

Words & Actions

An EFL Teacher's Critical Literacy Goals & Their Enactment in a Reading Class in China

Lina Sun

Introduction

The field of teaching English to speakers of other languages took a “critical turn” during the 1990s (Kumaravadivelu, 2006), and many scholars have called for the inclusion of a critical perspective in the teaching of English as a second language and English as a foreign language (EFL). However, critical perspectives are still not a major part of teaching and learning in most EFL classrooms. One possible reason may be the dearth of documentation of critical perspectives in language teaching practices.

For instance, Wallace (1999) noted that though numerous articles have been written about critical pedagogy, it tends to be conceptualized in highly abstract ways without concrete illustration. In addition, teachers and practitioners have not often made public any documentation of their work in classrooms (Albright, Church, Settle, & Vasquez, 1999). Most publications concerning critical perspectives have been largely theoretical in nature.

Although a few empirical studies have argued for the possibility of implementing critical pedagogy in EFL contexts in East Asian countries, they only focused on the role of the student in the instruction process, leaving the teacher's perspectives and concerns unexplored. Thus practitioners' voices need to be heard to further explore possibilities in practice.

It is significant to explore how a teacher

responds to a critical literacy classroom in terms of his or her teaching goals, beliefs, and concerns, and the challenges that he or she may encounter when undertaking a critical literacy approach in an EFL classroom in Confucian-based pedagogical environments such as China. In short, these comments point to the general lack of writing from a practical rather than a theoretical point of view. A critical literacy approach to EFL teaching is still underexplored.

This critical empirical study documents what critical literacy pedagogy looks like in a high school EFL reading class in China. The article aims to address the extent to which critical literacy could function as a theoretical anchor for the teaching and learning of English in EFL settings. It is written from the perspective of an EFL researcher-practitioner, and critical literacy is understood through the lens of an EFL teacher seeking a critical foundation for everyday work in the classroom. The study is guided by the following questions:

How does a high school teacher teach critical literacy in a high school-level EFL reading classroom in China?

How does he or she conceptualize critical literacy and develop critical teaching?

What difficulties and challenges does he or she encounter in taking a critical literacy approach to EFL reading instruction?

Literature Review

Critical Literacy Studies in EFL Contexts

Critical literacy maintains that the use of language is never neutral. Critical literacy explores what it means to read and write involving an epistemological understanding of knowledge construction and language practices intertwined in relations of powers. From a critical liter-

acy perspective, reading and writing are social processes that assist an individual in becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations (Shor, 1999).

Furthermore, critical literacy assumes that texts are written with particular purposes and serve particular aims. It guides students in thinking about the ideologies and consequences behind the choices to voice and to silence. It illuminates how texts are socially constructed, aiming to position their intended audiences in a particular way.

Therefore a language and literacy curriculum that draws from critical literacy goes beyond decoding and encoding the written symbols, answering comprehension questions, and summarizing paragraphs to engaging students in questioning the author's intentions and biases and in discussing the implications and consequences of the author's choices as well as the power relations involved in the voices both heard and unheard. Accordingly, teachers are required to engage in discussions of the social implications and textual and language practices as an integral part of any language curriculum.

A critical literacy perspective in the language and literacy curriculum has been well documented. Practitioners have focused on different aspects of critical literacy development in their implementation. Bomer and Bomer (2001) suggested engaging students in discussions both within and across texts. Reading texts against texts helps to draw gaps and silences in each piece of text and also makes explicit the different sides of an issue, different ways of writing about the same topic, and different perspectives from which to understand the same subject.

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Critical Literacy Teaching Strategies

Critical literacy is a way of thinking—a reading practice that challenges texts or the taken-for-granted ideas in our everyday lives. There is no single method for reading from a critical stance (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). Luke (2000) even cautioned against a formula for “doing” critical literacy in the classroom. The varied strategies that encourage students to take a critical stance toward text include textual analysis, dialogue, and questioning or problem posing.

