

Critical Literacy Practices in EFL Reading Classroom

-An Experimental Study towards Chinese University Students

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Abstract

English as a world language is more than a way to exchange information but a means to solidify certain social hierarchy and represent certain social interests. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers should instruct critical awareness to empower students to transform social injustice and fulfill responsibilities as global citizens. This experimental study aims to investigate how Chinese EFL reading classes integrate with critical practice, whether critical literacy practice (CLP) contributes to achievements of language proficiency, how critical literacy practice shapes and is reshaped by students' identities, and what contributions critical literacy practice can make to Chinese EFL reading classes. The experimental study throws light on EFL teaching.

Keywords: critical literacy, language, critical literacy practice, EFL, reading

1. Introduction

English is not only a kind of language for people to communicate or exchange information, but a means of powering and empowering the underlying norms, identities and ideologies of a given community (Lankshear and McLaren, 1993; Shor and Freire, 1985). Therefore in the classroom setting it is not enough for teachers to merely instruct mechanical skills of language to students but also to help students develop critical literacy competence to interrogate the status quo, critique social injustice and education inequities, and take actions (Luke, 2012).

Critical literacy has already developed well in western context. "Read the word read the world" (Freire, 1970). Scholars (Gee, 1990; Freire, 1970; Morrell, 2008; Jank, 2013) discern that power is a pivotal tenet of critical literacy. Freire (1998) proposes "reading the world by reading the word". In his book *The Oppressed and the Oppressor*, he calls on the unprivileged community Brazilian peasants should raise self-consciousness through critical literacy against oppression. Janks defines critical literacy as being "concerned with teaching learners to understand and manage the relationship between language and power" (Janks, 2000). Luke (2014) approaches critical literacy in a more comprehensive manner as "the use of the technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of institutions and everyday life".

Based on the theoretical ideologies of critical literacy, scholars carry out different frameworks of practicing critical literacy. Freire (1970) addresses "banking education model" against to critical pedagogy, which treats students as passive learners. Freire proposes his "problem-posing education, responding to the essence of consciousness—intentionality—rejects communiqué and embodies communication" (Freire, 1970). He stresses that teacher should act as an agent to help students know the world around them through critical practice. Teachers should empower students to exert their own power to change social order. Luke and Freebody call for a framework "four resources model" to implement critical practice in the classroom: code break, text participant, text user and text critique (Luke & Freebody, 1999). Later they (Luke & Freebody, 1999) modify the model into: coding competence (ability to decode and Critical Literacies in Historical Context encode the text), semantic competence (ability to make meaning of the text), pragmatic competence (ability to use the text appropriately in a context), and critical competence (ability to critique and evaluate the text). They point out that teachers instruct these competences without any hierarchical order. Teachers should integrate these competences instead of isolate them through implementation. Blommaert (2005) and Fairclough (1995, 2001) point out critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA focuses on the ideological character of discourse and on the aspects of power relations in

the text (Fairclough, 1989, 1995, 2001; Blommaert, 2005, cited in Bogum, 2016). CDA aims to deconstruct the power taken for granted, namely, hegemony, and address how language can provide a deep understanding of broader spectrum of power relations in society. Janks (2010) focuses on the relationship between language and power. She develops a model that synthesizes notions such as domination, access, diversity, and design/redesign into one integrated framework of interdependent elements. Lewison, et al. (2002) synthesize critical literacy into four dimensions as follow: 1) Disrupting the commonplace; 2) Interrogating multiple viewpoints; 3) Focusing on sociopolitical issues; 4) Taking action and promoting social justice.

An increasing number of international schools has been established in response to the state policy “cultivating students with international horizon, understanding international principles, and engaging in international affairs”. According to the information released by the information office of Ministry of Education in P.R.China, in 2016 the scale of foreign students enrolled in China is 45,138 from 205 countries, which rises by 11.35% compared with that of 2015. However, most EFL pedagogical practice still focuses on deciphering meanings from linguistic perspectives. Students’ critical awareness of empowering themselves to challenge social injustice and fulfill responsibilities as global citizens is still relatively weak, which has posed new challenges to teaching EFL reading. Most studies currently focus on critical skills or perfecting theoretical system (Yuan, 2010; Tian, 2012; Liu, 2006) while implementing critical literacy practice (CLP) in Chinese EFL reading classes is insufficient. This study is intended to fill the gap to integrate CLP into Chinese EFL reading settings.

