

Chapter 1

Understanding Critical Writing

So what happens to writing when you attach the word *critical* to it? Does anything happen at all? Is this another newfangled label that promotes a novel pedagogy or method for purely commercial reasons or other ulterior motivations without substantially affecting the writing activity? Or, on the other hand, is too much happening—far too much for our liking—shifting our attention to things unrelated to writing? Is this label bringing into composition something extraneous to the writing activity, such as political causes and social concerns that are the whims of one scholarly circle or the other? We in the teaching profession are rightly suspicious of anything that claims to be new, fashionable, or revolutionary nowadays.

For me, the label *critical* brings into sharper focus matters that are always there in writing. It develops an attitude and a perspective that enable us to see some of the hidden components of text construction and the subtler ramifications of writing. We gain these insights by situating the text in a rich context comprising diverse social institutions and experiential domains. In doing so, the label also alerts us to the power—and dangers—of literacy. Texts can open up new possibilities for writers and their communities—just as illiteracy or ineffective writing can deny avenues for advancement. Writing can bring into being new orientations to the self and the world—just as passive, complacent, or mechanical writing parrots the established view of things (which may serve the unfair, partisan interests of dominant institutions and social groups). Indeed, the text is shaped by such processes of conflict, struggle, and change that characterize society. By connecting the text to context (or the word to the world), the crit-

ical perspective enables us to appreciate the complexity of writing and address issues of literacy that have far-reaching social implications.

Defining the Critical

Before I spell out how *critical* redefines writing, we should consider briefly the currency of the label itself. We have by now come across critical theory, critical thinking, critical pedagogy, critical ethnography, critical linguistics, critical discourse analysis, and even critical classroom discourse analysis—just to mention a few.¹ We can of course go on attaching this label to any field we want because there is something predictable and distinctive that happens when we do so. It is natural for us to think of *uncritical* as the opposite of this label. But it is unfair to say that those who don't practice a critical approach are choosing to be apathetic or naive. There are good reasons why someone may choose to adopt an alternative approach. Indicative of these more serious motivations are terms like *objective*, *detached*, *disinterested*, *pragmatic*, *formalistic*, and *abstract*. These adjectives are less pejorative antonyms for the term *critical*.

To understand the ways these terms relate to each other, we need to take a brief detour through history. The Enlightenment movement of seventeenth-century Europe has much to do with the values attached to these terms. Taking pride in adopting a more rational, systematic, and scientific approach to things, the movement initiated radical changes in many domains of inquiry. Its effects are still there in certain traditions of the study of writing. In order to understand writing, the movement would have said, we need first to identify and demarcate the object of our analysis—the text. We should separate the “text-in-itself” from other related activities and domains so that it can speak for itself. For example, the writer's intentions, feelings, values, and interests should be separated from the text. Neither is the text the reader's processing of it in terms of his or her intentions, feelings, values, and inter-

ests. Also, the scholar must see to it that he or she doesn't bring any biases or predisposition to the analysis. This disinterested attitude was considered favorable to letting the object speak for itself. At its best, the study of the text could be undertaken without any involvement of the scholar by employing predesigned procedures and methods. As a culmination of the Enlightenment tendency, Structuralism took the scholar further inside the isolated text. It claimed that if one entered the core of the text, cutting through the superficial clutter of content, meaning, and surface structural variations, one would discover the basic underlying rules that account for the text's universal laws of production and reception. This attitude encouraged an abstract and formalistic approach. Schools as diverse as New Criticism in literature, text linguistics in discourse analysis, and the “current traditional” paradigm in rhetoric display such an approach today. Literacy instruction, influenced by this tendency, has been formalistic, skill driven, and product oriented.