For the teacher to take a critical literacy approach to an EFL reading class, McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) suggested that the teacher should scaffold student learning by using a five-step instructional framework: explain, demonstrate, guide, practice, and reflect. First, the teacher can explain what it means to be critically aware and then demonstrate this by using a read-aloud and a think-aloud. During the process, the teacher provides a critical perspective from which students question and challenge the text. Questions that promote reading from a critical stance can include,

Whose viewpoint is expressed?

What does the author want us to think?

Whose voices are missing, silenced, or discounted?

How might alternative perspectives be represented?

What material or economic interests are served in its production?

How are the participants named and shaped?

What does it exclude?

How is the reader positioned?

Then, students can work in pairs or small groups to offer responses as the teacher guides their reading and as they practice reading from a critical stance. Finally, the teacher and the students reflect on what they know about being critically aware and how it helped them to understand the text. Despite these suggestions and guidelines, critical literacy teaching is dynamic and continually needs to be revisited and refined.

Apol (1998) reported on the following perspectives from which to consider texts when working with fiction:

How characters are portrayed, including the major and minor roles.

How the plot is presented and its effect.

How students' reactions compared with

the narrator's intended response from readers.

Kohl (1995) also recommended the following directions from which to engage with stories:

Which characters have power and decision-making authority and for what reasons

Which characters assume more passive roles and how they are portrayed, and the dynamics and consequences of power relations among characters.

Hence, based on the well-documented experiences of researchers and practitioners, it seems advisable for novice critical readers to start with fictional work so that there are concrete characters and events from which to discuss the ideological positioning of authors and texts.

Graphic Novels in the EFL Classroom

A graphic novel is an original book-length fiction or nonfiction story produced in the style of a comic book. Here I am concerned with original book-length stories in graphic novels, allowing creators to present longer, complex narratives and mature themes, which is not possible with the much shorter format of the comic book. Graphic novels provide ample opportunities for students of all ages—especially EFL learners—to interact with highly engaging, multimodal texts of numerous genres.

The use of graphic novels and comics to support language learning in the EFL classroom is not a new concept. Using graphic novels in the classroom contextualizes the target language in ways that aid EFL students in learning how to use the language correctly.

Schwarz (2002) argued that EFL learners often face formidable barriers in a written text without any accompanying visual context and that comics provide visual support for EFL learners' construction of meaning during reading. He further suggested incorporating comics into writing activities with these students. Moreover, Tabachnick (2009) suggested that graphic novels as visually supported texts provide comprehensible input and lower the affective filter for second language readers.

Beyond the instructional considerations previously mentioned, the substantive content of certain graphic novels is particularly appropriate for EFL learners, for example, works that center on themes of social inequalities and social justice, like *Maus I and II* (Spiegelman, 1973, 1986), *Pride of Bagdad* (Vaughan & Henrichon,

2006), and *Pitch Black* (Landowne & Horton, 2008).

These works are accessible to even high-intermediate EFL learners and thus can enable them to engage in critical discussions in ways that are not always possible with only written texts, due to their scaffolding of textual meanings through rich visual modes of representation.

Theoretical Framework

Krashen's (2003) SLA theories, especially his acquisition/learning hypothesis, input/comprehension hypothesis, and affective filter hypothesis, are often cited to support the use of authentic literature with English learners. For Krashen, language acquisition is a subconscious process, and we acquire languages only when we understand messages, that is, when we obtain “comprehensible input.”

In addition to language factors, characteristics of comprehensible input include contextual clues, topics students have prior knowledge about, or topics that are interesting and meaningful to students. Moreover, the affective filter determines how comprehensible input is going to be processed. Students with a higher affective filter tend to seek less input.

Krashen (2003) accordingly emphasized the importance of authentic texts and meaningful tasks because the focus is on meaning rather than on form. He also suggested that using extended texts can provide more contextual clues for comprehensible input. Finally, he highlighted the importance of a low-anxiety environment because it lowers students' affective filter and increases the input they receive.