2. Method

2.1 Experimental Design

Subjects investigated are taken from the freshmen of International School in a Chinese southern university. The experiment will last for one semester with 18 academic weeks. They are divided into two classes made up of 36 students respectively, one as controlled class taught as normal EFL reading class; another as experimental one integrated with CLP. For each class, subjects’ mother tongues vary from Spanish, Arabic, Mandarin, Indian, Indonesian, Cantonese, Russian and African. Their English proficiency is ranked according to the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) scores as high distinct, distinct, intermediate, low intermediate and poor. Activities carried out by teachers and students within one semester would be recorded. Subjects are examined by paper-test and interviewed by questionnaires in the end of the selected semester.

2.2 Teaching Procedures

In the controlled class, subjects are cultivated to develop linguistic, semantic and pragmatic competences. Textbook is a nationally planned textbook which is specialized for non-English major students in China. Teacher adopts CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) method in reading classes. There is a theme in each unit. Teacher carries out led-in activities to introduce topic to students. Then teacher asks students to read in-class reading passages to summarize the main idea of the passage, discuss topic sentences in paragraphs, explain vocabulary knowledge to students and make students complete exercises in the textbooks. Teacher designs tasks such as oral presentations or free discussions concerning theme topic to students. Teacher’s role acts as an agent to transmit knowledge to students. Students are passive learners to follow teacher’s instructions and treat textbook as truth.

The experimental class integrated with CLP provides an insight into the nature of language so as to develop students’ critical competence as well as linguistic, semantic and pragmatic competences. Teacher chooses the same textbook as the controlled class. What’s more, teacher provides newspaper columns, magazine articles, academic paper and book comments as references. Contents of teaching are designed to be diverse and insightful, which involve a wide range of fields in the society. Reading materials are supposed to be non-nationalistic and maintain ecological relations among various ideologies. In the class, students occupy leading position in conducting classroom activities. The role of teacher is to scaffold students to accomplish tasks and offer help when necessary. Take one unit “Gender Differences” as an example. Instead of explicit introduction, teacher plays some video clips from TED. Gender issues are embedded in presentations from multicultural perspectives. Then teacher asks students what information the presenter gives, to what extent they agree with presenter’s opinions, why and how presenter elaborates his/her arguments in this speech? Are these arguments reasonable? These questions arouse students’ curiosity and interests to the topic. They engage in discussions on their own initiatives. They can argue with each other as long as they are persuasive. Teacher provides help when they are stuck in problems. Students do not need to reach consensus on the issues discussed. Through these interrogations, students’ background knowledge has been activated. After brain storming, students hold group talks to analyze in-class reading passages. The passage titled “Gender Roles from a Cultural Perspective” states society reinforces its established values and turns out each sex in its traditional and expected mold. The author

demonstrates his opinion from cultural perspective that teacher favors boys over girls. Furthermore, he points out that gender-biased education can be reflected in American teacher's assumption. He admits that the educational bias begins at home. Teacher stimulates students to dig deeper into the unspoken texts: 1) what intention does the author have? 2) how does the author utilize language to convey his/her opinion? 3) what functions paragraphs work as? 4) If you were the author, how will you organize your opinions? 5) Please apply the assumption embedded in this passage into your homeland circumstances. Does it work? Why? Please state detailed reasons. Student from Yemen states in his country woman seldom works. Husband legitimately is obliged to give fair rights to each wife (4 wives for 1 husband are the maximum.). So he does not perceive why Chinese women work outside when they get married. Students from Spain say girls are allowed to drink alcohol since they are 18 or above. People love to gather in the bars to dance, drink and chat in leisure time. They insist that girls do have equal rights with boys in the society. Students from India present that it is a convention that the bride should pay a great sum of money to the bridegroom when they get married. Otherwise the bride will be disgraced. These illustrations reveal that in different discourses social norms shift respectively. So teacher interrogates students who/what forms social norms, how people are educated to follow mainstream norms, whether it is fair and reasonable, and how to challenge these norms. Teacher can introduce classic literature work as "Gone with the wind", modern novel "The Devil Wears Prada" to demonstrate how women rights are shifted in different era through literature. So literature can be an effective way to challenge accepted norms of the society. After class, students are required to write an essay to illustrate his/her arguments in-depth regarding the topic. They may resort to magazines, journals, websites, or digital resources in library to collect data and form their own opinions. During 18 academic weeks, teacher works step by steps to help students to strengthen their critical awareness, make a habit of interrogating assumptions in the texts, grasp critical reading strategies, and motivate their learning interests.

