



## The Journal of Asia TEFL

<http://journal.asiatefl.org/>

e-ISSN 2466-1511 © 2004 AsiaTEFL.org. All rights reserved.



### **Critical Literacy in an EFL Classroom in Vietnam: Agentive Empowerment, Ideological and Language Transformations**

**Thuy Bui**

*Vietnamese-German University, Vietnam*

The study, conducted in a mountainous province in Vietnam, explored how teaching methods of critical literacy (CL) were effective with high school students and their perceptions about these approaches. The study employed engaged ethnography (e.g., Phyak & Bui, 2014; Davis & Phyak, 2015) in which the researcher worked collectively with 27 students in understanding current pedagogical issues and applying CL in a real classroom. In particular, students were provided an opportunity to learn English through CL which was embedded in two vignettes on listening and project-based learning. The findings indicated CL pedagogies significantly improved students' English language competency and multiple skills such as leadership, presentation, and collaboration. Moreover, the students' responses strongly indicated CL is a meaningful, applicable, and critical approach for their English language improvement, socio-cultural awareness, and agentive development. The study offered some recommendations for applying CL pedagogies in language teaching, paying special attention to students' agencies while providing them with ample CL methods, and opportunities to enrich their academic English competency for effective language learning and ideological and academic transformations.

**Keywords:** critical literacy, EFL, ethnography, English competency, agentive empowerment, skills, Vietnam

### **Introduction**

The interconnectedness of socio-economic, technological, and political spheres of globalization (Coleman, 2011; Tollefson, 2013) has created massive linguistic resources and discourses that require critical interpretations, negotiations, and applications in language teaching (Canagarajah, 2005; Heller, 2010; Kirkpatrick & Sussex, 2012). In English language education, the backdrop of global change has made teaching greatly complex, requiring alternative approaches of envisioning, innovating, and negotiating multiple pedagogical methods for new generations of students (Darling-Hammond, 2009; Helot & O'Laoire, 2011; Street, 2012). Moving away from the teaching of grammar in isolation, literacy scholars such as Gee

(1996, 2000) and Luke (2011) argue that critical literacy (CL) has become more relevant than ever because it benefits students in numerous ways. CL guides students to deconstruct and develop knowledge; thus, they are able to read text in deeper and more meaningful ways (Pennycook, 2004). Through CL, students are empowered to challenge the status quo and social injustice often interwoven in the text and to question silent perspectives (Gee, 1996). Ko and Wang (2012) and Gee (2000) among others argue that CL activities further help students become active and critical users of language while their cognitive and logical skills are greatly enriched. Helot and O'Laoire (2011) and Morrell (2007) contend that CL emphasizes students' linguistic and educational needs, capitalizes on students as key agents of their own learning and fosters critical connections between language learning and social-political issues. Moreover, this practice embraces the application of engaged citizenship, re-positioning students as important participants in language education transformations (Davis, 2009). Various studies on CL in EFL contexts consistently concur that appropriate CL methods will foster students' academic English and other skills vitally important for them to participate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (e.g., Abednia & Izadinia, 2013; Lau, 2012; Roger, 2014; Yang, 2011).

While studies of literacy approaches have been embraced across disciplines (e.g., Davis, 2009; Morrell, 2007), they still receive little attention in the English as a foreign language (EFL) setting in Asia (Kuo, 2014) and in Vietnam in particular (Nguyen, 2009) where tremendous English education reforms have caused various challenges in effective teaching pedagogies (Majhanovich, 2014). In Vietnam, the National Foreign Language Project 2020, launched in 2008, requires young Vietnamese students to be equipped with English language skills in order to improve national and regional employability and be confident competitors in global job markets. However, although the 2020 project is approaching an end, English language teaching has been largely contested and controversial (Bui & Nguyen, 2016). The principal hindrances of unresponsive English teaching are pedagogical factors, especially incomprehensive teacher education practices and limited relevant approaches in working with students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds (e.g. Kirkpatrick & Bui, 2016; Nguyen & Bui, 2016; Nguyen & Hamid, 2015). Consequently, English language teaching is argued to largely damage students' agentive potentials, motivation, and effort for learning English, creating a series of tensions and ambivalences for both students and teachers while yielding very minimal expected outcomes (Bui, 2013; Bui, forthcoming; Nguyen & Hamid, 2015).