In light of Krashen's (2003) theories, using graphic novels with EFL young adult learners should be appropriate because (a) these are authentic texts, (b) they are extended texts with interesting and meaningful topics, and (c) the extracurricular Graphic Novel Reading Group can help to create a low-anxiety environment.

The Study

Settings and the Teacher Participant

The study was conducted in an English reading class at a high school in China over the course of 6 weeks. Since there was no way for the study to fit into the established curriculum, the main part of the study was conducted in an after-school book club in a school room. The participant was the teacher of the reading course, who held a MA degree in English literature and had

been teaching English for more than 10 years at the time of study.

She held the belief that English reading instruction should not be limited to the instruction of basic language skills but rather that the English reading class should cultivate students to see through the hidden assumptions behind various texts. Therefore she was interested in adopting a critical literacy approach to teaching EFL reading when I invited her to participate in this study.

Data Sources

Data sources included classroom observation, audiotaped class discussion, the course syllabus, face-to-face interviews and several informal conversations with the teacher, and individual interviews with the students. A total of 6 hours of class discussion data that appeared significant and meaningful were selected and transcribed for analysis. The informal conversations continued regularly throughout the course, which provided valuable data to capture the teacher's understanding of critical literacy and critical literacy teaching and the changes in her conceptualization of them.

The in-depth interviews with the teacher were conducted prior to the course and after the course. The pre-course interview was about her earlier teaching experiences in reading and teaching philosophies, and the post-course interview was about her experiences with critical literacy teaching. The interviews with students were conducted after the course. All the interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and were audiotaped.

Selection of Literature

Gene Luen Yang's (2013) *Boxers and Saints* tells two parallel stories. *Boxers* follows Little Bao, whose village is plundered by Western missionaries. Inspired by visions of the Chinese gods, he joins a violent uprising against the Western interlopers. In *Saints*, Yang lays out the opposite side of the conflict. A girl whose village has no place for her is taken in by Christian missionaries and finds a home with them. As the Boxer Rebellion gains momentum the girl, Vibiana, must choose between her country and her faith.

The Boxer Rebellion was not only an important moment in Chinese and British history but it is also significant because of its effect on world history generally. Helping students to understand the Boxer Rebellion can create great insight into the philosophical issues at play in wars for

independence. Literary characters help students to make important affective connections with texts, and they can come to understand a great deal more about how wars affect everyday people by engaging with historical fiction—whether in the realm of the fantastic or the mundane.

Furthermore, historical fiction allows readers to contemplate the ethical and moral decisions and the extreme actions that characters make in times of war, allowing them to consider and evaluate their behavior. *Boxers and Saints* helps students understand the Boxer Rebellion and its importance to history, and Yang also encourages readers to think more deeply about the nature of war, rebellion, and the decisions we make in such times of crisis. The texts are an appropriate choice since they are strong for use in developing students' critical literacy skills while encouraging them to engage deeply with moral questions.

Gene Luen Yang is one of the most noted authors of graphic novels to come along since Art Spiegelman, and his graphic novels are some of the most literary examples of the format available to teachers for use in the classroom. He wrote and illustrated the first graphic novel Printz winner, *American Born Chinese*, as well as *The Eternal Smile* (illustrated by Derek Kirk Kim) and *Level Up* (illustrated by Thien Pham). He also wrote and illustrated *Animal Crackers* (a collection of two earlier graphic novellas) and a kids' graphic novel, *Prime Baby*. He is also currently working on a series of graphic novels that follow Ang and Team Avatar's journey after the series finale of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*.

Findings and Interpretations

The Students: Moving Toward Critical Reading

EFL learners' views on graphic novels.

At the beginning of the course, many of the EFL learners were not excited about reading graphic novels and could not foresee much value in reading a graphic novel. Nearly all of the students changed their perspective after engaging with the text (all the names used in the following parts are pseudonyms).

