Critical Literacy in the EFL Classroom: Evolving Multiple Perspectives Through Learning Tasks

Jun-min Kuo

Tunghai University, Taiwan

This paper explores an English learning activity designed from the perspective of critical literacy; the activity addressed the exploration of multiple perspectives through a picture book and different learning tasks. In particular, it integrated students' language learning with their personal experiences. The class consisted of 34 college freshmen, all non-English majors. Two research questions were formulated: 1) How did the students respond to an activity designed from a critical perspective? and 2) How did the students compare their learning in this activity to their prior experience? Data included classroom observations, students' artifacts and assignments, their reflection papers, and follow-up interviews with students. The present study found that this activity led students to assume the role of social agents. They developed a critical stance, investigated multiple perspectives, and re-examined their familiar world. In addition, adopting the role of language learners, students formed critical responses to the activity; three themes recurred with regard to classroom materials, topics, and tasks. To sum up, this research suggests that critical literacy merits more attention and implementation in Taiwan if we hope to help students cultivate a critical competence in addition to the traditional four language skills.

Keywords: critical literacy, multiple perspectives, picture books, learning tasks

Introduction

The term *critical literacy* appeared in the 1980s and thus the movement that the term designates is a fairly recent development (Stevens & Bean, 2007). It became influential at the institutional level during the mid-1990s when its concepts were discussed and then applied in the classroom in English-speaking countries. Critical literacy refers to alternative language instruction that stimulates students to explore hidden textual messages, question the status quo, and undertake action for a more equitable society (Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006). Since the 1980s this shift from merely decoding texts to understanding how systems of meaning and power operate on people has been drawing increasing attention in discussions and research studies, as in the special 1999 issue of *TESOL Quarterly* on critical approaches to TESOL and the special issue of *Theory Into Practice* devoted to critical literacy in 2012.

However, critical literacy still seems to be marginalized in English-as-a-second-language (ESL) and English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) education (Alford, 2001). In EFL classrooms in Asia, some language practitioners and researchers have contributed to exploring critical literacy (Gustine, 2013; Kumagai & Iwasaki, 2011; Shin & Crookes, 2005; Valdez, 2012). But relevant practice and research of critical literacy are still limited, as seen in the case of Taiwan (Huang, 2011, 2013; Ko & Wang, 2013). To address this gap, the present study explores the possibilities of critical literacy in Taiwan; it investigates a critical literacy practice that the researcher-instructor conducted at the beginning of one semester at a private university in Taiwan. Specifically, it reports on language learning that emphasized the notion of multiple perspectives and that required students to complete various learning tasks.

In order to add to the literature on critical literacy in Taiwan, two research questions were addressed in the study: 1) How did the students respond to an activity designed from a critical perspective? and 2) How did the students compare their learning in this activity to their prior experience?

Literature Review

The meaning of critical literacy varies because critical researchers/instructors employ different theoretical frameworks and stress different instructional philosophies (Luke & Woods, 2009). Beginning with Freire (2000), critical literacy has not been defined as a unitary approach with regard to theory or practice, but many critical theorists hold that such alternative instruction should be seen from a socio-political perspective (Harste, 2009). That is, critical literacy considers language learning a social practice; students are helped not only to improve their language development but also to understand themselves as social agents capable of questioning the basic assumptions of society (Lewis, 2001; Morrell, 2008; Parker, 2013).

Critical literacy maintains that texts, literacies, and language practices are never neutral. To critical researchers/scholars (e.g., Harste, 2003), all texts are ideologically constructed within the discursive systems of a given society (Gee, 2008), so students should be equipped with critical competence enabling them to recognize ideological messages and social forces encoded in the texts. In addition, if we consider new digital technologies and the accompanying youth popular culture, the notion of literacy should be expanded to multiple literacies including art, music, movement, visual text literacies, and so on (New London Group, 1996). Moreover, language practices represent a form of situated education in response to the "social constructions of one's peers, culture, family, classrooms, neighbors, communities, and world" (Lesley, 2004, p. 323). Given the fact that language learning is a complex phenomenon that has the potential to involve students' social identity, critical literacy is important not only to the L1 context but also to the L2 context. Critical literacy should be explored in various English learning classrooms, including those in Taiwan.

With regard to textual interpretation, critical literacy adopts a post-structuralist and postmodern view of reality and literacy (Meacham & Buendia, 1999): 1) knowledge and reality are not stable or objective, but are sites of mediation through continually reflexive actions; and 2) textual interpretation involves many interpretative possibilities. Accordingly, approaching a text has

become a process of understanding multiple meaning systems, emphasizing the larger discourses of power which inform instructional assumptions. As Johnston (1999) points out, "in the postmodern world, plurality and difference are actively encouraged and celebrated" (p. 270), inviting students to investigate discourses of power in interpreting various texts.

Critical literacy motivates students to become active meaning-makers by creating a learning environment in which textual critique is stressed and multiple perspectives are encouraged, explored, and respected. In order to achieve this goal, different critical scholars have adopted various frameworks to expand the concept of critical literacy. Examples include Halliday's (1978) model from a social semiotic perspective, Luke and Freebody's (1997) four resources model that sees reading as a social practice, and Janks's (2000) synthesis model that emphasizes four orientations (i.e., domination, access, diversity, and design). All these models suggest that critical literacy sees language learning as a social practice, one that helps learners learn a language effectively and also change their attitudes toward the society in which they live.

