



Part2: Critique - When Materials Create Barriers

Training handout

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1. Language as Construction, Not Reflection

Teaching materials are often treated as neutral. In reality, they construct meanings about who succeeds, who belongs, and what is considered “normal.” When certain identities are repeatedly centred while others are absent, materials begin to function as silent gatekeepers of participation.

Critical engagement with materials allows teachers to move beyond delivery and into interpretation, questioning not only what is taught, but what is implied.

2. From Surface Reading to Critical Reading

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a lens for examining how texts encode assumptions and power relations. The distinction below captures the pedagogical shift:

Surface Reading	Critical Reading
Meaning is taken as given	Meaning is questioned
Texts are neutral	Texts carry assumptions
Focus on understanding	Focus on representation
One interpretation	Multiple perspectives

This shift becomes essential in diverse classrooms where learners may not recognise themselves in the material.

3. Hidden Demands in Materials

Many barriers are not visible at first glance. They operate through expectations that remain unstated:

Dimension	What It Assumes	Who It Privileges
Linguistic load	Control of complex language	High-proficiency learners
Cultural load	Shared knowledge and norms	Dominant cultural groups
Task design	Familiarity with formats	Experienced/academic learners

When these demands are unexamined, participation becomes uneven rather than inclusive.

4. Case Study: Travel as a “Universal” Experience

A B1/B2 task asks learners to describe a trip abroad, presenting travel as common and desirable. The text positions travel as a marker of personal development and open-mindedness.

This framing introduces a socioeconomic assumption: access to travel is treated as universal. Learners without such experiences are not only excluded from the content but are implicitly positioned as lacking.

From a pedagogical perspective, the issue is not the topic itself, but the narrow entry point. When a task depends on a specific life experience, language ability becomes secondary to access.

A more inclusive design maintains the same objective while widening access: learners may draw on local experiences, imagined journeys, or mediated exposure (e.g. films, online content). The shift is minimal, yet the impact on participation is significant.

5. Case Study: The “Ideal” English Speaker

A text defines successful learners as those who speak clearly, avoid strong accents, and imitate native speakers. Accuracy is presented as constant and deviation as failure.

This reflects native-speakerism and deficit framing. Language is no longer a tool for communication but a standard to approximate. Learners’ linguistic identities become obstacles rather than resources.

Such representations can reduce confidence and reinforce unrealistic expectations, particularly in multilingual classrooms where variation is the norm.

An alternative framing shifts the focus to intelligibility, adaptability, and communicative effectiveness, recognising that English operates globally across diverse users.

6. From Critique to Adaptation

The aim of critique is not rejection, but transformation:

Original Framing	Inclusive Shift
One norm	Multiple realities
Assumed experience	Flexible access
Fixed response	Choice of response
Deficit view	Asset-based view

Small pedagogical decisions how a task is framed, who is represented, what is questioned, which can significantly reshape learner access.