Anne exhibited this attitude in her interview and said,

I wasn't thrilled. I thought the assignment might be kind of pointless, and I wouldn't enjoy the book. My opinion was totally changed after I read *Boxers and Saints*, and it seemed like the book was interesting and educational.

Marco shared a similar attitude in a forum post about the book:

I feel as if the content is actually quite valuable. At first I was a bit hesitant to jump to this conclusion, as I am not a fan of graphic novels. However, the book flowed quite nicely and was easy and interesting read. Furthermore, it provided first-hand narratives of a tragic and imperialistic historical event that has happened in the history of China. For example, the first-hand narrative provided for the killing of innocent Christians was horrific. It also provided great primary resources. I feel that I would be more apt to read this as opposed to a general English textbook.

Anne and Marco demonstrated that they came to value the genre in several ways and felt that graphic novels could benefit EFL learners. The following sections present some of the ways the EFL learners valued the graphic novels.

Multiple perspectives. Nearly all of the students in this study noted that graphic novels' greatest value was in their presentation of multiple perspectives, which included new perspectives they were not aware of in several historical situations. Justin noted the graphic novel's impact and value in his analysis and wrote,

Boxers and Saints provides readers with a variety of individuals who were all affected by the event differently, each providing their own perspective on the tragedy and ultimately providing individuals with a more accurate account of the event.

Holly also noted the emphasis on multiple perspectives and the value of their use in *Boxers and Saints*. In a forum post, Holly wrote,

I believe the content is highly valuable, as it not only discusses issues in Chinese history that are not normally discussed, but also employs a variety of less traditional perspectives to do this. Because this is a graphic novel, it often takes the perspective of those who were actually involved in the events being discussed, which is a very different approach than students would find in a textbook. For example, I could see the Boxer Rebellion from the perspective of senior official, the real foreign devil, and the intelligentsia.

The EFL learners demonstrated that the graphic novels they read offered valuable narratives that included new and multiple perspectives that were not typically found in the traditional language learning curriculum.

Reader engagement. EFL learners in this study found that graphic novels would

be valuable for engaging unmotivated readers. The format of graphic novels differs from traditional texts, which offers readers a variety of ways to engage with the text. Anne noted this fact in her interview and said,

I think graphic novels could be more valuable for certain students who do not enjoy reading . . . because graphic novels present information in a different way that could be more appealing to these students.

Darin noted the value of graphic novels in a similar manner, but on a more personal level. In his interview, Darin said,

I'll be honest, I don't like to read . . . which I know is bad to admit as a student but I enjoyed reading *Boxers and Saints* . . . and the story was fascinating. . . . The mixture of documents and images was great.

The EFL learners valued graphic novels as narratives that could possibly engage those who typically do not enjoy reading, not to mention engage them in texts about historical events, such as the Boxer Rebellion.

Contextualization of historical empathy.

All of the EFL learners valued the graphic novels as narratives that could promote types of critical thinking and reading among them. Most of EFL learners identified graphic novels as valuable ways to engage them in thinking about historical empathy, because of the way the graphic novels portrayed the actors in context.

Gary commented about this in his interview and noted that in reading *Boxers and Saints*, he learned about new events and perspectives. He was able to better understand their actions through the way the graphic novel contextualized attitudes among the actors. Gary wrote in his analysis,

After reading the story of Little Bao and Four-Girl, I think that religion is a method by which we can find the true "us" and solve all the problems and explain all the phenomena. Religion is the spiritual ballast for people and a kind of faith which means a standard for people when they judge something or make decisions. In both volumes, the importance of religion is that it becomes the faith for ordinary people and the standard for them to do something.

Sam also demonstrated empathy from the contextualization of Xiao Bao's life in describing his experience with *Boxers and Saints*. Sam wrote in his analysis,

Not all of the Boxers are noble, and Yang highlights this as the Boxers' fear of polluting Yin and misogynistic rumors about Westerners that partly fuel their disgust.