Thus, building on the notion of CL in EFL contexts, the researcher argues that CL could be a relevant teaching approach that can advantageously address the current teaching situations in many areas in Vietnam. The purpose of the study, therefore, is to explore whether and to what extent critical literacy methods work with high school EFL students in a remote mountainous province in Vietnam and student attitudes towards these approaches. The study asks the following questions:

1. How does teaching critical literacy in an English class play a role in improving students' English proficiency?
2. What are the students' perceptions on critical literacy teaching methods?
3. What skills do the students achieve through critical literacy?

The following section discusses literacy pedagogical trends and critical literacy practices in EFL contexts, which will serve as a conceptual foundation for this study.

## **Perspectives of Critical Language Teaching and its Practices in EFL Contexts**

### **Perspectives of Critical Language Teaching and Learning**

There have been multiple perspectives regarding theories of language and literacy. Gee (2000) and Street and Leung (2010) suggest that literacy learning must be situated in a social practice. Thus, theories of literacy and language learning emphasize students' skills in making critical connections between their literacy and language learning and socio-political and educational issues. Students are not only required to learn language skills such as reading and writing, but to engage with deep and complex issues related to meanings of literacy pertinent to different places, times, and contexts. Through literacy and language learning, students are socialized into the ability to voice their need for responsive pedagogical practices and equitable access to education, social services in their neighborhoods and society at large (Appadurai, 2006; Morrell, 2007). Linguistic theorists such as Larson, Ares, and O'Connor (2011) recommend that multiple communication methods and hybrid text forms (images, sounds, gestures, and animation) should be incorporated in English language teaching. Furthermore, literacy and language acquisition should be strongly rooted in learning strategies and experiences of literacy in students' own cultural milieus (e.g., Hélot & O'Laoire 2012; McLean, Boling, & Rowsell, 2009), with which teachers should be familiar in order to address their students' needs adequately and help them to build strong linguistic repertoires.

McLean, Boling, and Rowsell (2009) promote inclusive teaching approaches designed to develop EFL students' diverse literacy skills through awareness of what different students need to know and need to develop. Such approaches include modifying teachers' questions and responses, adapting the curriculum, designing assignments based on language proficiency, and promoting collaborative learning. These models of inclusive teaching also emphasize the importance of teachers' broad understanding of the backgrounds, values, and socio-cultural situations of the students with whom they work. All of these approaches support students' academic development and language learning while respecting them as unique individuals with rich linguistic, social, and cultural backgrounds. Directly related to the transformation of literacy learning is the notion of a "third space" (Bhabha, 1994), a discursive space in which students engage in analyses of the dominant discourse as a means of affirming their own linguistic abilities and agencies. Teachers use this "third space" as a way to empower students to act as critical researchers and ethnographers of their own literacy learning. Use of the "third space" theory allows students to develop higher-order thinking skills, meta-cognitive and meta-linguistic abilities, and language proficiency. Students further gain expertise in English as an academic language, along with the content knowledge necessary to achieve their future career goals. But how does CL play a role in helping students learn English? The following discusses the employment of CL in various EFL contexts.

### **Critical Literacy Teaching Methods in EFL Contexts**

Studies of teaching critical literacy (CL) in EFL contexts have gradually proliferated and shown positive outcomes. Lau (2012) demonstrates that teachers can foster students' critical discussions of their real life concerns through providing careful language scaffolding and classroom structures and conditions. In particular, students are able to work, formulate, evaluate, and question reading and writing about their real worlds. Yang (2011) and Gin (2013) report that EFL college students effectively improved their uses of critical reading and writing while being highly able to relate the texts to the wider world.

In another context of applying CL in reading in Iran, Abednia and Izadinia (2013) indicate students are highly capable of capturing the complexity of issues, identifying problems, offering solutions, and considering their own previous conceptualizations. The results further show students' deep interests in

learning through critical and creative approaches allowing them to create multiple interpretations. Kuo (2014) claims that applying CL through a picture book and different learning tasks helps students to have positive attitudes toward CL and significantly develops students' multiple perspectives and abilities in re-examining their society.

