacist

That succinct response was in fact the point. This shows the student's heightened awareness to what an unbiased account would look like and where information is suppressed. While this example was a small and perhaps oversimplified one, if applied to larger, broader international news, what is important is the ability to discern when there is one-sidedness in a debate.

Following the analysis of the texts, the class then discussed the broader social issues brought to the fore: the right to access emergency contraception over the counter; the ethical, cultural, and religious conflicts implicit in questions of sexual and reproductive healthcare in a multicultural context; and media bias in representing such dilemmas. From this dual perspective, the articles acted as linguistic resources as well as facilitators for debate. Personal and cultural experiences could be compared with those of the social actors represented in the news texts.

4.2. The survey

The survey was devised so as not to be too complex or time consuming. It comprised only eight questions in total, three of which were open-ended and five on a Likert scale from 1-5. The questionnaire aimed to elicit students' attitudes to the course content, structure, and methods and attempted to ascertain how useful they felt the course was to them as English language learners. From a critical studies perspective, the survey sought to determine whether the students thought the course had contributed to developing critical awareness of the language and its role in the construction of reality. Of the 25 students who regularly attended the classes, 10 completed the survey.

Students were asked to help with this research by taking part in the survey once they had completed their final exam. I stipulated this time restriction because even though the survey was anonymous, they might be tempted to give positive responses if they answered the questions before sitting the final exam. By contrast, it could equally be reasoned that students who had obtained good marks at the end of the course might be more inclined to respond positively to the questions. The latter hypothesis appears to be the case in point. Of the ten respondents, only one gave unfavourable evaluations, which appeared on Google Form immediately after I had awarded a student a low mark at the exam. Unfortunately, methodological considerations such as these might appear to invalidate the data to some extent but there is no fool proof way of obtaining unbiased opinions from participants in this kind of survey. With such a small sample, it is difficult to draw any concrete conclusions, nevertheless the data discussed below provides a starting point for more in-depth studies in future research projects on this theme.

4.3. Survey results – open ended questions

A sample of the responses to the open-ended questions and a summary of three of the Likert scale questions are reported here. Overall, the survey revealed a very high level of student satisfaction. The vast majority found the contents of English module extremely or very relevant to their degree programme, scoring 4 or 5 on the Likert scale. The question "do you think the course has helped you improve your reading skills in English?" encouragingly also elicited scores of 4 or 5, with only one student answering with a 1. The critical reading of newspapers was deemed not only useful for English acquisition but also extremely useful for the students' general knowledge and life-skills. Finally, students found that preparing and delivering a presentation was a productive activity that enhanced their English learning experience.[7]

The subsequent open-ended questions intended to gain more detailed insight on student perception of the course. The first question aimed at understanding what the students felt they had gained form the course:

What have you learned from the course?

> CDA, improved my English, the English legal system
>
> I have understood how to be a conscious and critical reader. Moreover it has been also useful to learn lots of terminology and think about the importance of language and comunication [sic.] in our digital society
>
> I improved the understanding of a newspaper article (and also which are the English newspapers and which bias they have). I also improved my presentation skills by talking about current events

From these comments, it appears that the student has developed various skills, not only those directly linked to the English language but also presentation skills, debating current affairs, specialised terminology in the field of international studies and international legal English, and a broad understanding of critical discourse analysis applied to anglophone news media. These abilities would fall within the remit of the Dublin agenda, which, as mentioned earlier, aims to promote the development of students' critical awareness.

What did you like or dislike about the course?

This question sought to identify weak or strong points in course design from the students' point of view. The following responses indicate that encouraging involvement and participation on the part of the students and attempting to stimulate discussion to the point of being provocative in the (virtual) classroom

[7] See appendix for the results of the Likert scale questions in graphic format.

was welcomed. The students also appreciated the fact that their course work constituted a major part of their final mark.

> I like the involvement of students during the lessons and the possibility to have partially examination during the course
>
> I really enjoy the content of the course, especially the part related to CDA. I also appreciate the capacity to create and encourage debates among students during the lessons
>
> I liked the structure of the course, which encourages the active participation of students. The discussion in the classroom allows you to better understand the concepts of the course.