The cultivation of such an empirical perspective on texts was certainly productive in many ways. It brought a clarity, discipline, and rigor to the descriptive activity. Getting the predisposition of human subjects muddled in the analysis, or getting distracted by superficial variations, can be misleading. The approach certainly generated important insights into certain general properties of textuality and literacy. But there is also something lost in this type of approach. For the sake of analytical convenience we are deliberately simplifying the disposition and implications of texts. The text becomes more and more isolated, detached, abstract, and generic. The values that inform its structure and form are ignored. It becomes empty of content, losing its complexity and depth. With the decontextualized approach, the influences of social conditions and cultural diversity on text construction are lost. The ways in which texts are shaped by, and in turn shape, sociopolitical realities are obscured. Much of this happens because the text has become static, passive, and one-dimensional. Writers and readers themselves become automatons who employ predesigned formal procedures with detachment

to generate texts. All this amounts to adopting an innocence and complacency toward the literate activity. As a corrective, the critical approach grounds the text in the material world to orientate to its troubling social functions, the value-ridden nature of its constitution, and the conflicting motivations behind its production and reception.

Now let's return to our original question: how does the critical orientation redefine writing? We may summarize the shifts in perspective in the following manner.

- *From writing as autonomous to writing as situated.* The production of texts is not an end in itself. We don't write simply to produce a text—and leave it at that. We produce texts to achieve certain interests and purposes. Furthermore, after a text is produced, it gets used in unanticipated ways. Launched into the public world, it takes a life of its own and effects results and processes totally unanticipated by the writer. Therefore, texts not only *mean* but *do*. Their functionality goes to the extent of reconstructing reality, rather than simply reflecting reality. We need to inquire what the word does to/in the world.
- *From writing as individualistic to writing as social.* For many of us, the stock image of writing is that of the lonely writer locked away in his small apartment (in crowded New York City) or a cabin (in the quiet woods of New England) pouring his thoughts on paper under mysteriously received inspiration. But writing is not a monologue; it is dialogical. One has to take account of the audience (implicitly or explicitly) while writing. This may involve a set of intended audiences, but it also involves an ever-expanding unintended audience (stretching limitlessly across time and space). In constructing a text, a writer is conducting a conversation with all this diversity of readers. This process is different from the definition of it we get from communication theory—which is often diagrammed as follows: writer→text→reader (or speaker→words→listener). Writing is not a one-way

transmission of ideas, nor are constructs like *writer* and *text* autonomous. The writer's "intentions" and "thoughts" are considerably influenced by the expectations, norms, and values of the audience (or community). The text itself then becomes a *mediated* construct—one that is shaped by the struggle/collaboration/interplay between the writer, reader, and the community for thought. We have to become sensitive to how the text embodies the influences of this social interaction.

- *From writing as cognitive to writing as material.* For many, writing is a purely mental activity of putting down on paper the relevant ideas, words, and information that one has the capacity to generate. They view writing as a play between the mind and the text for meaning, order, and coherence. But there are many material resources required to do writing. At the simplest level, one needs a pencil, pen, typewriter, or computer to compose one's thoughts. Which of these one uses is often decided by one's economic status. Each of these instruments presents different levels of advantage to the writer. Furthermore, one needs to be privileged to devote the time required for writing. Writers also need the means to tap necessary resources from publishers, libraries, media industries, and the market. The text is shaped out of a negotiation of these constraints and resources. How these material factors impinge upon the text requires examination.
- *From writing as formal to writing as ideological.* Another commonsense assumption is that one only needs grammar, structure, and rules to construct a text. These are treated as abstract, value-free features of textual form. But writing is more than language or structure. It is also a representation of reality, an embodiment of values, and a presentation of self. Form itself is informed by diverse conventions of textuality, values of appropriacy, and attitudes to style. If writing is not just rules but how to use those rules—that is, for what purpose and with what attitude—then this is a contentious area of cultural differ-

ence and ideological preference. One has to consider what values are implied by the form and whether textual norms can be modified to represent alternate values.

- *From writing as spatial to writing as historical.* For many, the text (once produced) is an inert object that occupies a space. It is how words populate five pages, structured in a seamless manner, that is treated as the concern of writers and readers. But the text has evolved through time. While the writing was being done, the writer took care of many other responsibilities in his or her everyday life. There were many false starts and failed attempts. There were many visions and revisions of what the writer wanted to say. There were collaborations and conflicts around the evolving text. The changing social conditions of the community and the personal fortunes of the writer also shape the text. After being produced, the text continues to live in history, being decoded differently according to differing social conditions. The text then is not a seamless whole that stands static through reading and writing. How it is shaped by the disjunctions, fissures, struggles, and conflicts during its construction and reception needs attention.