Generally speaking, although challenges that affect applications of CL are acknowledged (students' poor English proficiency, and lack of attention to critical literacy in curriculum), all the studies reviewed persistently emphasize the need for critical literacy pedagogies in current education systems. They strongly suggest providing students with ample opportunities to make a sound connection between student knowledge of their daily life experiences with the text in the classroom to broaden their critical views and applications of critical literacy (Janks, 2014; Ko & Wang, 2012; Rogers, 2014). The review of the literature reveals that while the researchers in the above contexts empower students as agents in challenging the dominant discourses and developing their critical knowledge, the CL practices implemented appear to be mainly individual-oriented rather than group-based approaches. Moreover, while CL emphasizes the importance of the students' agency in learning English through critical tasks, such agency has not yet been widely discussed in the previous studies. Therefore, the current study will address these gaps in the current literature by including both individual and group-based practices to explore the effectiveness of CL in an EFL classroom. It further discusses the vital role of students' agency in CL teaching. The following section demonstrates the method used for the study.

## **The Study: Engaged Ethnography**

### **Engaged Ethnography and the Researcher's on-the-ground Work**

The study employs engaged ethnography (EE) (Bui, 2013; Davis, Phyak, & Bui, 2012; Davis & Phyak, 2015; Phyak & Bui, 2014). Drawing on the critical and participatory research approaches, EE respects and places all participants at the core of investigating their teaching and learning challenges and creating meaningful transformations. It creates a collaborative space for participants to interrogate education policies and practices (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2008). Moreover, grounded on the notion of full citizenship (Appadurai, 2006), EE is a public sphere, advocating for voicing participants' needs, and calling for sustainable and effective policies and teaching practices while nurturing participants to gain socio-political, educational, and linguistic knowledge and skills in a globalized world.

This critical research method was chosen since it greatly guided the researcher to involve multiple students in this study with the intention of creating meaningful pedagogical changes that reflected greater effectiveness, agency, and quality teaching (Grinwright, Cammarota, & Noguera, 2005). Furthermore, EE greatly emphasizes the researcher's positionality throughout the research process and product, in which the scholars (such as the researcher in this study) have strong ties with the land, people, socio-political, and education issues of their research settings, and who have taken researcher roles to collectively work with participants to create meaningful pedagogical transformations for more effective learning and teaching.

Over the past eight years, the researcher has been researching English language policies and practices in a remote mountainous province in Vietnam, which is also her native land. She has fostered dynamic and collaborative dialogue and meaningful practices with teachers and students with a strong commitment to promote effective teaching and learning. She has immersed herself in the cultural, social, and pedagogical aspects of the local classrooms to understand what things happened with the teachers and students. Most students indicated that they were uninterested in learning the English language for wide-ranging reasons, including it being *khó* "difficult," *khác biệt* "strikingly different," *không thực tế* "impractical." When the

researcher co-constructively created ideas for possible solutions to ineffective language teaching, many students expressed their desire for teachers to understand their needs, psychology, and conceptualizations. To use the words of the students, they requested to be taught “using comprehensive, realistic, new, and attractive” approaches that incorporate students’ numerous strengths. Such challenging teaching situations, students’ struggles, and suggestions of pedagogical shifts profoundly foreground the researcher’s pedagogical implementation with these students in order to improve students’ English learning.

### **The Classroom, Students, and Curriculum**

In order to apply CL practices, from September 2014 to May 2015, the researcher taught English to a group of 27 (22 females and 5 males), 18-year-old high school students for 90 minutes a day, four days a week. The students specialized in English and their English proficiency was at the intermediate level. A majority (86%) of the students came from the city center where they had more favorable conditions to study English starting at an early age. The remaining students came from more rural communities that were between 30-100 kilometers away from the city. However, since all the students had to pass the entrance exam in order to study English as their specialized major in this school, they possessed fairly good English understanding. When the researcher first worked with these students, she realized that they showed their eagerness in learning English with her but they had never learned through CL methods. Therefore, before applying CL and for the first month of working with the students, she characterized her role as that of a “participant observer” (Angrosino, 2007), as she sought to observe the classroom environment and understand student desires and needs before applying critical literacy methods. The researcher realized that the students were uninterested in learning English because of unresponsive teaching approaches and a curriculum that often hindered their needs, expressions, and multiple creativities. While students were very skeptical of having interesting English lessons, many of them were highly active, creative, and excited when discussing multiple teaching pedagogies that would nurture their love for learning and make a strong connection between learning English and their real life. Thus, the current situation and the students’ needs set a solid foundation for the researcher to delve into more linguistically, socially responsive, and critical teaching methods with them. She started to apply multiple critical methods to teaching, adapting the curriculum and applied real life issues into teaching. She also mobilized diverse teaching resources (online materials and websites, pictures, newspapers) and provided multiple learning techniques (e.g., pair work, collaborative learning, and modified evaluation methods) in the classroom.