Critical instruction involves task-based learning that introduces inquiry into language learning and sees language learning as a process of performing a social act rather than as the goal itself (King, Hart, & Kozdras, 2007). With a social orientation in the classroom, students are likely to be more motivated. As Ciardiello (2003) suggests, inquiry instruction can be achieved through question-finding. Specifically, students are offered many opportunities to explore topics collaboratively by using students' own and/or others' perspectives and knowledge. From the perspective of critical literacy, task-based interaction requires materials that students are familiar with or that are within students' background knowledge.

Norton (1999) indicates that most picture books designed for children and young adults usually express a central theme and involve several relevant issues, all of which allow instructors to create many opportunities for students to respond critically to the texts. This observation corresponds to empirical research that has found that picture books can have a great effect not only on improving students' language abilities but also on enhancing their critical

reflection on social issues (Beck, 2005; Behrman, 2006; Chang, 2006; Morgan, 1997). One example is Anthony Browne's (1998) *Voices in the Park*. Vasquez, Tate, and Harste (2013) describe this book as a type of multiview texts because it is "structured so that characters speak for themselves, often with each page, section, or chapter featuring the perspective ... of a different character" (p. 69). Therefore, *Voices in the Park* can be effective in inviting students to explore what it means to see things or people differently.

To sum up, the current study sees critical literacy as an instructional approach that uses tasks to make students active learners in the pursuit of knowledge and language development. As Jones (2006) states, "critical literacy is like a pair of eyeglasses that allows one to see beyond the familiar and comfortable; it is an understanding that language practices and texts are always informed by ideological beliefs and perspectives whether conscious or otherwise" (p. 67).

Methodology

Setting and Participants

The activity was offered in a General English class. All the non-English-major freshmen at the university have to take an English proficiency placement test as soon as they matriculate. The test consists of a grammar (20%), reading (40%), and listening (40%) section. If a student scores 80 or above, his/her level is considered high; a score between 80 and 60, medium level; a score lower than 60, low level. According to students' performance on the placement test, students from the same college are assigned to a class of fewer than 35 at the same level. The informants in the study included 16 male and 18 female freshmen from different departments of the College of Social Sciences (e.g., Economics). The students' English ability was between high and middle.

Data Collection

In order to ensure trustworthiness, the researcher-instructor triangulated the following data sources: classroom observations, students' artifacts and assignments, their reflection papers, and follow-up interviews. First, classroom observations were conducted by the researcher's assistant. She observed and video-taped the activity. Second, students' artifacts were collected during the activity. For example, students had to respond to different questions and to write down their opinions on a discussion sheet. Students in each group also needed to make a poster based on their discussion of the texts. Each student was asked to submit a written assignment in Week 5. Third, each student spent one hour in Week 5 completing a reflection paper with his/her comments on the activity, including the materials, the elicited issues, and the exercises. Fourth, the researcher read each student's reflection paper and isolated students' opinions. Then he randomly selected at least two students from each department for a follow-up interview.

In total, six females and four males were selected for an interview during Weeks 6-7. Each interview lasted about forty minutes. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and later analyzed. Both the reflection papers and the interviews were completed in Chinese, so that students were able to express their opinions with more in-depth details. These opinions were later translated into idiomatic English.

Data Analysis

This study used Corbin and Strauss's (2008) framework of grounded theory to analyze data with a transition from "open" through "axial" to "selective" coding. The analysis process began by examining all the data through *open coding*. Corbin and Strauss (2008) offer a basic guideline: who, what, when, where, and how? Then the analysis moved to *axial coding*, a phase that stresses analysis rather than description. In the third phase, *selective coding*, the researcher tried to identity a core category that structured the recurring themes

and significant patterns found in axial coding. It should be noted that axial coding allowed the researcher to use established categories and frameworks for further analysis and theory development.

With regard to reflection material, the identity of each student will be given as S1F and S2M, indicating the female student with class number 1 and the male student with class number 2, and so on.

Description of the Multiple Perspective Activity

The first two sessions of the activity were conducted in Week 3, while the third session was implemented in Week 4. The course material was Anthony Browne's (1998) *Voices in the Park*. The story presented in the book is told from four different perspectives, i.e., four gorilla protagonists at a park at the same time. These four characters are from two families: a snobbish gorilla mother and her son, and an unemployed gorilla father and his daughter. This book was selected for this activity because it is thought-provoking for the concept of multiple perspectives.

First session.

Guessing other students' experiences of modified perceptions.

At the beginning of the first session, the instructor asked each of four student volunteers to put on a pair of glasses with different color lenses (red, green, yellow, and orange) and to hold up a sheet of white paper. The instructor then asked these students what color their paper was. The students all responded with a different color as they saw the paper through the glasses they were wearing. Then the instructor spent about 5 minutes having the whole class discuss the students' experiences. Students needed to answer suggested questions such as "How would you describe a situation in which people see the same things in different ways?", "What is the purpose of this activity?", and "What words/phrases would you use to describe a situation in which people see

the same thing from different perspectives?"

Before reflecting on the questions mentioned above, each student was given a sheet of paper to write down his/her ideas either with key words/phrases (e.g., multiple perspectives) or with sentences (e.g., I think this activity is meaningful.). After students finished, they were required to share the ideas that they had just written down. Fifteen minutes were spent on this task.

Reading the shortened version of Voices in the Park in groups.