2.3 Paper-Test

In the end of the semester, subjects from controlled class participate in paper-test, which is made up of five passages, three from IELTS, one from the "Reader's Choice", and the other from 'The Economist' magazine. Passages' topics range from language, environment, economy, to politics. Subjects are required to complete 61 questions and a composition writing within given time. Questions of lexical knowledge account for 9, syntactic knowledge 14, discourse knowledge 16, and critical reading knowledge 22. Critical reading knowledge questions focus on inferring and critiquing underlying assumptions, for example, "The writer mentions a number of factors that have resulted in employees working longer hours. Which FOUR of the following factors are mentioned?". "Why was this article written?" "Each of the statements below is a generalization that describes a characteristic of one of the generations discussed in the selection you just read. For each statement, decide which generation best fits the generalization." Composition writing requires students to write a reflective essay on the passage titled "What does Hilary stand for?", which is taken from "The Economist" magazine. Subjects from experimental class take the same paper-test as controlled class but with an additional interview. They are given on-line questionnaires which consist of 16 questions with 5 grades (never, occasional, general, frequent, and highly frequent). Questions aims to investigate the frequency of adopting CLP in reading, the benefits CLP makes, the difficulty of adopting CLP, the relevance with cultural background and changes CLP makes.

3. Results

English proficiency has been improved for most subjects compared with their previous scores (See Figure 1), especially for the students on intermediate level from controlled class. However, there are no striking achievements for subjects on both high distinct level and low level.

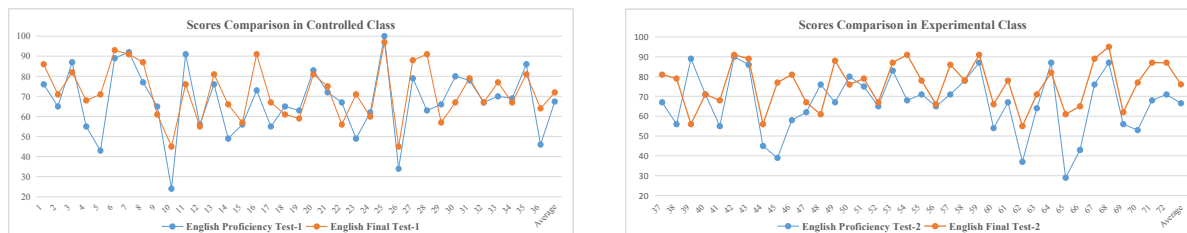


Figure 1. Scores change in controlled and experimental classes

The average score of the experimental class has surpassed that of the controlled class by 4.11 points in the

semester ending paper-test. In addition the controlled class has improved nearly by 4 points in average score in one semester while the experimental one has applaudively raised roughly 10 points (See Table 1). Considering the statistical results from the designed questionnaires (see Table 2), 28 out of 36 subjects in experimental class have claimed that they have benefits from CLP. Only one-third subjects occasionally apply CLP into reading activities, following 10 in 36 subjects implementing CLP on average frequency. There are 11 subjects who feel challenging to carry out CLP. 25 subjects admit that CLP is relevant to cultural, social and educational background. Only one-third subjects make changes since they participate into CLP concerning learning habit and efficiency, ways of thinking, and ideologies.

Table 1. Statistics on critical practice in experimental class

Class	Beginning (English Proficiency Test)				Ending (English Final Test)			
	Average	Standard Variance	F Value	P Value	Average	Standard Variance	F Value	P Value
Controlled	67.44	16.46	1.15	0.34	71.97	13.43	1.42	0.15
Experimental	66.56	15.34			76.08	11.28		

Table 2. Feedback on critical practice in experimental class

Class	Benefit for EFL reading	for	EFL	No	Rare	Average	Great	Extraordinary
				Experimental Class (36 students)	Frequency of applying CLP	Never	Occasional	General
Difficulty in practicing CLP	Extreme	Challenging	Average		Acceptable	Easy		
Relevance with background	No	Rare	Average		Great	Extraordinary		
Changes caused by CLP	No	Rare	Average		Great	Extraordinary		
	2	6	9		12	7		