The curriculum used for teaching English through CL was both developed and adapted from the students’ main English textbooks that teachers were not strictly required to follow. The themes of the textbooks were exactly the same for all three Grades 10, 11, and 12 which meant that the same themes for Grade 10 were repeated in Grades 11 and 12. The themes covered topics including friendship, volunteer work, illiteracy, competition, recreation, and so forth. The students often reported that the content of the textbook was largely repetitive, uninteresting, and out of date. Therefore, building on the notion of teaching CL which promotes mobilizing, democratizing, and adapting multiple sources of materials for students’ effective learning, the researcher utilized the suggested themes and topics in the English textbooks as a spine to integrate new materials that were more relevant to the students. She spent a month at the beginning of the semester to study the textbook content and themes in order to come up with a plan of what to keep and what to replace for the overall curriculum to meet the students’ needs. She then developed her new lesson plans every week based on her revised curriculum. New materials were often given to the students a week before to make sure students had time to read them. For instance, adapting new materials in the existing themes suggested by the textbook and using the theme competition, rather than delving deeply into numbers illustrating what some sportsmen had achieved during sports games introduced in the textbook, the researcher adopted a topic about a great

sports icon that students could learn from. Likewise, the topic of youths doing volunteer work with which the students were familiar was replaced by a reading on Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani Nobel peace prize recipient for her enduring advocacy commitment on education for girls (which is discussed more fully later in this paper). Furthermore, the researcher often discussed and encouraged students to collect materials based on themes of interest to them and suggested these be brought to class as rich resources for learning. Thus, by integrating, adapting, and scaffolding new materials, the researcher reasoned that students not only had a chance to learn the content in the textbook but were also given ample space to learn greatly relevant, socially and psychologically appropriate, and meaningful materials that could help them enrich their English competency along with their knowledge and cognitive foundation. The two vignettes presented later in the paper serve as examples of the exploration into CL practices with the students.

## **Data Collection**

In this study, the researcher presents two vignettes that are drawn from CL approaches with the students. These vignettes were chosen as they exhibit students' individual and group-work activities and vividly represent students' reactions, responses, and activities through CL practices. The vignettes reflect multiple data types, including her classroom notes, videos, students' presentations, student posters, and their final written reflections. The researcher believed that her teaching intervention would be strengthened through observing the students' linguistic and cultural settings, their abilities, and needs both inside and outside the classroom. Thus, during her CL teaching process, she actively observed the students' work, as well as their collaboration, preparation, behaviors, and reactions to CL methodologies. She kept a classroom journal from the early stages of planning her teaching that enabled her to plan, reflect, and revise her practices with the students. She also collected the students' posters, and their written reflections in which they were asked to focus on: (a) what they had learned; (b) their reactions on CL in the classroom; and (c) their reflections at the end of the semester on CL teaching. Finally, the researcher gathered students' collaborative presentations that were filmed during the final presentations in order to analyze her teaching interventions and the students' language transformations.

## **Data Analysis**

Building on ethnographic data analysis as a method of "social presentation rather than data analysis in a narrow sense" (Delamont & Atkinson, 2004, p. 130), it was important for the researcher to analyze the data with reference to the participants' constraints for learning English to illuminate their participation, practices, and their transformations. Thus, the researcher in this study analyzed her practices by aligning her data analysis with the research questions to uncover how CL pedagogies worked with the students as well as their perceptions and transformations. She further utilized an inductive and recursive process that allowed patterns, themes, and categories to emerge from data. All of the observational notes and the students' reflections were read and coded (Maxwell, 1996). For the students' presentation videos, she spent many hours watching and taking notes on the content and their verbal responses to the classmates. She then spent time reading, coding, and recoding her classroom and video watching notes and students' reflections, in order to create an initial set of themes for the data (Delamont & Atkinson, 2004). Themes were revisited several times, along with the classroom notes and reflections, to identify salient themes with multiple values and to discover missing information. These data were combined to enable a rich description of the data that portrayed CL intervention with the students. The vignettes described in this paper draw on the process of careful data analysis and reflexivity (Madison, 2012) in which methodological intervention and the voices and actions of the students are highly interwoven.