If we can summarize all these differences in one simple slogan, the shift is from writing as an *object* to writing as an *activity*. In integrating the text into the flow of sociohistoric currents and understanding it as one more purposive activity we do in everyday life, writing becomes not a product but a practice. It is in perceiving writing as a situated, mediated, dynamic social activity that the work of critical practice begins. We cannot stop with charting the internal linguistic structures and rhetorical patterns of the text. We have to also interrogate the values and ideologies that inform the text; the ways in which the external contexts of production and reception shape the text; the prospects for human possibilities to be limited or expanded by the text; and the ways in which the unequal status and differing identities of writers (and readers) affect the constitution of the text. In short, we begin to see how

writing is implicated in social conflict, material inequality, cultural difference, and power relationships. In critical writing, students would become sensitive to these factors. They would wrestle with textual constraints, tap the available material resources, and negotiate the conflicting discourses in their favor to communicate effectively. In teaching critical writing, instructors have to make students aware of these diverse constraints and possibilities as they strive for a representation of knowledge that is emancipatory and empowering.

The orientations listed earlier differ from the perspectives of some other current schools of thinking that may employ similar constructs in their definitions. For example, that writing should be contextualized is widely held by many schools these days. But for some, contextualizing the text means seeing the specific details/words/images in terms of the total framework of the text. Or it can mean seeing the details in terms of rhetorical/genre conventions. But this sense of context is still “internal” to the text. I have articulated an ever-widening context that expands beyond the writer/reader and the community to historical and social conditions. On the other hand, even when social context is acknowledged by some schools, it is treated as lying outside the text; it doesn’t affect the text’s very constitution. Furthermore, theorizing the politics of writing has become fashionable in many circles today—especially among those influenced by poststructuralist and postmodernist perspectives. However, here again, politics is defined in terms of discursive and linguistic issues only, leaving more recalcitrant material factors out of consideration. This orientation explains the trend in Western academic circles toward celebrating the rhetorical activity of interpreting the tensions within the text to show how ideological struggle is manifested there. The poststructuralist schools perceive language as one of the tools that sustain inequality and domination at the microsocial level; therefore, deconstructing the written text to expose the tensions therein is treated as equal to bringing the whole unfair social edifice crumbling down. Though I acknowledge the importance of language and discourse in reflecting/sustaining/enforcing in-

equality, I still feel that the historical and material dimensions of power have to be addressed in their own terms. Therefore my perspective on writing brings together text-internal and text-external factors, discursive and historical forces, linguistic and social considerations.

Orientating to the Multilingual Writer

I have been talking of the writer in very generalized terms up to this point. It is time now to give flesh and blood to the type of writers this book is concerned with. The pedagogical context assumed in this book is the teaching of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). The ESOL student community includes those who are learning English as a second language—in other words, those living in former British colonies such as India, Nigeria, and Jamaica and those linguistic minorities living in the traditionally English-speaking countries of Canada, the United States, and Britain, all of whom actively use English as an additional language in social and educational life. These are largely bilinguals. Included in this group are speech communities for whom English has become considerably “nativized.” Through a long history of interaction, English has now become locally rooted, accommodating lexical, grammatical, and discursal features from native languages. While some of these speakers would consider English their native language (i.e., speaking English as their first or sole language), they will still face challenges in using the “standard” English dialects (of the Anglo-American variety) treated as the norm for academic writing. Therefore they should also be considered bidialectals who have to shift from one variant of English to another in their writing.

These groups (largely ESL) differ from those who learn English as a foreign language (EFL). In many parts of the contemporary world, English is an indispensable auxiliary language for a variety of specialized purposes. In addition to being proficient in the vernacular, and perhaps in some regional or colonial languages (French in Vietnam, Dutch in Indonesia,

Portuguese in Brazil), students from these communities will still have some competence in English. This circle is largely multilingual, speaking English as a third or fourth language. However, the traditional distinction between EFL and ESL contexts is becoming fluid these days as English attains the position of a global language.² It is becoming indispensable for almost everyone in the postmodern world to hold some proficiency in English and use it for a variety of purposes in their everyday life. Despite the varying levels of linguistic competence possessed by the different ESOL subgroups identified earlier, in practicing academic writing in English they have to all acquire new discourses and conventions and represent their identities in novel ways.³

