

## Listening between the lines

The other day I went to a fascinating presentation on critical literacy. (Yes, really.) It was one of those occasions that remind us of the complexity of the language we deal with every day – and teach our learners.

According to our lovely presenters, critical literacy involves “looking at texts to question the underlying values, attitudes and beliefs.”

Why bother? I hear you ask.

Well, when you read an article in the newspaper, you notice all sorts of things apart from the words alone. You can pick whether the writer is pushing their own barrow, informing or persuading the reader, aiming for a particular response. Maybe you don't notice that you notice.

Think about some of the questions below when next you watch *Masterchef New Zealand* or read the editorial in the Listener magazine – or as you read this bit from the Dominion Post (16 November 2010 - made a brief mention on page 2 of Section B).

### Foreigners die

French officials say that a fire in a building in the Eastern city of Dijon, housing immigrant workers, has killed seven people, including two who jumped from the windows to escape. Some 100 people were injured. The building housed single foreign workers and families, mostly from sub-Saharan Africa.

*How does the text depict age groups? Gender groups? Cultural groups?* (The workers are identified- three times- as being foreign. Nothing on age, gender, occupation, family circumstances. They are faceless as well as alien. Compare the three articles on the front page of this same newspaper which are all “person-centred”, giving various individual reactions to financial crises in terms such as “I was gobsmacked”. And photos, of course.)

*Who is quoted? Who isn't?* (French officials - authorities from the host culture. Nothing from the workers themselves, their families, witnesses, any individuals in fact. Makes it pretty impersonal.)

*What view of the world does the text present?* (This event is not very important or relevant. The workers are from Africa, so could well be overstayers or illegal immigrants. France is troubled by too many immigrants anyway. Nothing the fire brigade could have done. The single workers were probably young men with no responsibilities. They are probably low paid manual workers to be living in a building like this. Not the best idea to leap out of the window to escape, but then they are foreigners... )

*Is the text fair?* (To these workers? Maybe not. To the French officials? Probably. To the workers' families? Hmm.... To immigrant workers in France? To immigrant workers in general?)

**What does the text say to you that it doesn't to your learner (perhaps)?**

The experts say that critical analysis doesn't follow comprehension, it goes alongside. When we share our language we also share our view of the world, so that premise seems fair enough.

Exchange critical literacy skills with your learner. It's a fascinating process!

PS For those who are still awake at this point and want to read more, there's a nice introduction in Wikipedia [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical\\_literacy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_literacy), or try this memorable if somewhat baffling video <http://freireproject.org/content/intro-video>.