The researcher maintained research credibility through Smith's (2012) perspective that credibility of critical and engaged ethnographic research is strongly correlated with the researcher's selfhood and his/her ontological and epistemological background as all of these important criteria influence the research process and products. This study was developed from her deep understanding of complex teaching situations at the local level where she had been working as a teacher and teacher-researcher for more than the last eight years. Moreover, she used a triangulation method to maintain credibility by (a) drawing comparisons between the observational and video data; (b) checking the consistency over time of the participants' opinions on CL; and, (c) comparing the results drawn from the vignettes to those of other studies in the literature as a means of increasing credibility and strengthening the findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Maxwell, 1996). Furthermore, the theoretical framework of this study was considered as an instrument for explicit comparison, which is blended in the results section to make the account comprehensive, accessible, and a reflective pedagogical intervention (Maxwell, 1996). In what follows, the researcher demonstrates how CL practices were applied through the use of two vignettes.

### **Vignette 1: Listening Unit**

The researcher readapted the topic about youth in the current curriculum to respond to the students' needs for more practical and meaningful language teaching and make a stronger connection between learning and real-life situations (Hélot & O'Laoire, 2012; Street & Leung, 2010). Students were provided with a listening lesson on Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani girl who was the youngest-ever Nobel Prize recipient<sup>1</sup> in 2014 for her human rights advocacy for education and women in her native land of the Swat Valley. Before the lesson, she provided students with brief information about Malala's bravery when being identified and shot by a Taliban gunman on the bus. Then students were provided with a handout picturing Malala and her statement: "I don't mind if I have to sit on the floor at school. All I want is education, I am afraid of no one."<sup>2</sup> The researcher then invited students to work in groups of three to answer two questions: "Can you guess her ethnicity?" "And what do you think about her statement?" Students actively guessed her nationality as looking Indian or Pakistani. Student comments on her statement included "I think she is a strong woman," "I think she loves education [more] than anything else," and "I think she can come from a place with limited schooling and educational equipment."

The students then listened to a video about Malala, which follows literacy scholars' calls for re-imagining and augmenting multiliteracies with hybrid text forms (sounds, images, semiotics). The researcher reasoned that different Englishes were a form of multiliteracies. Departing from the rigid curriculum which largely privileges English from Australia and England, she offered this video as an opportunity for students to listen to a Pakistani-English accent. While listening, students often said: "What strange English is it" or "I can't hear what she is saying" and so forth. Thus, the researcher encouraged students to try to be familiar with multiple English accents because it was likely that they would communicate with people in Asian regions more than those from America or Europe.

Applying critical literacy methods suggests asking students to make a strong connection with between their learning for meaningful reflections and awareness of socio-political and educational issues (Morrell, 2007). Therefore, the researcher posed the post-listening discussion question: "Being the same age as Malala, what does the listening today make you think?" Students' reflections showed increased awareness and acceptance of other types of English like Malala's Pakistani English. As Thi (pseudonym) remarked: "I realized that there are many types of English not only the ones from Britain or America. This lesson helps me to practice

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sgg06a7mHZ4>

<sup>2</sup> Picture source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/265501340506962270/>

listening [to] other English and gain more knowledge about Pakistan's politics and education." Another student actively reflected:

I feel happy when Malala could escape from her tragedy. Moreover, the listening helps me understand that there are many places where inequality in education is still dominant; thus, we should fight for women and children to have equal education like us. This listening reminds me to be stronger as a woman.

Another student also commented on the notion of agency through "standing up for one's agentic self perspective" She further said:

I think that we should dream big and pursue our dream no matter how hard it is. I learn that we should be confident and fight against the ones who prevent us from what we want [e.g., education]. She [Malala] makes me feel that if we receive any unequal treatment, we should stand up, express our ideas and fight for equality.

We can see that the students' critical responses illuminated their meaningful awareness and acceptance of multiple types of English that they should be familiar with various purposes in the future. Such listening activities further functioned as a forum for the students to enrich and sharpen their socio-political and educational knowledge in their region as well as foregrounded and empowered their agency to voice their concerns against unjust matters. Furthermore, the listening activity using CL signaled that the students participated actively in these activities. This type of activity was far different from their routine listening lessons that required listening, filling out answers on worksheets, and listening again to make corrections. Students had a chance to practice both their listening and communicative skills through such critical activities while inquiring into more advanced knowledge and informing each other about their new worldviews. The next section introduces vignette two which demonstrates how CL worked in project-based critical learning.