Like how history frames the Boxer Movement in various lights—anti-imperialist, xenophobic, revolutionary—Yang does not shy away from incorporating all these perspectives as well. Bao's uneasy participation in this group as the movement grows results in him sacrificing more of his values until the heart-wrenching end, which shocked me in its abruptness. . . . I definitely can understand him in a different light.

The graphic novels presented difficult historical situations and were able to present them in ways that contextualized the historical actors' decisions. The format of the graphic novels combined with their narrative forms contributed to effectively contextualizing the actors and the causes and consequences of their actions in a detailed and meaningful manner.

Historical agency. The EFL learners also valued graphic novels as a resource because they thought they could engage them in thinking about historical agency. Seixas (1993) noted the importance of understanding historical agency:

Historical agency implies that people in the past faced choices, that they made decisions, and that the resulting actions had consequences. . . . Historical agency is necessary for conceptualizing people's interactions with the social and cultural circumstances in which they found themselves. (p. 303)

Thinking about historical agency often involves identifying what actions were taken, by whom, and why.

To think about historical agency also involves identifying and understanding the constraints that restricted the individuals' actions, or in other words, to engage in historical agency is to consider how much agency is possible for an individual in a given situation. Anne noted the value of *Boxers and Saints*, which emphasized the actions of lesser-known individuals involved in the circumstances of the famous historical event. Anne commented on this in her interview:

His [the author's] use of a wide span of people allows me to realize that there is not just one person in any historical event but many that influenced the outcome and history as we know it. I learn that it was not just General Hongdeng Zhu and Futian Cao that influenced the outcome of a historical event and how we remember it but that it was the lesser-known individuals such as Xiao Bao and Four-Girl and everyday soldiers who died in battle that influence the history we know about an event such as the Boxer Rebellion.

In another interview, Dan commented on the value of *Boxers and Saints* and the way it portrayed individuals and decisions they made despite the constraints of difficult circumstances:

I like how Yang showcased actual people . . . people who were in these conflicts and stuff. I feel like his [Yang's] perspective is kinda narrow and I wonder which perspectives he left out . . . but I really liked hearing about Xiao Bao and Four-Girl. . . . I think . . . they made sacrifices in such difficult events.

The EFL learners found that the graphic novels held value in the way they portrayed historical situations and the actors in those situations. The graphic novels allowed for readers to see more explicitly the individuals' positionality and the constraints they faced when they made difficult decisions and sacrifices.

Historical inquiry. The use of historical narratives can have a significant impact on students' historical understanding. Graphic novels allow readers to engage in new interpretations of history by offering revisions of historical events and the circumstances of historical actors' lives.

The EFL learners also found graphic novels to be valuable for historical inquiry. They found that graphic novels could help them raise questions about their own culture and experiences and allowed them to investigate the past to raise questions that possibly have relevance for the present. Olivia noted this in a forum post:

I learned about several pieces of Chinese history, which was never even discussed in my history classes in high school. I want to know more about these historical events, it is part of our history and I feel like our society sweeps so many things under the rug.

Mark also had questions after reading *Boxers and Saints*. He noted not knowing much about the Boxer Rebellion and was surprised to read about foreign missionaries' actions after the event. However, Mark was more surprised by another aspect of the period, the foreigners and Christian converts. Mark wrote in a forum post,

I think that the perception I had of the foreigners and Christians has changed. The Brother-Disciples of the Righteous and Harmonious Fist are impulsive and they cannot analyze the current situation and always do their fighting according to zeal. After reading these two books, I believe that everyone has his or her right to choose a religion and be faithful of it. Not all the people who convert from Catholics

are like the foreign devils. If people can get the essence of the religion and follow it throughout their whole life, all the things would develop in a good way.

When EFL learners read the graphic novels, they engaged with unfamiliar historical situations and actors, which compelled them to inquire about both current and historical events.