4. Discussion

This experiment indicates the feasibility that Chinese EFL reading classes can integrate with CLP. To implement CLP teachers' role shifts from knowledge transmitting to empowering students. Teacher can follow "explain, demonstrate, guide, practice and reflect" five steps (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). Teacher makes students be aware that language is not unbiased. Language reflects certain power and reinforces certain group's interest. Teacher instructs students how to adopt strategies to apply CLP into English reading. Students should be guided to investigate the underlying assumptions of texts and critique the standing point of the author. Connecting text analysis to social reality, teacher enhances students' courage to critique and interrupt hegemony in the society. In daily life, students should question "common sense" assumptions which represent consensus of all social groups. Students should question whether there is unheard voice from minority groups. Teacher needs to respect individual differences, and embrace with ethnic minority groups in the classrooms. In these interrelated societies, teacher should support students to attend critical practices to global and multicultural perspectives (Bogum.Y, 2016). Both teacher and students should reflect on CLP, such as the diversity of reading contents, the motivation of students, the difficulty in learning, formative evaluation and summative evaluation. CDA (critical discourse analysis) is a useful tool to analyze texts in CLP. Discourse forms knowledge and social relations, discourse is shaped by relations of power (Fairclough, 1992).

According to test scores critical competence is not heavily dependent on previous English language proficiency. Critical competence for high distinct students may not be applied when they process reading questions. They may rely on their coding competence or semantic competence to draw inferences according to contextual clues. For subjects on low level they may resort to social background knowledge to guess what answers might be. Some researchers worry that language proficiency may hinder from critical competence. Catherine Wallace (2003) points out, "understanding a text linguistically and conceptually must be a starting point for all reading

positions, but readers may want and need to respond to texts in more diverse and complex ways than is generally acknowledged. All learners, whether reading in a first, second or other language, are, from the earliest stages, potentially both making meaning from texts, and engaging critique”.

CLP does contribute to students' language proficiency. Implementing CLP includes analyzing the interdependent relationships among paragraphs, unveiling the hidden texts of authors, clarifying what attitudes author have, combining social background with textual contexts, critiquing take-for-granted norms, which result in great achievements of language proficiency. In order to improve critical competence, students must strengthen their language foundations. Furthermore, students develop their skills to distinguish major information from minor details, tell authentic information from the distorted and identify the gist of texts which attach great importance to the success of reading tasks. Students are capable of processing information and grasping main points within short time. This enhances the accuracy of accomplishing reading tasks. Students develop linguistic, semantic, pragmatic and critical competence all round.

Students identities do have effect on their critical practice. The frequency of adopting CLP is definitely relevant to the assimilation of cultures. The more background culture assimilates into target language culture, the easier it is to carry out CLP in reading activities. For subjects with learning experience, social and cultural background inclined to western learning styles, they are easily to form critical awareness. They voice themselves and empower them to critique the underlying assumptions of texts. For those with Confucius cultural background, they are educated to respect teachers and treat texts as truth with no interrogations since they begin education. They have systematically learned how to critique the status quo, voice them, and interrogate questions instead of deciphering meanings for 18 academic weeks. Given the result of questionnaires, they do not frequently adopt critical literacy practice influenced by their backgrounds. Some students feel CLP is difficult for them because of conflict with conventional learning method. However, they are willing to make changes since they have the goal to go abroad after graduation, or they need to fit into constantly changing world. For subjects with Arabic culture backgrounds, they have strong religious faith. Therefore, they feel confused and frustrated when they develop critical competence. It is noticeable that the concepts of student individual identity and collective identity, which is a shared identity that all students develop as they interact in and outside the classroom (Beach, Campano, Edmiston, & Borgmann, 2010). When students' individual identities embrace with group identities, they feel conflicted and compromised. At the same time, students are able to recognize their own power as independent individuals along with their collective power. Their identities have been influenced by what they have read and learnt.

4. Conclusions

This experimental study of CLP in Chinese EFL context shed light on EFL learning. First, CLP is necessary and feasible in EFL reading classes. As EFL learners, English proficiency should not be obstacle to deter CLP from implementation. Secondly, CLP can enhance EFL learner's motivation, and optimize learning efficiency. Students are active critics and constructionists when they involve in CLP. CLP fosters coding competence, semantic competence, pragmatic competence, and critical competence. Thirdly, EFL learners' identities do shape and be reshaped by critical practice. Identity is fundamental to the practice of critical literacy because critical literacy embraces people differences. Identity differences should be valued and uphold without one identity being prized above other. Awareness and learning can change and reshape identities. In multicultural and global community, EFL learners are intertwined with others to set up their identities. Fourthly, reading is a social practice. Being aware of critical literacy, EFL learners realize that they are empowered to voice themselves and challenge social injustice. EFL learners become more sensitive to unfairness and suffering around them. CLP enable EFL learners to fulfill responsibilities as global citizens to respect and sustain culture differences, to understand issues from global and multicultural perspectives.

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