## **Vignette 2: Project-based Critical Learning**

The researcher further engaged students by offering a four-week long project-based learning unit in order to promote students as creative agents and emphasize the strong links between language learning and socio-cultural matters. After introducing the notion of project-based learning, she encouraged students to select topics that concerned them most in current Vietnamese society. Twenty-seven students were divided into six groups of four, with one group of three. She offered students additional guidance online, during break time, and through Facebook and other social networks. Students were then guided to do research on newspapers, the Internet, and other media sources to select their topics of interest. Meanwhile, in her role as consultant and facilitator, the researcher provided ample guidance. Students generated various interesting and radical ideas, namely school conflict, family violence, gender inequality, homosexuality, media, and multiculturalism and diversity, all of which directly reflect contemporary issues in Vietnam.

Project-based critical learning opens up a democratic space for students to exercise all their multiple intelligences and agencies (Bhabha, 1994). The researcher drew on the notion of "new literacies" (Street, 2003) to encourage students to apply multiple communication methods, hybrid text forms, genres, and writing (Street & Leung, 2010) in their presentations. She realized that the students took up the notion of new literacies quickly and deeply understood the power of generating multiple sources for their final projects. For instance, students actively made short films, conducted interviews with other teachers and students in school,

used cultural artifacts, and made products for their final 15-minute group presentations. During the final two weeks of the project, the students' work was organized clearly with vivid illustrations of facts, figures, videos, interviews, and cultural artifacts or hand-made products.

The work students exhibited illustrated that they were highly capable researchers of their own learning. Their presentations resembled mini research projects as they worked on the full circle of posing questions, researching problems, narrowing topics, doing research on their topics, and diversifying presentations while always providing responsible and highly applicable suggestions. For instance, the students who presented the topic of gender inequality started with the definition and then related it to discriminatory treatment in schools and homes. In their three-minute video that students created, they role-played the common belief of many Vietnamese parents in their mountainous area that money should be invested in learning for their sons but not for their daughters despite both genders desiring to receive equal education. Providing some facts about gender inequality in Vietnam and other countries, students shared that "the full time gender pay gap is 10% and the average part time pay gap is 34.5%" and "women who work, with or without children, spend 15 hours a week on average doing chores, while men spend only five." The students indicated various consequences of gender inequality, including that women and girls were often victims of rape, undervalued jobs, illiteracy, low pay, poverty, and unequal rights. Students concluded by saying that they were very glad to choose this topic because they "are female" and should "seek for our equality." They then cited a British actress who asked everyone to get involved in fighting against gender inequality by saying "If not me, who? If not now, when?" The students finally provided practical suggestions to help mothers, female friends, and women in general to be conscious about and work against gender inequality. In another project on school conflicts, students offered solutions to avoid school conflicts by sensitively and responsibly using social media such as Facebook while urging acceptance of people's differences.

Furthermore, teaching English through CL solidly helped students improve their presentation skills embedded with technological skills which they hardly ever had similar opportunities to sustain and develop. The students' presentation contents were integrated with various images, text styles, and figures to best illustrate their topics. Students working on homosexuality made a video-clip in which they interviewed their school peers for their views of gay and lesbian rights. Yet, students further had a chance to practice and improve their presentation styles. Overall, students were confident and fluent during their presentations, while also engaging the audience in topics or questions. They were cognizant about maintaining eye contact or respectfully asking for reiterations when the meaning was not very clear to them. At other times, students asked for time for a brief group discussion before addressing the audience's questions. The presentations were mixed with feelings of joy, creativity, and celebration, especially when students presented topics of school or cultural diversities. They collected sample foods and songs from other cultures to bring to class while performing dances during their presentation. At other times, the class was deep in feelings of anger, sympathy, or sorrow about family violence or school conflict.

CL not only offered the creative space for the students to practice their English, establish background knowledge, and improve skills, but it also provided a forum for students to reflect on their own learning in the final week of the project. The students' worked collaboratively in generating their reflections that corresponded well with the theories of critical literacy learning. Their written reflections further signaled that they had become more fully cognizant of their linguistic strengths and limitations, which strengthened their perception towards constantly improving themselves and their academic skills. Student written reflections further pointed out areas they needed to improve by saying: "We need to be more confident and talk louder" or "We would like to have more time for our presentations." Moreover, although the students' responses largely yielded positive outcomes, some indicated shortcomings such as: "As much as we enjoyed the new teaching styles, we were also under a lot of pressure because we have to complete our task in a timeframe. We feel tired." Recognizing that students need to be more aware of their audience when presenting, one student realized that the "Teacher should guide students to practice speaking more fluently."