After students shared their perspectives on the glasses-wearing warm-up exercise, the instructor gave a brief 10-minute introduction to *Voices in the Park* which presented its author, illustrations, and the four main characters to help students understand the background to the story. The instructor then allocated five minutes to divide students into four groups of eight to nine members and to assign each group one of the four roles presented in the book. At the same time, students were each given a copy of *Voices in the Park*. By cutting and pasting, the instructor had consolidated the written text, together with selected illustrations, onto fewer pages, so the copy was a shortened version. Once the reading was finished, each student was given a discussion handout with two sections and a list of common character traits (e.g., depressed, snobbish, sluggish), a list designed to help students identify their character's traits.

Identifying and discussing the personality traits of an assigned role.

During the 25 minutes allocated for this task, each student first tried to identify and write down the personality traits of his/her assigned role in the first section of the discussion handout. Then students were asked to work in pairs and to exchange the ideas that they had just written in the first section. Students needed to share their opinions by using English while their partners listened to them and wrote notes in the second section of their discussion sheet. Students were not allowed to exchange their notes or to write down their partner's ideas

directly from the sheet. During this time, the instructor walked around the class and made sure that students had no difficulty sharing their ideas and completing this task. The purpose of this task was to improve students' English listening/speaking abilities while they were motivated to generate reflective responses to the notion of multiple perspectives.

Second session.

Working in groups on a character web poster.

During the second session, the instructor gave each group a Character Web poster and had each group identify the qualities of the character they had discussed. In order to guarantee that students would fully understand the purpose of this project, the instructor showed students how to complete the task step by step. For instance, students were asked to write down the name of their character (e.g., the gorilla mother) in the middle of the poster. Then students needed to come up with four to five adjectives (e.g., domineering) to describe the character's personality. Lastly, students needed to offer some examples to support these traits (e.g., She tends to look down on the poor.) from the picture book and to write them down on the poster. If students had enough time, they could decorate and color their poster (Appendix A). Afterwards, 25 minutes were allocated for each group in turn to share its opinions.

Third session.

Reading and discussing the entire picture book.

At the beginning of the third session conducted in Week 4, the instructor spent 20 minutes showing the picture book in Power Point format. During the lecture, besides speaking English the instructor at times used Mandarin to indicate crucial ideas in the story. This would enhance students' understanding of the storyline.

To provoke students into thinking more deeply about the issues presented in this study, students were given a handout with two inferential questions: 1) "Why does the author present the story from four different perspectives?" and 2) "Is it important to recognize multiple perspectives regarding specific events in our lives? Why or why not?" Students answered these questions individually and then formed pairs to discuss their answers. The discussion procedures followed the same format as the first two sessions, with students speaking in English and not being allowed to copy each other's answers directly. The instructor had each student choose a partner sitting next to him/her. Students in pairs were asked to think about these questions, exchange ideas and write the ideas down on the discussion sheets. During the following 10 minutes, the instructor wrapped up the ideas from students by having a class discussion.

Being assigned individually to complete a perspective journal.

Before the remaining time of the third session, students were informed of their individual writing assignment, a Perspective Journal. In it, students had to summarize a personal experience relating to multiple perspectives, describe the people involved, mention their perspectives, and figure out which voices, if any, had been silenced. Finally, students needed to write about what they had learned from analyzing different situations from a critical stance. Students were given two weeks to complete this assignment and to submit it in Week 5 (Appendix B).

Findings and Analysis

A Critical Social Practice in the Classroom

With regard to the first research concern "How did the students respond to an activity designed from a critical perspective?", all the data show that students found it meaningful to their lives. A further analysis of the collected data indicates that this cumulative learning process helped students develop their critical competence through different phases: forming a critical stance, investigating multiple perspectives, and re-examining a familiar world.

Forming a critical stance.

Data show that students were challenged at the outset of the activity by the task that asked four students to wear a pair of glasses with different colors. This task and its follow-up discussion turned out to be an experience that initiated critical literacy in the classroom and encouraged students to question from an alternative viewpoint. Since the current activity was the first time these students encountered such an unfamiliar mode of learning, the video-taped data suggest that most students looked puzzled during the task and hesitated when the instructor asked them what this performance meant to them. The awkward silence was not broken until S14F burst out, "the seven blind men and the elephant!"

In his reflection paper, S4M indicated that this performance not only confused him because there were no given answers but also challenged him to "make sense of it on his own". During the interview, S4M said that at first he tried to relate this "guessing game" to standard English teaching, which, in his view, typically involved "vocabulary, grammar, drills, tests, etc." However, S14F's exclamation changed his opinion about his learning within a larger social context by associating this exercise with a fable that he had heard since childhood. In Pennycook's (2004) words, this incident was a critical moment, a time when things change, when students "seize the chance to do something different ... [and]

realize that some new understanding is coming about" (p. 330).

Some interviewed students agreed that they had been taught to follow the textbook and believe the information presented to them. But this performance, the suggested questions, and the follow-up sharing discussion during the first session all promoted their learning from a critical stance. Being asked to illustrate this learning experience, S20M metaphorically explain:

> This learning is like playing basketball. During the time-out period, all the players listen to their coach and follow his instructions. But when they go back onto the court, they will be the masters in the game. Just like us in the classroom responding to the activity on our own, the players, according to their previous training and experience, have to decide when to assist, block, or defend. Similarly, we shared, questioned, and accepted ideas from others.