Do these students require a different teaching approach from those used for L1 students? To address this question clearly we have to first ask how ESOL and L1 student communities are different. (By “L1 students” I am referring here to those who are “traditionally native” in English, largely monolinguals, coming from the former colonizing communities that still claim ownership over the language.) It has become pedagogical common sense to distinguish these groups in terms of linguistic difference. ESOL teachers have treated multilingual students as strangers to English and thus aimed to develop their grammatical competence in order to facilitate their academic writing. But this approach is misdirected. We must note that many of these students have some competence in one or more dialects of English—sometimes speaking their local variants of English “natively.” There is also widespread proficiency in specialized registers in English—such as the language of computers, technology, academia, and the professions (e.g., legalese, journalese). Moreover, writing involves not just grammatical competence. Therefore, different pedagogies are not warranted based purely on differences in grammatical proficiency.

Teachers have also focused on the cultural difference between both student groups. Apart from the larger differences in beliefs and practices, there can be more specific differences related to literacy. The genres and styles of communication,

the practices and uses of literacy, and the attitudes and processes in composing can be different. The popularity of approaches like contrastive rhetoric explains the importance given by teachers to cultural differences in text construction. But even this mustn't be exaggerated too much. After the colonial experience, European culture has left an indelible mark on many local communities (see Canagarajah 1999c; Pennycook 1994). The general trend of globalization in the contemporary world has also resulted in the spreading of Anglo-American values and institutions worldwide. More relevant to our discussion, literacy has spread to such levels that we don't have any "pure" oral communities to speak of today. Even the communities that didn't have a written script have developed one through the help of missionary enterprises (though some of this resulted from the motivation of teaching the Bible).

In general, it is becoming more and more difficult to "essentialize" students in ESOL—that is, to generalize their identity and character according to a rigidly definable set of linguistic or cultural traits. We are unable to define them in ways that are diametrically opposed to the language and culture of L1 students. ESOL students are not aliens to the English language or Anglo-American culture anymore. The hybridity that characterizes communities and individuals in the post-colonial world complicates some of the easy distinctions teachers are used to making about ESOL students. In fact, it is difficult now to speak of uncontaminated "native" cultures or "vernaculars," as many communities have accommodated foreign traditions and practices through a history of cultural interaction and adaptation (see Appadurai 1996). Students in ESOL bring with them a mixture of local and Western linguistic/cultural characteristics, and we shouldn't assume that they all require an "introduction" to the English language and Anglo-American culture.

These qualifications don't mean that ESOL students are not different from L1 students but that "difference" has to be re-defined in more complex terms. We have to move away from easy stereotypes about them. The fact that ESOL students dis-

play hybrid multicultural, multilingual tendencies doesn't make them the same as L1 students. Hybridity doesn't preclude questions of sociocultural uniqueness. These students may display conflicting attitudes toward the various cultures that make up their subjectivity. They may in fact suspect—and resist—their "Anglo-American" legacy, which has the potential to dominate or suppress their more "indigenous" side. They may also display a different subject position in terms of cultural identity. Their preferred choices of community solidarity and cultural identities have to be respected. While most ESOL students occupy a largely unequal status, as colored individuals from periphery communities, L1 students occupy a privileged position. The latter's cultural identity enjoys the power of dominant communities from the geopolitical center, providing a head start on the linguistic and cultural capital necessary for success in the contemporary world. Hybridity shouldn't be taken to mean, therefore, that issues of power and difference are irrelevant in today's world. Some postmodernist scholars have mistakenly assumed that the reality of cultural and linguistic mixing has defeated the designs of imperialistic forces. Nor should we assume that trends toward hybridity and globalization lead to a homogeneous world where difference doesn't matter anymore.⁴ In fact, these trends have inspired minority communities to celebrate their differences and develop their local knowledge and identities. Therefore, despite certain obvious signs toward homogeneity through forces of technology, multinational companies, market forces, and the media, we cannot say that difference has been eradicated altogether. Issues of power and difference have simply become more subtle and dispersed.