We further see that CL practices helped create ideological and practical transformations not only during the group project but these also extended into the students' future learning activities. After the project, the researcher realized that students often incorporated critical topics and strategies into their lessons, such as reimagining the new school year's opening ceremony, critiquing a national TV channel, and linking unethical issues in their communities in the speaking or writing activities. They showed more interest and remembered their lessons more clearly when instruction related to local practices and when they were offered ample space to exercise their creative and critical minds.

## Results, Conclusions, and Implications

### Results

With regards to the first research question about the role of CL in improving student English proficiency, we can see that the wide-ranging evidence in the vignettes indicates the effectiveness of CL approaches in our EFL classroom with both individual and group-based activities. The results greatly support the previous studies (Abednia & Izadinia, 2013; Lau, 2012; Roger, 2014; Yang, 2011) that persistently showed the positive outcomes of CL in assisting students in English language skill areas, and in vocabulary expansion, as well as in academic knowledge. In this current study, the students' responses and well-prepared presentations demonstrated that their academic English knowledge and skills were significantly ameliorated through scaffolding CL methods in their classroom. As a group of students shared in their reflections which also represent many others' similar responses: "We have learned many new words, expressions, and knowledge about different topics" or, as another group responded: "We feel more confident because our listening, speaking, writing, and reading are greatly improved thanks to working on our project." Moreover, students were provided with various opportunities to inquire into and improve their new interdisciplinary knowledge (e.g., politics, education, woman rights, gender issues) embedded in their everyday lessons and group projects. Such knowledge crucially strengthens both their English competency and academic abilities while gradually fostering quality language education and their future development (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The overall course scores<sup>3</sup> showed two students obtained outstanding results (from 9.00-9.20) and 20 out of 27 gained very good results (from (8.00-8.90 over10.00). The remaining five students scored significantly well which ranged from 7.00-7.90. Furthermore, according to our classroom record, it is remarkable that 100% of the students passed the English national entrance university exam at the end of school year and have now been studying in multiple programs in colleges and universities such as law, international diplomacy, education, the military, and banking. These results further contribute to the effective outcomes of involvement in CL methods used with students throughout the school year.

In light of the second research question on students' perspectives towards CL, it is argued that the students' responses and successful learning outcomes show their highly favorable attitudes for these practices which further helped them regain their hope for effective English teaching and learning. The researcher observed that students participating both in collaborative work and in the presentations felt more happy and satisfied when their work offered them an alternative and applicable method for higher quality learning. In the written reflection at the end of the class, many students further wished for the approaches to be applied to other subjects now and in the future. Moreover, echoing the attitude of many others, the students in one group commented on the teaching approach as "unforgettable moment of learning in our student life." Another group shared:

---

<sup>3</sup> 10 was the total points for the course.

We feel relaxed, confident, and natural learning through these CL approaches. We are grateful for learning English through many meaningful and well-grounded ways of constructing the lessons. In fact, we used to think that our love for learning English was faded away in the past two years.

A student indicated in their group reflection that: “We often talk to each other about your critical teaching approach. It is very memorable to us and we hope to be taught with the similar way in our universities.”

With regards to skills students obtained through CL learning which addresses the third and final research question, the vignettes indicated that the students were provided with rich opportunities to apprentice and deepen a toolkit of skills that potentially enables them to participate confidently in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: their interpersonal and life skills are nurtured, and their technology, leadership, and research skills are sharpened. For instance, students’ teamwork and interpersonal and communicative skills were enriched as they worked on the complex process of discussion and negotiation with their peers to deliver their projects effectively resulting in positive learning outcomes. Sample student reflections include: “we become more active and closer to each other, and be responsible for our learning.”

Furthermore, students were nurtured to be true researchers of their own learning. The students’ research skills were reflected through their presentations which demonstrated a complete process of proposing controversial topics, inquiring into knowledge of their topics through various forms of materials, and synthesizing crucial information while responsibly providing relevant suggestions. As Minh (pseudonym), a student, shared in his group’s reflection:

I learn to carefully prepare our presentations as well as how to incorporate pictures and figures more effectively. I think that the CL teaching approach is very useful and effective to me. I learned more about how to work effectively with other friends, leadership skills, and skills of presenting in front of others. To be honest, I used to be very shy.