A critical stance represents an aspect of consciousness that stems from students' knowledge of the world. As discussed above, this activity stimulated students to foster such an alternative attitude at the beginning of the activity. Students were encouraged to develop a critical stance by using their background knowledge to understand relationships between their own ideas and the ideas of others. This element of critical literacy could be found during the entire learning process when students envisioned different ways of viewing texts or messages presented in the classroom.

Investigating multiple perspectives.

After reviewing the professional literature related to critical literacy, Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) found that examining multiple perspectives forms an essential dimension of critical literacy research and practice. The current activity was no exception; it had students explore this notion not only on the basis of the text but also from viewpoints presented outside the text. In their final reflection papers, twenty-five students agreed that

the issue of multiple perspectives was closely linked to their personal experiences. Many students thought that the activity, through picture-book reading, discussion, and poster-making, helped them understand how reality is negotiated from different perspectives by different people.

As indicated in their reflection papers, many students said that *Voices in the Park* led them to understand that reality is constructed from various viewpoints. As S10M wrote, "This book is really helpful in teaching how things can be interpreted from different standpoints because the story itself is built on the perspectives of four gorilla characters." Further, either in their reflection papers or during the interview, many students indicated that they had become more conscious of such a notion through two learning tasks, i.e., having each group read the story from one specific voice and using twenty minutes to show the whole class the picture book in Power Point format two different times. As S16F said during the interview:

> The story reminds me of some movies I've seen ... that tell various stories in different settings at the same time. But this time students participated in constructing the story by being assigned to identify one of the four voices and to look at the story from a limited viewpoint.

Likewise, discussion with the instructor and classmates led students to scrutinize the notion of multiple perspectives and to seek out and compare different concepts. On their reading comprehension discussion sheets, twenty-three students mentioned that the author of the picture book suggests that we should not judge events from a single angle and that we should respect and tolerate different opinions. As S26F indicated, she had learned not only to analyze the situation presented in the story from various angles but also to appreciate others' ideas about the same event. More importantly, as S31M said in his reflection paper, discussing multiple perspectives with others pushed him to pay closer attention to viewpoints that he might have ignored and made him "begin to observe different interpretations and viewpoints from various sources

such as newspapers, TV programs, etc."

The recorded tapes show that most students participated actively in this language arts exercise and that the interaction among the instructor and students and students themselves was meaningful. Even though students sometimes exchanged their opinions in Mandarin while they were discussing which adjectives they would use for their poster, most students were engrossed in the activity and tried their best to contribute their ideas to the discussion. For example, while students were working on their poster, some students from different groups eagerly consulted their own electronic dictionaries in order to confirm the proper meaning of the adjectives that these students and their group members had agreed on. Students did not merely accept knowledge from either their instructor or the picture book; on the contrary, students took active roles while seeking, exploring, and finally building various learning resources through teamwork.

Vasquez et al. (2003) argue that critical literacy "is about creating spaces or opportunities ... for looking at the ways texts and images are constructed and constructive ... it is about creating opportunities for critical conversations" (p. 10). The activity offered students those spaces in which they experienced three collaborative inquiry-based tasks, a form of socio-cultural learning that helped them seek multiple perspectives and develop new understanding on their own.

Re-examining their familiar world.

The learning exercises discussed so far were all designed to help students become more aware of their lives and gain a deeper sense of multiple perspectives. Accordingly, the last learning task, the Perspective Journal, was to encourage students to be more attentive, from a critical stance, to things and people in their daily environment. Ultimately, as eighteen students indicated in their reflection papers, this exercise made them re-examine their lives more critically than any other task had.

As S5M noted, such a task enabled him 1) to understand how to modify his opinions based on other people's viewpoints and 2) to learn how to become

more open in his thinking. S24F shared a similar opinion about the writing assignment during the interview: "My previous English teachers would give students a topic and ask them to complete their writing according to some mechanical structures such as opening, body, and conclusion ... and ask students to memorize rules for compositions." It can be seen that S24F was not accustomed to a writing assignment that asked for personal opinions to be expressed in a short essay. She continued, "Even if the writing process was not successful for me, I still had a positive attitude toward this type of writing training because the activity was very thought-provoking and useful in using the notion of multiple perspectives in different situations."

The discussion so far has suggested that most students considered the Perspective Journal helpful in promoting critical responses; they began to pay more attention to their surroundings. In Table 1, we can find that most students in this activity recognized a close connection between what they had learned and their writing assignment. Many students chose themselves as an example and tried to analyze their personal experiences in their reflection journal. Family and friendship were the topics that thirteen students were concerned about. The third topic that students discussed the most was TV news.

TABLE 1
Categories of Topics in the Perspective Journal

Categories	Number of Students
Friendship	7
Family	6
TV News	4
Politics	4
Movies	3
World	3
Entertainment	2
Education	2
Others	3
Total	34

As an example of an essay of the third sort, S7F tried to re-examine a car accident from different perspectives and to identify some passengers' voices that had not been heard. In her reflection paper, she agreed that analyzing the event from different angles did help her to understand that the notion of multiple perspectives was very important. Similarly, S23M used multiple perspectives to analyze the 9/11 terrorist attack. He explained that during the event the voice of the government of the United States was heard most of the time, but Muslims' viewpoints went unnoticed. He thought that most mass media were controlled by the Americans and that people did not pay attention to why the terrorists behaved in such a violent way.