The more important consideration in critical writing is not difference per se but the attitudes we adopt toward difference. We have a long history in our profession where the linguistic/cultural difference of multilingual students has been treated as making them limited and deficient in their writing ability. Their distance from the English language and Anglo-

American culture has been treated as depriving them of many essential aptitudes required for successful academic literacy practices. Some have gone further to stigmatize multilingual writers as illogical in thinking and incoherent in communication, by virtue of their deficient L1 and native culture. Consider a summary of the many differences discovered between L1 and L2 writers from empirical studies by Silva (1993).

"L2 writers did less planning, at the global and local levels" (661).

"L2 writers did less goal setting, global and local, and had more difficulty achieving these goals" (661).

"Organizing generated material in the L2 was more difficult" (661).

"Transcribing in the L2 was more laborious, less fluent, and less productive" (661).

"Pauses were more frequent, longer, and consumed more writing time" (662).

"L2 writers wrote at a slower rate and produced fewer words of written text" (662).

"L2 writing reportedly involved less reviewing" (662).

"There was evidence of less rereading of and reflecting on written texts" (662).⁵

We shouldn't be surprised that L2 students fall short when L1 writing is treated as the norm or point of reference. It is important therefore to examine the assumptions and attitudes with which our research is conducted. Though it must be acknowledged that ESOL students would practice English academic writing in the L1 context and cannot escape from the norms of the dominant linguistic circles, we must still ask: How would our interpretation differ if we understood the composing strategies of ESOL students in terms of their own cultural frames and literacy practices?

Adopting a perspective that takes the students' own frames of reference seriously is the *relativistic* orientation, distinct from the *normative* approach described earlier. It is important to take the students' own explanations and orientations into

account, situated in their own cultural and linguistic traditions, to explain their writing practices. This way we are able to understand that there are good reasons why they do what they do. Although this attitude is more egalitarian, differing from the "deficit" perspective described earlier, it doesn't go far enough in providing dignity to multilingual students. Their perspectives are seen as being shaped by their respective cultures and languages, requiring inordinate effort to reorientate to other discourses. Even well-meaning scholars sympathetic to minority cultures sometimes theorize the competence of ESOL students in condescending terms. For example, some have argued that since students from Asian communities prefer nonlinear styles of thinking, they shouldn't be imposed upon to adopt the explicit forms of logic and reasoning of Anglo-American communities (see Fox 1994).⁶ If these students fail in English literacy, this is explained as resulting from the fact that they are strangers to the established discourses of the academy. (And, displaying a trace of ethnocentrism, these scholars judge literacy skills according to Anglo-American rhetorical traditions anyway.) Such an attitude is to orientate to difference as a problem all over again. Sometimes this can take a deterministic bent. The cultural uniqueness of students is treated as *preventing* them from becoming successful writers in English, trapping them into their respective cultural/linguistic worlds.

If *difference-as-deficit* and *difference-as-estrangement* are somewhat limiting perspectives on multilingual writers, an attitude that gives them more complexity is one that I call the *difference-as-resource* perspective. Multilingual students do—and can—use their background as a stepping-stone to master academic discourses. Their values can function as a source of strength in their writing experience in English, enabling them to transfer many skills from their traditions of vernacular communication. Even in cases where the connection is not clear, it is important for teachers to consider how the vernacular influence can be made beneficial for their writing experience rather than functioning in negative, unpleasant, or conflictual ways. Such an attitude will involve teach-

ers orientating to their students differently. We should respect and value the linguistic and cultural peculiarities our students may display, rather than suppressing them. We should strive to understand their values and interests and discover ways of engaging those in the writing process. In doing so, we should be ready to accept the ways in which academic texts and discourses will be creatively modified according to the strengths brought by the students. Academic literacy should adopt a bilateral process—in other words, not only should students be made to appreciate academic discourses but the academic community should accommodate alternate discourses. It is such an attitude that characterizes my orientation to composition research and pedagogical practice in the chapters to follow.