However, when asked to make any final suggestions, two of the students highlighted the fact that class participation was difficult for those with a lower level of English and that greater effort should have been made to motivate participation from students with a lower level of English.

> **Any comments on the course?**
>
> I only hope that next year the course will be in presence. By the way, even if I personally don't like very much the distance learning, I want to say that the teacher managed to create the atmosphere of a "real" class, and I appreciate it very much
>
> For those who have a lower level of English, the participation in the class debate is difficult. I think it would be better to stimulate their participation more
>
> It would be better to involve students with a low level of English more in class debates

This last criticism is one that I certainly acknowledge. When students are reluctant to speak it is sometimes easier for the instructor to rely on those who are always willing to contribute. However, in a virtual environment, ensuring that less loquacious or less confident learners have equal floor space becomes even more of an issue. Online platforms allow students to hide behind an icon as they are not obliged to switch on their video cameras. There is no face-to face dialogue. In traditional classroom situations, encouraging participation from students of all levels of ability and controlling turn-taking opportunities becomes easier.

On a more positive note, one student observed:

> Ho apprezzato moltissimo il corso, soprattutto la parte relativa al CDA. La docente è stata sempre disponibile, attenta e paziente creando un'atmosfera molto piacevole durante le lezioni, nonostante la didattica a distanza. [I really enjoyed the course, particularly the part on CDA. The instructor was always

willing to help, attentive and patient with the students, creating a very pleasant atmosphere during the lessons, despite the fact that they were online.]

Dear Pr. Filmer, thanks for your wonderful course. It has covered not only General English, but also Legal English and Critical Discourse Analysis. I liked your approach very much.

5. Conclusions

This contribution has described the implementation of critical reading practices during an ESP module on a postgraduate international studies programme at the University of Pisa. The module content was specifically designed to reflect contemporary shifts in teaching literacy as merely traditional reading and writing skills to the recognition that these abilities are rooted in a broader scope to develop (cross-cultural) pragmatic competence, effective communication skills, and make (critical) sense of the world. Building on Park's (2011) study on using news articles to promote critical literary in the L2 classroom, the research reported sought to raise student awareness to the ways in which news producers shape knowledge through the strategic use of language. In tandem with this aim was the intent to encourage reflection and debate on a range of social themes, through written and oral production. As prospective game changers in global affairs, I felt it was particularly relevant for students of international studies to be cognisant of the ways in which linguistic strategies are employed in journalistic discourse when representing social actors in world events. This also meant drawing their attention to possible ideological skewing in the translation of foreign politicians' discourse.

The aims of the teaching module were achieved through a dialogic approach. A simplified critical discourse analysis framework was introduced to the students and then applied to the examination of anglophone news texts drawn from digital newspapers across the ideological spectrum, which was carried out together during lessons. Students were encouraged to find their own readings of the use of language with supporting evidence, which did not necessarily align with the instructor's view, but which often provided valuable insights, especially where cultural filters are concerned. Student evaluation at the end of the module entailed two summative assessments: the first, a written essay on one of the social issues covered in class; the second, a seven-minute PowerPoint presentation with slides illustrating a CDA analysis of a newspaper article of their choice. These two very different tasks tested their L2 reading comprehension, oral and written production, and crucially, their pragmatic ability to make inferences to reveal how meaning is constructed through linguistic strategies and lexical choice as outlined in Machin and Mayr's CDA toolbox. By drawing attention to implicit meanings created through the use of

language, and by cultivating the capacity to make inferences from the texts through the guided CDA approach, all of the attending students by the end of the course were able to successfully produce and present a short critical discourse analysis of a news text.