In addition to sociopolitical issues, some students explored events that had happened to them (e.g., an argument with friends or family members). As S11F noted in her assignment, somebody told her that her best friend had said something negative about her in public; as a consequence, she felt very angry and cut off their friendship. During the interview, S11F said that "if I could have done this writing task, I may not have judged the person by listening to opinions from only one classmate." Therefore, this task enabled her to understand how the notion of multiple perspectives was crucial for her.

The diverse topics students used in their essays were informed by their experiences, observations, and reflections. Students' conceptualization of multiple perspectives helped them build alternative images of their lives. This new awareness of the world suggested that critical literacy is not only an instructional approach to be implemented but also an element of existence. It is something we do every day in order to be reflective agents in relation to others in society.

Materials, Issues, and Students

In response to the research question "How did the students compare their learning in this activity to their prior experience?", students' responses were repeatedly accessed and clustered into recurring patterns that emerged from their perspectives. Ultimately, three themes were identified.

Picture books as alternative teaching materials.

Either in their reflection papers or during the interview, many students stated that this activity, especially the use of picture books as course materials, had offered them a new perspective on learning a language. Picture book reading had the participants re-examine this particular type of teaching and learning. As S34F wrote:

> Picture books for me used to be a very simple thing and even childish. I was so surprised that our instructor, a university teacher, would use picture books as course materials. At the end of the semester, I found that each story contained meaningful issues that helped me think deeply and that I had never experienced this before.

During the interview, S26F said that with the picture book discussed, if children did not receive guidance from their teachers, they might have a difficult time in understanding the deeper meaning. She herself did not comprehend the meaning of this book until she had analyzed it through the various tasks offered in the classroom. Thus, from this simple story, she learned many things.

In their reflection papers, students listed several other advantages of reading picture books. S28M wrote that he liked using this material more than a textbook because English textbooks that he had read before were mostly related to scientific research. He found scientific articles very boring, not to mention that he was required to memorize specialized vocabulary. Therefore, he hoped that in the future his English teachers would consider using different materials.

Similarly, S29F stated that, while articles in textbooks tend to convey too many messages didactically presented, picture books enable readers to have vicarious experiences, identify with the characters in the book, and reflect on the meaning of the story in a more engaging way. As she explained, "students in groups needed to investigate why the story is simultaneously constructed through the perspectives of four characters and to explore what the main

purpose of the story is."

Some students believed that the illustrations in *Voices in the Park* played an essential role in the reconstruction of the meaning of the story. As S22F said in her reflection paper, one of the reasons why she was attracted to *Voices in the Park* was the differences in the illustrations depending on the four voices presented in the story. She indicated that "the illustrations were designed to correspond to the emotions and personalities of the four different characters." And she found that when Gorilla Father regains his confidence because of his daughter's encouragement, the colors of the illustrations that describe this part of the story change from dark to light.

To sum up, reading a picture book made students realize that language instruction should not be limited to textbooks only. Students' positive attitudes toward the picture book suggest that picture books can be stimulating alternative materials. Students can be active learners making sense of the text by themselves rather than passive learners waiting for the transmission of textbook knowledge from their instructor.

Relevant materials and issues.

The following qualitative results indicate that most students liked to study English in this way. This activity encouraged students to discuss a topic with their classmates and to share their opinions in English because the activity included pertinent topics. As S5M said in his reflection paper:

> The issue of multiple perspectives changed me somehow because it helped me relate my learning to my real life outside the classroom. For example, in the past I went to see a movie largely because some reviewers had made positive comments about it. I would just go see it without thinking if these comments were some form of business promotion. Now I think that it would be unfair to judge the movie totally through the opinions from others.

During the interview, S33F made a similar comment: "The topics brought up in the classroom made me build more connections with my life." She began to look at things happening to her from a more critical perspective. She indicated that modern language teaching should be broadened beyond the knowledge within a textbook.

Many students in their reflection papers indicated that they had positive feelings about the discussion of multiple perspectives. The issue had a great impact on students' learning motivation. Such comments supported the notion of critical literacy – each language teacher should take into consideration students' interests, personal backgrounds, and learning experiences while designing classroom activities. As S32M said during the interview, because the issue was related to his personal background, he had more ideas to share with his classmates and he was engaged in the follow-up writing assignment. Likewise, S9F stated in her reflection paper that the activity had made her start paying attention to the notion of multiple perspectives, which was – as she emphasized – an important issue that she had not noticed before. She said that she enjoyed discussing issues associated with her life and that she and her classmates were more willing to participate in different tasks during the learning process.

In conclusion, many students supported the element of relevancy found in the materials and topics. Students showed greater motivation to review what they had learned because they were engaged in a thought-provoking issue. Students' responses to the activity suggest that language learning should be involved not only with the mastery of the four skills, but also with critical reflection on meaningful issues related to students' lives.

Interactive and learner-centered tasks.

The third theme was concerned with how students responded to the different tasks implemented in the activity. These theme-based tasks made learning interactive and helped them play active roles during the entire process. In their reflection papers, all students mentioned the glasses-wearing performance at

the beginning of the activity. As S4M wrote, his previous English teachers always played the main role in the classroom. In response to the follow-up questions during the interview, S4M elaborated on his attitude toward this task:

> The task drew the attention of the entire class. We students didn't know what was going to happen as we watched four classmates wearing colored glasses in front of the class. Students were kept in suspense and the exercise was fun. And the suspense lasted until we started discussing this task.