The Instructor: Moving Toward Critical Literacy Teaching

The teacher's progressive change in teaching beliefs and practices. The teacher used four kinds of arrangements in teaching her lesson: group presentation of vocabulary/summary, teacher explanation of text, and small-group discussion and sharing by teacher-led whole-class interaction. The first two arrangements were on literary reading, and the other two were on critical reading, which was the focus of this article, as this study explored how the teacher did the critical reading in the class.

For critical reading, the teacher had students discuss first in small groups. She adopted a device similar to the *literature circle*, where each group member in turn takes the role of *director* and is responsible for directing the discussion; the role of *connector* for making text–self, text–text, or text–world connections; the role of *challenger* for challenging the ideas students mention; and the role of *wrapper* for summarizing their discussions.

When students finished group discussions, several of them were called to share in front, and it was mostly during this period that the teacher posed critical questions and attempted a critical dialogue with students.

The teacher often used three steps to have a critical dialogue with students in the reading class:

- (a) *stance*, asking students to respond to commonly held ideas or beliefs by taking different perspectives;
- (b) *deconstruction*, guiding students to uncover the effects of the commonplaces or stereotypes on people; and
- (c) *reconstruction*, encouraging students to reflect on the possibility of constructing the liberatory or emancipatory discourse.

Question posing is one important strategy that the teacher used for her critical teaching. The questions she posed in the first few weeks contained mostly literal-comprehension questions that required only a literal response, but as the course moved halfway, she was able to pose more

and more critical questions that encouraged students to question and challenge the values, beliefs, and attitudes that lay beneath the surface of the text. Questions like, Whose voices are represented? What are the intentions of the author? and What other perspectives can we have on this issue? appeared intermittently in class discussion.

To sum up, the teacher approached her reading instruction by encouraging students to see things from different perspectives; asking students to consider the purpose of the text and the author's motive; supporting them in taking a stance on issues; examining the implications of worldviews, values, beliefs, and attitudes; and articulating, clarifying, or even changing their own values. She noted,

Teaching students reading or writing does not merely mean to teach them linguistic knowledge or cultivate in them linguistic competence. I came to think of reading and writing in English as making meaning out of the context in which words are used. I moved from teaching language forms to teaching the meaning embedded in language.

The teacher's concerns and challenges. Critical literacy provides another layer of significance to meaning-focused instruction in the EFL context. It allows students to understand that there is purpose and meaning in both what is written and what is omitted. Meanwhile, it guides students to think about the ideologies and consequences behind the choices to voice and to silence and illuminates how texts are socially constructed, positioning their intended audiences in a particular way.

Critical literacy can serve as an optimal starting point for novice teachers seeking to include a critical perspective in their language classrooms. Since critical literacy focuses on critical analysis of the contents of texts, teachers may have something concrete from which to work to engage students in interrogating the social implications of language practices as well as the power relations inherent in the choice of words and modes presentation.

Even though critical literacy practices can significantly enhance the profundity of EFL teaching and learning, their actual application in the classroom may not be without potential difficulties. In the EFL classroom, critical pedagogy may not directly provide the novice critical language educator the immediate means through which to translate the theory into classroom practice.

Successful implementation of critical

language practice relies on the teacher's familiarity in deconstructing texts for their ideological assumptions through linguistic features and the teacher's ability to focus on student experiences and language practices. As documentation of critical literacy practices in EFL classrooms is still relatively scarce in the literature, it also relies on the teacher's creativity in its implementation.

It has to be acknowledged that there is still great distance in EFL contexts between what the theories can potentially offer and their practice in classrooms. The most effective way to enhance a critical dimension in language education in EFL contexts is perhaps through its emphasis on teacher education programs.

Interested teachers could begin by sharing their own experiences in their own classrooms. Therefore a necessary step to the achievement of critical consciousness in EFL teaching and learning lies in bottom-up practitioner-led action research that documents and shares teachers' experiences of their implementation and reflection.

Though the teacher herself gained a better understanding of reading and critical literacy through the teaching of this course, she had some concerns and also faced challenges while implementing ideas of critical literacy in an EFL reading class, including a transmission model of literacy and students' beliefs about language learning.