Feedback from the students indicates that although I carried out the research during the Covid-19 pandemic, when a remote learning environment was enforced, the participants enjoyed the opportunity to express their ideas in English and experience foreign language learning from a different perspective that did not focus on traditional yardsticks. The survey also highlighted certain limitations of the course. As two of the comments suggest, students with more advanced spoken English were inevitably advantaged in class debates. However, learning how to draw inference from a text could prove to be a more inclusive activity. Those students whose spoken English sometimes impeded their ability to contribute fluently to discussions were nevertheless able to contribute with their interpretations. Furthermore, these learning practices could be fruitfully expanded to a project-based approach. Students could work in small groups to perform a comparative analysis of how a particular event is represented in online news discourse across the ideological spectrum. For space constraints, here I have not delved into a discussion on the role of multimodality in reading comprehension. Nevertheless, indications suggest that students who may not always successfully apply pragmatic principles to making sense of a news report find support through the multimodal features of digital news texts and the collaboration of their peers in a less threatening learning context than one to one teacher-student dynamics. This could be a fertile line of research for future study into developing reading competence in L2 speakers.

What can be asserted is that by participating in class debates, by learning through doing preparing and delivering presentations, and by understanding language as a powerful tool that can influence public opinion, the students have improved their English competence while gaining useful transversal skills. Although the teaching practice involved a scaffolding process that brought learners out of their linguistic comfort zone, in the end the students adapted to the challenge and appreciated this new learning experience.

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Annexes

Survey results - Likert scale questions

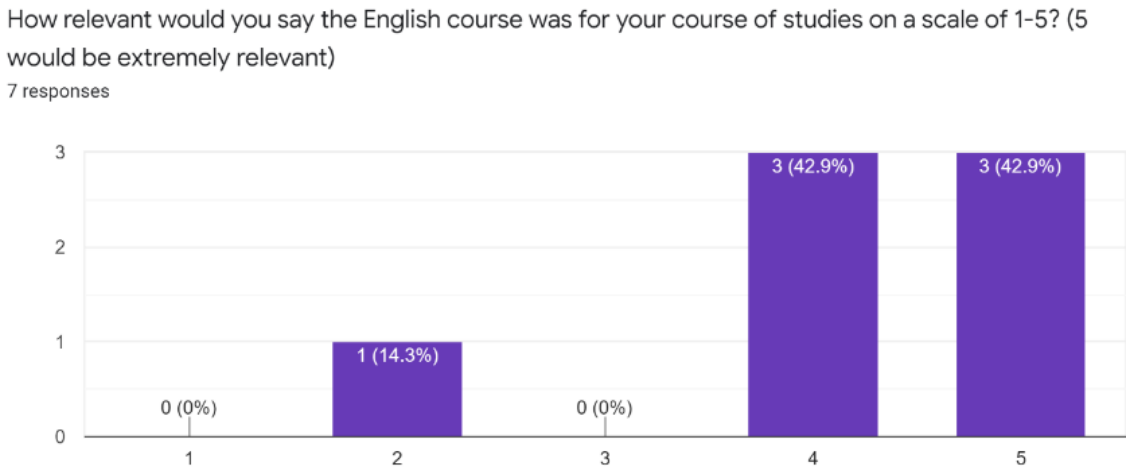

Table 1
Results of the question: how relevant was the English course for the type of degree programme you were following?