Students' responses to this task suggest that a multimodal text that is interactive can also involve the physical senses. What this might mean for language teachers is that they should recognize the role of the senses in daily life and value the senses in the classroom.

Such interaction can also be found when students were required to work collaboratively on tasks such as poster-making and pair/group discussion. Many students in their reflection papers indicated that they liked the poster-making task very much because it was a brand-new learning experience. This task made students exchange and mediate ideas by constructing the meaning of a poster text with other classmates. S21F explained how she had cooperated with her group members to complete their poster work. During the process, she needed not only to write the vocabulary and sentences, but also to draw a large picture that represented the character assigned to her group. Classroom interaction between the teacher and students and among students increased. Many students said that they preferred this kind of learning in which they were asked to create something of their own instead of passively listening to lectures to the whole class. One of the benefits most students mentioned was that the classroom atmosphere was positive and interaction among participants was much better than in their previous English classes.

In this activity, even though students used some Mandarin in discussion, most students tried their best to express their opinions in English. Sometimes the grammar used by students was incorrect or the words they chose were very

simple, but the teacher still encouraged them to speak more in order to express their ideas. Many interviewed students said that either during group discussions or in pair work they had encountered many concepts different from their own. S14F expressed her favorable attitude toward classroom discussion:

> Discussion time was very interesting for me. The teacher assigned some classmates whom I didn't know well to sit with me. At first, I was not used to the arrangement; but after I discussed the features of a character in the picture book with my partners for a while, I started trying to appreciate the differences among the group members.

The tasks that have been discussed were interactive and learner-centered. Above all, these tasks created an opening for students to be exposed to multiple perspectives which would then challenge them to think differently. As Lankshear (1994) might conclude, this activity motivated students to respond critically to the notion of literacy by examining their previous and current learning experiences; students gained "some meta-level understanding of literacy as social practice" (p. 10).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This descriptive paper has employed grounded theory to analyze how college freshmen in Taiwan responded to a critical-literacy activity. Students performed a series of learning tasks that laid bare the concept of multiple perspectives. The data analysis shows that they reacted to the activity by assuming two roles.

First, critical literacy occurred when these students were social agents moving their learning from the personal to the social. In the classroom, they developed a critical stance, investigating multiple perspectives, and re-examining their familiar world. Specifically, students came to a better sense of

the topic during a multi-part literacy activity. The individual writing assignment helped them arrive at new understandings of reality as mediated among a variety of individuals inside or outside the classroom. Students were encouraged to deconstruct and reconstruct the discussed theme by integrating their lived experiences into their writing projects.

Second, students played the role of EFL learners; in response to this activity, they became critically literate concerning their present and previous experiences. Three themes were identified in their responses: 1) picture books as alternative teaching materials, 2) relevant materials and issues, and 3) interactive and learner-centered tasks. From the students' perspective, picture books can be material for instruction in the classroom. In addition, meaningful materials and topics enabled students to express their thoughts and relate their learning to life experiences. Different tasks made the activity interactive and made students assume the main role in learning.

Narratives of the success of critical literacy have emerged from the current study, but we are not going to claim that such instruction can be a replacement for traditional language teaching, especially in EFL classrooms. Critical literacy instruction can both enhance and reinforce traditional instruction by embedding matters of personal concern/identity in the matrix of English language instruction in such a way that students are more motivated to use English both as a tool of investigation and a means of self-expression. Freire's dichotomy (e.g., the clear-cut distinction between the 'oppressed' and 'the oppressors') has been criticized (Luke & Woods, 2009), so we do not suggest adopting Freire's pedagogy without further reflection. Therefore, when we propose picture books as alternative materials, we do not ignore the fact that textbooks can still be effective in practicing critical literacy.

We cannot say that critical literacy is a one-size-fits-all approach applicable to all teaching contexts. Although only two students in their reflection papers questioned the relevance of such language instruction for their future careers, we, as suggested by Petrone and Bullard (2012), normalize student resistance as a part of critical literacy. The students' concerns are echoed by questions raised by the appropriateness of critical literacy approaches in language

instruction. Such hesitation partly derives from a misunderstanding that critical literacy ignores conventional literacy practices (Huang, 2011) and partly from a belief in "transmission modes of teaching and materials that promise to prepare students for the test" (Schmidt, 2009, p. 207).

We need to know that critical literacy cannot be introduced immediately without development of traditional language skills. Examined from Luke and Freebody's (1997) aforementioned reading model, the current activity was composed of conventional literacy practices of code breaker and meaning maker (such as approaching a picture book at different times and identifying the personality traits of an assigned role), and text user (working in groups on a poster). Finally, moving classroom learning to a critical investigation of real-life experiences (i.e., completing a Perspective Journal) further expanded students' practices to include text critic.

This activity was the first of three critical literacy practices during the same semester; the second activity focused on a nonconventional fairy tale, while the third employed three gender-issue picture books. Along with these critical literacy activities, a traditional textbook was also used over the course of the entire academic year. The combination of critical literacy and textbook English learning was intended to achieve the goal of the course, i.e., a proficiency-based competence that emphasized the four skills in general contexts. We hoped that the activity discussed would prepare students for the two follow-up activities and would help them develop their critical competence through a prolonged learning process based on three critical literacy practices as a whole. As we have seen from students' reflections, these hopes were realized to a significant degree. Finally, this study showed a method of learning in the EFL classroom, the success of which was demonstrated in critical moments, as Pennycook (2004) states (see above). In particular, the activity was designed to help students "identity critical moments in which participants hold different interpretations or understandings of a common event" (Damico & Riddle, 2004, p. 45; emphasis theirs). We hoped that when the research project was over, students would leave the classroom as people with different attitudes towards their future lives.