Having examined our *attitudes* toward the linguistic/cultural difference of multilingual students, we have to briefly consider the *approach* we should adopt to relate their background to academic writing practice. It is not surprising that the attitudes discussed earlier have brought forth different approaches to teaching writing. There is no need to discuss the unfairness of the *conversion* approach, informed by the deficit attitude, which posits that multilingual students have to permanently move away from their indigenous discourses to superior English-based discourses. An approach that has been more respectable in this regard is what I call the *crossing* model, informed by the relativistic attitude. According to this approach, teachers attempt to build bridges to help multilingual students move from their local literacy practices and cultural frames toward academic/English discourses (and vice versa). Though students may shuttle between academic and home settings, in this approach there is a clear-cut difference between the academic and vernacular literacies. Students have to keep their discourses from home at home and enter into academic discourses with a new sense of self and reality. Students are asked to adopt different roles and identities as they move between the home and school. They have to remember that in each context (or community) there are differ-

ent values, knowledge, discourses, and styles practiced. So they have to develop the facility to switch discourses in contextually relevant ways as they cross boundaries.

Although this approach devises a way to develop respect for both the academic and nonacademic discourses, there are certain problems with it. It creates an either/or distinction between academic and vernacular literacies. Text construction in both traditions is treated as mutually exclusive. It also imposes a split subjectivity on multilingual students—they are asked to be different persons in different communities/context. However, there is an increasing body of research that suggests that minority students don't want to suppress or abandon their vernacular cultures when they practice academic writing.⁷ They want to bring their preferred values, ideologies, and styles of writing into English literacy. Students cannot be expected to leave behind their identities and interests as they engage in the learning process. What I call the *negotiation* model requires that students wrestle with the divergent discourses they face in writing to creatively work out alternate discourses and literacies that represent better their values and interests. In some cases this means appropriating the academic discourse and conventions in terms of the students' own backgrounds. It can sometimes mean a creative merging of conflicting discourses. It shouldn't be surprising that the texts of multilingual students are somewhat different—they are embodiments of the unique voices and identities of the students. This approach also tackles some of the power conflicts experienced by multilingual students. Practicing academic discourses according to the established conventions (as defined by the dominant social groups) would involve endorsing the values and interests these conventions are informed by. If these values are unfavorable for multilingual students, or if they don't favor emancipatory interests, these writers are going to give life to the oppressive ideologies of the dominant groups. Appropriating academic discourses in their own terms would enable students to reconstruct established textual practices and infuse them with oppositional values and meanings. This is a way of eventually resisting the domi-

nant ideologies and interests that inform academic literacy. There is therefore a critical edge in the negotiation model, while the crossing model (at its best) simply takes the established conventions and knowledge of each context/community for granted in a noncommittal way. Teachers and students who practice the negotiation model would tend to subscribe to the difference-as-resource attitude articulated earlier.

Writing in an Imperialistic Language?

Before I conclude these preliminary statements of intent, I need to adopt a position on one more matter that will nag us in the following chapters. This is the question of the English language. To the extent that we are talking about academic writing in English, there are issues of linguistic imperialism that need to be addressed. Is it proper to encourage and facilitate the use of a language that is tainted with a history of global domination, colonizing other languages and communities with its values? There is no need to prove here that the English language does have a domineering status in the academy and society.⁸ What is important, once again, are the attitudes and approaches to be adopted toward this language.

There is an important strand of thinking among some third world scholars that local communities should have no truck with English. We may call this the *separatist* orientation.⁹ Treating languages as embodying partisan values, these scholars hold that English will condition our thinking and limit the meanings we may want to express in our writing. They would therefore think of English as muting any oppositional perspectives one may bring to knowledge creation in academic writing—and, in fact, as leading to the reproduction of Eurocentric values and thinking in the local communities. For them, the medium is the message. Opposed to them are the *universalists*, who believe that language is simply a neutral medium that one can use for whatever messages one may want to convey.¹⁰ For the latter, the mind of the writer transcends language to freely employ any grammatical system de-

sired. Some in this camp go further to argue that English has attained the position of a universal language that has accommodated values from different communities and lost its imperialist character.¹¹