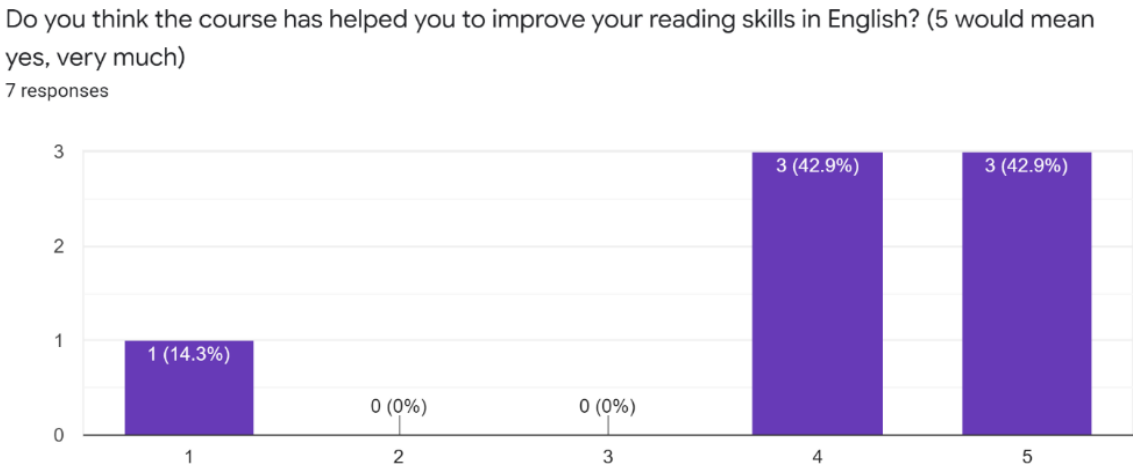

Table 2
Results of the question: do you think the course has helped you improve your reading skills in English?

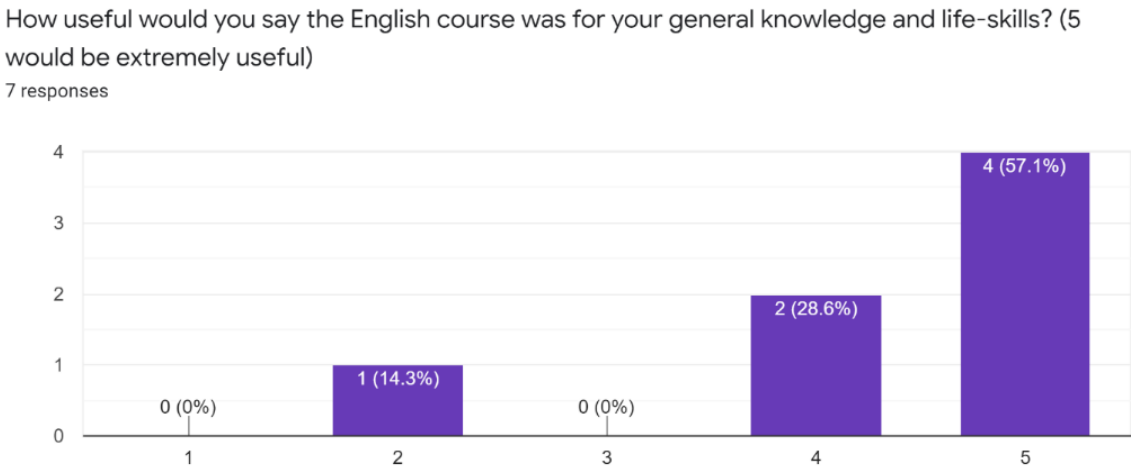

Table 3
Results to the question: How useful would you say the English course was for your general knowledge and life-skills?

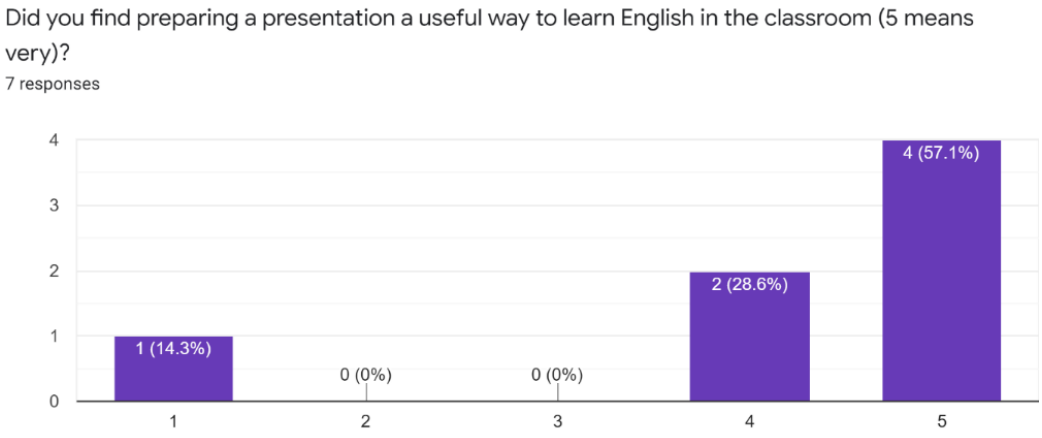

Table 4
Results to the question: did you find preparing a presentation a useful way to learn English in the classroom?