Limitations of the study and recommendations for future instruction/research are as follows: First, instruction intended to increase students' sense of multiple perspectives should include a critical discussion of students' writing assignments. This discussion can be seen as a wrap-up exercise to help students deconstruct their own discourse and appreciate multiple perspectives. Second, the approach discussed in this paper can also be implemented with English majors who have a higher proficiency in order to develop a more comprehensive argument concerning critical literacy. Third, this study was limited as a small-scale exploration; its classroom constituted its own environment that mirrored its own social and historical context. It is hoped that the practices, interactions, and reflections discussed here can provoke thought and action in different contexts and cultures, especially in the EFL classroom. Fourth, this research was mainly qualitative in order to elicit from students more comprehensive responses and to arrive at more in-depth interpretations. Looking back, we could have design and administered a perception questionnaire to support and strengthen the interview data, which would have lent further validity to the results and findings. That is, more data should be gathered for further interpretation and better triangulation, such as interviews with more participants. To sum up, this research suggests that critical literacy merits more attention and implementation in Taiwan if we hope to help students cultivate a critical competence in addition to the traditional four language skills.

The Author

Jun-min Kuo is an associate professor at Tunghai University in Taiwan. His research interests cover critical literacy, qualitative inquiry, children's literature, and popular culture in the EFL classroom. He would like to thank the anonymous reviewers who provided many insightful comments. He is also indebted to the support provided by the National Science Council of Taiwan under the research grant NSC 97-2410-H-029-029-MY2.

The English Language Center
Tunghai University
Taichung 40704, Taiwan
Phone: +886 423590121 ext. 31905
Fax: +886 423590232
Email: kuo0328@thu.edu.tw

References

Alford, J. (2001). Learning language and critical literacy: Adolescent ESL students. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 45*(3), 238-242.

Beck, A. S. (2005). Critical literacy in the classroom. *Thinking Classroom, 6*(3), 3-9.

Behrman, E. H. (2006). Teaching about language, power, and text: A review of classroom practices that support critical literacy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 49*(6), 490-498.

Browne, A. (1998). *Voices in the park*. New York: DK Publishing.

Chang, Y. J. (2006). *Engaging multiple-level children in a summer camp with English picture books*. Unpublished master's thesis, Southern Taiwan University, Tainan City, Taiwan.

Ciardiello, A. V. (2003). "To wander and wonder": Pathways to literacy and inquiry through question-finding. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 47*(3), 228-239.

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles: Sage.

Damico, J. S., & Riddle, R. L. (2004). From answers to questions: A beginning teacher learns to teach for social justice. *Language Arts, 82*(1), 36-46.

Dozier, C., Johnston, P., & Rogers, R. (2006). *Critical literacy/critical teaching: Tools for preparing responsive teachers*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans. 30 anniversary ed.). New York: Continuum.

Gee, J. P. (2008). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge.

Gustine, G. G. (2013). Designing and implementing a critial literacy-based approach in an Indonesian EFL secondary school. *International Journal of Indonesian Studies, 1*, 2-21.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as social semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning*. London: Edward Arnold.

Harste, J. C. (2003). What do we mean by literacy now? *Voices from the Middle, 10*(3), 8-12.

Harste, J. C. (2009). Multimodality: In perspective. In J. V. Hoffman & Y. Goodman (Eds.), *Changing literacies for changing times: A historical perspective on the future of reading research, public policy, and classroom practices* (pp. 34-48). New York: Routledge.

Huang, S. Y. (2011). Reading "further and beyond the text": Student perspectives of critical literacy in EFL reading and writing. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 55*(2), 145-154.

Huang, S. Y. (2013). Revising identities as writers and readers through critical language awareness. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique, 12*(3), 65-86.

Janks, H. (2000). Domination, access, diversity and design: A synthesis for critical literacy education. *Education Review, 52*(2), 175-186.

Johnston, B. (1999). The expatriate teacher as postmodern paladin. *Research in the Teaching of English, 34*(2), 255-280.

Jones, S. (2006). *Girls, social class, and literacy: What teachers can do to make a difference?* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

King, J., R., Hart, S., & Kozdras, D. (2007). Critical literacy and adolescents. In B. J. Guzzetti (Ed.), *Literacy for the new millennium* (Vol. 3, pp. 173-187). Westport, CT: Praeger.

Ko, M. Y., & Wang, T. F. (2013). EFL learners' critical literacy practices: A case study of four college students in Taiwan. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher, 22*(3), 221-229.

Kumagai, Y., & Iwasaki, N. (2011). What it means to read "critically" in a Japanese language classroom: Students' perspectives. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies, 8*(2), 125-152.

Lankshear, C. (1994). *Critical literacy (Occasional Paper No. 3)*. Canberra, ACT, Australia: Australia Curriculum Studies Association.

Lesley, M. (2004). Looking for critical literacy with postbaccalaureate content area literacy students. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 48*(4), 320-334.