I hold that while each language is indeed ideological in representing partisan values and interests (being by no means neutral), it is not impossible to negotiate with language to win some space for one's purposes. It appears to me therefore that while the separatists are a bit too cynical, the universalists are complacent. While the former are too deterministic, the latter are romantic. Though we are all ideologically conditioned, human subjects do enjoy some relative autonomy from social institutions and discourses to conduct critical, independent thinking. English itself is becoming hybridized, embodying grammatical features, lexical items, and discourse conventions from a variety of communities. Through such processes of nativization, formerly colonized communities are appropriating the language and making it their own—thus making English a suitable medium for their values and interests. Consistent with my view expressed earlier on culture, the so-called alien language can also become a *resource* for oppositional and critical purposes. It is possible in critical writing for multilingual students to tap the resources of English and use it judiciously to represent the interests of their communities. An uncritical use of the language, on the other hand, poses the threat of making the individual and the community prone to domination. I would give this critical approach the same label I gave earlier for dealing with cultural difference—the *negotiation* model.¹² ESOL writers have to be made reflexively aware of the medium they are using, developing a critical understanding of its potentialities and limitations as they appropriate and reconstruct the language to represent their interests.

On Adopting Ideological Commitments

There are important reasons why I am stating my position up front on some of the controversial questions affecting ESOL

writing. It is the view of critical theorists that there are no positions of absolute neutrality available for anyone on any issue. Everything is value ridden and ideological. It is important therefore to be frank about the position one holds on social and educational matters. Making one's assumptions explicit can help one to examine one's ideological positions critically and adopt stances that favor more emancipatory, egalitarian, and empowering interests. Practicing a critical pedagogy would involve instructors being similarly clear about their values, positions, and interests as they engage in teaching writing. Apart from adopting emancipatory agendas in their teaching activity, this would also enable them to examine and refine their ideologies in relation to the conditions confronted in the classroom and the challenges posed by the students. Pretending to be neutral or hiding one's ideological stances is counterproductive, as such practices will lead both to surreptitiously imposing one's values on the students and to limiting one's own development into deeper social awareness.¹³

Needless to say, all this doesn't mean that any ideology is acceptable in the classroom. The purpose of acknowledging one's ideological stance is to frankly examine whether it furthers the interests of justice and equality for all. If teachers recognize that their ideological leanings lead to unfair outcomes, they should have the integrity to revise their beliefs. Even in cases where one may be convinced that one's ideology is the most liberating system of belief, one should have the humility to respect the values of students, engage with them frankly, and negotiate differences in favor of developing beliefs and practices that ensure the well-being of everybody.

Acknowledging one's values shouldn't be taken to mean that one holds rigidly to one's position in the face of conflicting evidence and deepening political understanding. One should be open to developing more humane and progressive positions based on increasing knowledge and changing social conditions. Adopting a critical orientation doesn't mean being dogmatic. It is possible to admit one's tentative position on something while being open to further developing one's awareness. In fact, what is "politically correct" in writing

pedagogy has been changing over time, based on new research knowledge and social awareness. For example, during the 1980s the relativistic positions articulated earlier—that is, the difference-as-estrangement attitude and the crossing model—were held by many critical pedagogues (including me) as offering the best recourse for the conflicts faced by multilingual students.¹⁴ This was certainly a more enlightened perspective compared to the deficit approach, as it respected the vernaculars and indigenous cultures of minority students and acknowledged their right to maintain them. But with additional research showing the dissatisfaction of minority students in adopting a split personality as they switch discourses and identities, and the understandable social consequences stemming from the complacency of a relativistic orientation, we have had to adopt more critical positions. Moreover, acknowledging one's position on some of these fundamental theoretical issues doesn't solve all the pedagogical questions one has to face in the classroom. Similarly, how one's positions are to be realized in writing will take different forms in different rhetorical contexts. There are many different methods and strategies that may be adopted to achieve the negotiation model and the difference-as-resource orientation articulated earlier. As we will see in the following chapters, between holding a standpoint and practicing it in the classroom (or practicing it in writing) there is a huge divide that needs to be imaginatively bridged.

The Challenge

Given the general orientation to multilingual students and their writing activity articulated earlier, how can we summarize the challenges we face in teaching critical writing? Here are some of the concerns that will be addressed in the chapters to follow.

- Whereas students are generally taught to take the established genre rules and literacy conventions for granted in

constructing texts to suit different rhetorical situations (often with the assumption that these are value-free rules or neutral frameworks that we can use to articulate any message we want), critical writing involves examining the values and interests assumed by these rules. We should teach students not to treat rules of communication as innocent or indisputable but to negotiate for independent expression by reframing them in suitable ways. They have to ask: How did these rules come into being? Whom do these rules favor? What possibilities and limitations do these rules pose for critical expression? What alternatives are available?