Transmission model of literacy (banking education). A critical literacy classroom demands active participation and constant reflection on the students' part, which most Chinese students were not accustomed to from their past learning experiences. To engage students in critical literacy, the teacher used dialogues instead of one-way lecturing, and it presented a challenge for her, as she had been accustomed to lecturing in class, where students listened silently, and she also believed students had been used to listening to the teacher's lectures.

Therefore it was difficult for her to transform herself from a teacher as information transmitter to a teacher as learning facilitator in the beginning. She found she had difficulty in eliciting responses from students during class. She said, "Students only waited for me to provide the answers to the questions" (second interview). Though students became more responsive as the course went on, their participation still did not measure up to what she had expected from a critical literacy classroom,

which should be a forum for many different voices. “I wanted to make students feel the atmosphere of democracy in the classroom, but I somewhat failed in that respect.”

Though the teacher experienced difficulty in initiating a dialogue with students and facilitating whole-class discussion, students liked the small-group discussion and whole-class sharing activity. Most of them believed these activities had expanded their thinking. One student, Debbie, said in the interview,

You can find others who have very different ideas from yours or some ideas you’ve never thought about. People from different backgrounds look at things differently.

In this study, the teacher adopted the form of a literature circle to engage students in participation. In this way, she created a space for students not only to make links between their lives and texts to deepen their comprehension of text but also to encourage discussions of multiple answers, perspectives, and interpretations for students to foster their critical literacy. Therefore the small-group discussion activity could compensate for EFL students’ nonexpressiveness in whole-class teacher-led discussion.

Students’ beliefs about language learning. The second challenge came from students’ perceptions of learning a foreign language such as English. Even though students’ expectations for a reading course were to increase their knowledge of vocabulary and reading skills, they welcomed such a critical literacy-oriented reading class because they also felt the need to equip themselves with critical thinking ability.

For example, Mark, a student who was still struggling for English proficiency and was more conscious of the need to improve his proficiency in the English language, also emphasized the importance of critical literacy by quoting a saying from Confucius: “Study without thinking is labor lost; thinking without study is perilous.”

James, an advanced-level student, similarly viewed critical literacy as a very important tool. He commented,

Without critical awareness, you don’t judge. You have no idea of your own. You just follow others. . . . Critical awareness is really important, not only in learning English but also Chinese, in logical thinking in daily life.

He even highly valued this class.

Conclusions

This study depicted an EFL teacher’s and students’ growth in critical literacy teaching and learning in a high school in China and found the teacher’s pedagogy moving from a traditional didactic classroom to a critical dialogic approach. Such a finding is significant, given that China has progressed from an authoritarian state into a democracy in which many different ideologies are competing with one another. In such an open society, critical approaches to EFL learning are needed, because they reflect the inseparable relationships between language, learning, and social change.

The teacher’s and students’ growth explored in this study has yielded some insights for teaching and learning from a critical perspective and contributed to a greater understanding of critical literacy practices in East Asian classrooms. These countries under the influence of Confucian ideology are supposed to be incongruent to critical teaching.

However, as the study showed, the teacher has to some extent transformed herself from an information giver into a critical facilitator who, through dialogues with students, raised their critical consciousness about the text and unjust social practices, and the critical consciousness raised through critical pedagogy will empower them to be active agents for social change in the future.

Though such teaching is different in nature from the traditional English courses that students had previously experienced and from a school system where knowledge transmission is highly valued, the students in this study were not generally resistant to critical discussion. They especially welcomed the group discussion and the sharing activities, in which they felt their critical thinking was motivated and expanded.

Though the teacher was awkward in engaging in dialogue with the students, and the students—long accustomed to transmission pedagogy—were also not very expressive of themselves in the beginning, they soon enjoyed critical literacy teaching and apparently benefited from it. This indicates that critical pedagogy can indeed be done in East Asian classrooms.