Lewis, C. (2001). *Literacy practices as social acts: Power, status and cultural norms in the classroom*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Lewison, M., Flint, A. S., & Van Sluys, K. (2002). Taking on critical literacy: The journey of newcomers and novices. *Language Arts, 79*(5), 382-392.

Luke, A., & Freebody, P. (1997). Shaping the social practices of reading. In S. Muspratt, A. Luke & P. Freebody (Eds.), *Constructing critical literacies: Teaching and learning textual practice* (pp. 185-225). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.

Luke, A., & Woods, A. (2009). Critical literacies in schools: A primer. *Voices from the Middle, 17*(2), 9-18.

Meacham, S. J., & Buendia, E. (1999). Focus on research: Modernism, postmodernism, and post-structuralism and their impact on literacy. *Language Arts, 76*(6), 510-516.

Morgan, W. (1997). *Critical literacy in the classroom: The art of the possible*. London: Routledge.

Morrell, E. (2008). *Critical literacy and urban youth: Pedagogies of access, dissent, and liberation*. New York: Routledge.

New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review, 6*(1), 60-93.

Norton, S. E. (1999). *Through the eyes of a child: An introduction to children's literature* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Parker, J. K. (2013). Critical literacy and the ethical responsibilities of student media production. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 56*(8), 668-676.

Pennycook, A. (2004). Critical moments in TESOL praxicum. In B. Norton & K. Toohey (Eds.), *Critical pedagogies and language learning* (pp. 327-345). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Petrone, R., & Bullard, L. (2012). Reluctantly recognizing resistance: An analysis of representations of critical literacy in *English Journal. English Journal, 102*(2), 122-128.

Schmidt, R. (2009). Assessing our way into instruction: What teachers know about how they know it. In R. Schmidt & P. L. Thomas (Eds.), *Twenty-first century literacy: If we are scripted, are we literatre?* (pp. 207-224). Amsterdam: Springer.

Shin, H., & Crookes, G. (2005). Exploring the possibilities for EFL critical pedagogy in Korea. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies, 2*(2), 113-136.

Stevens, L. P., & Bean, T. W. (2007). *Critical literacy: Context, research, and practice in the K-12 classroom*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Valdez, P. N. (2012). Actualizing critical English language teaching: A classroom experience in the Philippines. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher, 21*(2), 279-285.

Vasquez, V. (2003). *Getting beyond "I like the book": Creating space for critical literacy in K-6 classrooms*. Newark, DL: International Reading Association.

Vasquez, V., Tate, S. L., & Harste, J. C. (2013). *Negotiating critical literacies with teachers: Theoretical foundations and pedagogical resources for pre-service and in-service contexts*. New York: Routledge.

Appendix A

Character Web Poster
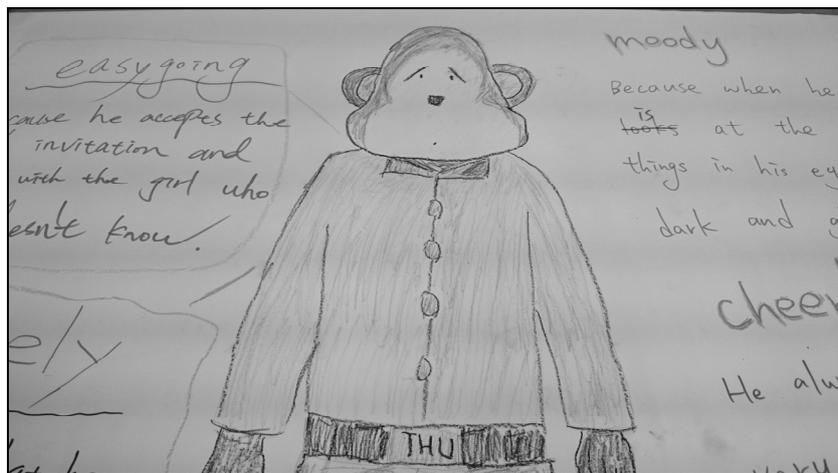
Appendix B

Perspective Journal (A Car Accident)

Perspective Journal   Name:_____

In this journal, you are encouraged to pay attention to things and people around you in your everyday life. You can record your own experiences or ones that you have read about in books, interactions you have with other people, movies you have seen, and so on. The questions below are designed to help you organize your reflections.

1. **Summarize your experience.**

There was a car accident that a motorcycle bomb into a car. Both drivers complained with each other. Few minutes later, police officer is coming. They need to judge about who broke the law and who should pay the money to fixed the broken car and motorcycle.

2. **Describe the people involved in the experience and mention their perspectives.**

The car driver said that when he was broke because of red light, and motorcycle bomb into his car. The motorcycle driver said that when green light turn into the yellow light, he higher the goal to rush the yellow light, but the car infront of him was suddenly broke the car. After police officer watched the video, they judged that motorcycle driver need pay for car driver.

3. **Which perspectives can be heard and which cannot be heard in this experience?**

° Both driver insisted they are right, and they complained to each other. Because both of them are angry, and they couldn't forgive each other too.

° Because both of them couldn't forgive with each other, so they wouldn't give up their right, too.

4. **What have you learned through writing this journal?**

Even there is only an event, others people's perspectives will be change. And even if someone is doing the wrong things, they couldn't give up his rights. And they will insist they are rights even if there just need a "sorry" to slove the question, they