- Whereas students are generally taught to use established knowledge already available in texts, critical writing involves interrogating received knowledge and reconstructing it through the writing process. All knowledge should be treated as “interested.” Multilingual students have to question the dominant knowledge constructs in the academy, in addition to critically engaging the knowledge traditions they bring from their local communities as they make a space for oppositional knowledge that favors wider emancipatory and democratic interests.
- Whereas students are generally taught academic writing as a detached activity of expressing publicly verifiable knowledge in a balanced and logical way through conventional rules, critical writing encourages a personal engagement in the writing process. One should reflexively explore one’s identity, consciousness, and values during text construction not only to make a textual space for one’s voice but also to challenge dominant knowledge constructs according to one’s personal location.
- Whereas writing is generally taught as an acquiescent activity of assuming a preexisting reality within which the text takes its place, critical writing involves interrogating the dominant conception of reality and changing it to create more democratic possibilities. In order to do so, students have to be taught to treat texts as not only reflecting but constituting reality. Apart from being instru-

mental in transforming realities, texts may themselves represent new realities.

- Whereas students are generally taught to treat the language of written communication (including registers, styles, and codes of that genre) as an abstract structure or system, critical writing involves interrogating the language for the ways in which it represents its own values and sometimes suppresses divergent messages. Students have to negotiate the ideologies informing the English language as they appropriate it to represent their interests and values in their writing, using language in creative new ways to struggle for alternate expression. Bilingual writers have the further task of finding appropriate ways of accommodating the strengths they bring from their nativized Englishes and vernaculars as they struggle for a voice that suits their values and interests in academic texts.

In one sense, these are perhaps the common issues facing all students in academic writing. But since multilingual students bring with them identities, values, and discourses from multiple communities, the challenges they face in practicing this writing are more complex. Their acquaintance with oppositional intellectual traditions and worldviews can also function as an advantage. These traditions hint of alternate ways in which knowledge and society can be reconstructed.

Conclusion

In the chapters to follow, I discuss current research and teaching practice in ESOL writing from the positions articulated earlier. Throughout, I adopt a special focus on academic writing in higher-educational contexts, acknowledging that ESOL students may engage in many other genres of writing—including professional, creative, and biographical in different social sites—as part of their repertoire. In the next chapter, I will examine the dominant schools in writing pedagogy to ex-

plicate *their* assumptions and ideologies. Often their research claims and pedagogical successes mask the underlying assumptions behind their practices. In the four chapters that follow the next, I take up pedagogical issues according to the different foci of writing—that is, issues of form, the writer, content, and audience. It should be noted that this organization is purely based on convenience. Writing involves an integration of all these components—and more—in the composing process. The separate treatment of issues related to these components should not be taken to mean that our pedagogies can be based on developing a single component in isolation from the rest. In the final chapter, I examine the changing faces of global communication and new imperatives in postmodern literacy, concluding with a discussion of the practices and values that should inform teachers in striving for a truly multilingual and multicultural educational environment.

Chapter 2

An Overview of the Discipline

It is important to understand the disciplinary tradition of teaching ESOL writing and examine the potential our professional knowledge may have for facilitating a critical pedagogy. In this respect, it is necessary to interrogate the dominant pedagogical assumptions, values, and practices in our field. Since these concerns are implicated in the professional identity, status, and “culture” of writing teachers, I will begin by exploring how the field of ESOL composition is constituted.

The Community of Writing Teachers

ESOL writing teachers have so far enjoyed an uneasy relationship with the two communities that most matter to them professionally—that is, their immediate family of applied linguists (comprising TESOL professionals) and their extended family of composition specialists (composed largely of L1 teachers). To some extent, they have been marginalized in both circles. There are many reasons for this situation. Within the applied linguistics circle, there is the well-known structuralist bias that spoken language is primary. Therefore pedagogies for ESOL students have largely featured oral interactions. There is also the professional wisdom in our discipline that writing is the last of the four skills that should be developed, long after laying the foundation of grammatical competence through speech and the two receptive skills (i.e., listening and reading). Those who teach writing from the TESOL community have therefore lacked the motivation and opportunities to develop a distinctive professional identity as spe-