As the teacher plays a key role in the critical classroom, what is needed is a teacher training program to cultivate a critical mind in the teacher and to develop those critical teaching skills of the teacher that are culturally congruent. As found in this study, we can see that posing critical

questions impromptu and having a critical dialogue presented a challenge to most of the EFL teachers, especially when students had long been accustomed to a transmission style of instruction and valued the opinions of the teacher more than their own. To overcome this difficulty, teachers must themselves be critical thinkers to help their students become critical readers. Only when the teacher is critically aware will teaching students to read from a critical stance be a natural process.

Finally, some pedagogical suggestions are provided for the teacher to implement critical literacy in an EFL reading class:

First, balance instruction in basic language skills and critical literacy. Though the teacher may perceive it to be important to immediately engage texts at the discursive level, a successful teacher does not neglect students’ practical needs.

Second, create a supporting environment where learners can consider a variety of perspectives. Classroom activities such as small-group discussion can not only create opportunities for students to voice their different perspectives but also build rapport and establish a comfortable learning environment.

Third, model a questioning stance toward texts. The teacher’s guidance or modeling is vitally important when the students are not clearly picking up on it.

Implications

The findings of this study suggest that EFL instructors should consider graphic novels as viable resources to explore for use in their courses. The EFL learners in this study identified several attributes of graphic novels that engaged them in aspects of critical thinking (empathy, agency, and inquiry) in the context of historical issues and engaged them with new and multiple perspectives on these issues.

These attributes make graphic novels another genre that is valuable to the EFL curriculum, because they effectively engage students through the use of historical narratives. As many of the EFL learners mentioned, these historical narratives also focus on many historical situations and actors that are not typically covered in the traditional EFL textbooks. Graphic novels provide a way for readers to engage with voices often left out of the EFL curriculum and to develop valuable skills in critical thinking and reading.

Following are some suggestions for teachers who would like to introduce graphic novels to teaching the English language in their own contexts.

Always begin with the initial impressions.

Inviting initial impressions is always a good way to break the ice, because all the students can have something to say. They may at the very least say whether they liked about what they have read or not. This also helps students to voice their initial understandings; they can then begin to construct and refine meaning.

Provide opportunities for students to talk. Students should talk to each other, to the class, and to teachers who genuinely want to know what they think. In this study, the instructor used a great deal of group work in her teaching. In addition, she talked less in the reading club than the teacher using traditional pedagogy. By providing these opportunities, teachers encourage students to develop their own well-formed interpretations and gain vision from others.

Act as listener, responder, and helper rather than as provider of information. Open-ended prompts and questions are particularly conducive to reading graphic novels. Teachers may encourage students to make personal and intertextual connections. This can be done with questions or prompts such as the following:

Have you ever read a story where the event in the book happened? Relate it to your own experiences, and share similar moments from your life or from books you have read in the past.

Talk to the characters as you begin to know them. Give them advice to help them. Put yourself in their place, and share how you would act in a similar situation. Approve or disapprove of their values, actions, or behavior. Try to figure out what makes them react the way they do.

Students should also be encouraged to consider why they respond as they do

and to develop a sense of tolerance for responses that differ. Teachers may pose questions and prompts that encourage students to relive the reading experience. This can be done by imagining, visualizing, and hypothesizing, for example,

If you could be any character in the story, who would you be?

What would it feel like to be a character in the story or participate in an event in the story?

This can also be done by expressing preferences or by asking for summative opinions. Teachers may encourage students to respond in writing. In the study, the instructor noted that it was very useful to ask students to keep logs. She noted that “responding in writing could establish a habit of thinking deeply and personally about what they read.”

Teachers may provide students with opportunities to engage in a variety of activities. Different types of activities may be readings involving books, plays, poems, or dramatic interludes; role-playing; one-on-one conversations with peers (in small groups or in whole-class discussion); writing, both private (journal writing, logs) and public; project work ranging from drawing the mental images created while reading a graphic novel to rewriting the text; responding to film adaptations of the work; filmmaking; and dramatizations of the text.

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