We can further argue that such a set of skills indicates students’ linguistic and socially meaningful development that profoundly engenders their way of seeing, occupying social space, and helps them gain legitimate access in the globalized world (Bourdieu, 1991).

## **Conclusions and Implications**

The study demonstrates the application of CL in an EFL classroom with the students and appears to be an effective and favorable method. The results of this study strongly support the previous studies (Janks, 2014; Ko & Wang, 2012; Gin, 2013; Roger, 2014; Yang, 2011), which argue that such critical learning methods augmented students’ English competency but also empowered their meta-linguistic, meta-cognitive, and higher order of thinking skills. Furthermore, the study assists in filling the gap in the current literature as mentioned above in the section of critical literacy teaching methods in EFL contexts by integrating both individual and group work in teaching English using critical literacy methods which yielded positive outcomes. Moreover, the study expects to strengthen the scholarship on applying CL in teaching by foregrounding the role of students’ agency at the heart of the learning and teaching processes. In particular, the study argues that besides the role of CL in improving students’ English language competency and background knowledge, CL practices applied in this study repositions students at the epicenter of their learning, offering students a democratic space and wide-ranging activities to fully participate in a series of academic inquiries. Rather than solely relying on teachers’ teaching agendas, teaching English through CL opens ample space for the students to actively voice their needs, exercise their agency as confident researchers of their own learning, and mobilize their agentive and creative stance to improve their learning practices.

Furthermore, students did not learn English in isolation but maintained and sharpened their knowledge and skills essential for their being, seeing, and eventually achieving socio-political and educational well-being in the demanding globalized world.

Although CL showed positive outcomes in the context of the study, challenges faced by the researcher and limitations of the study could not be overlooked. She realized that teaching English through CL required her strong commitment to students' quality learning as applications of CL consumed a tremendous amount of time and energy throughout the process of investigating the existing curriculum, generating and scaffolding materials, and teaching and mentoring students for desirable learning outcomes. Furthermore, it was significantly challenging for her to constantly accommodate all 27 students' inquiries and create time to check on their weekly work and practice. Hence, co-teaching in the future could essentially ease the process of designing, mentoring, and communicating with the students. A possible limitation of this study is that it only applied CL with students majoring in English who generally possess higher English knowledge and skills compared to other students. Future research, therefore, could employ CL with other students and in other types of classrooms to explore how CL works in other contexts. Moreover, teacher trainers and teachers could collaborate to both inform each other and put CL into action. This approach could further examine the effectiveness as well as shortcomings of CL in EFL classrooms, which could serve as a rigorous foundation for students to nurture both English and academic competency and for teachers to sharpen their pedagogical knowledge and interventions.

The study not only shows the positive results of using CL but also intends to offer some recommendations for researchers and practitioners to apply CL in teaching. First, it is strongly recommended that students and their rich potentials be positioned at the center of critical language teaching and learning in order for CL to be implemented effectively. Students have to be respected and empowered as active and creative language learners, being highly able to exercise their abilities to promote effective language learning especially in the challenging pedagogical situations that students in this study experienced. Second, the study concurs with literacy researchers (Abednia & Izandinia, 2013; Lopez, 2011) to suggest that it is particularly important to create full opportunities to not only help students vocalize their nuanced and critical perspectives on a variety of real life issues but to also prove themselves to be critical, resourceful, and highly responsible learners in collaborating with the teacher to create pedagogical changes. Third, this study urges educational stakeholders and teachers to deeply understand local pedagogical situations and deploy the multiple strengths and rich resources students possess to foster their literacy and ontological and epistemological transformations. Finally, this study acknowledges that applying CL in this research is a complex task. Hence, the study recommends that techniques and knowledge of current literacy teaching pedagogies and the realities of language learning, students' backgrounds, desires, and agencies have to be understood and taken seriously in order to effectively carry out CL practices. Different forms of support, such as face-to-face discussions or online means using Facebook and forums should also be utilized whenever students need help to foster relevant teaching that gives rise to high quality English teaching and learning, gradually preparing students to be competent, versatile, and confident English language users in the modern world.

### **The Author**

*Thuy Bui* graduated from the doctoral program at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, USA. She held a position as a visiting scholar at The University of Sydney, Australia in 2015. She has been working as lecturer of English at the Vietnamese-German University, Vietnam. Her main research interests include language policy and socioeconomic equity, neoliberalism and language policy, engaged ethnography, youth ideologies and activism, and the interconnection of globalization, language, and multilingual education. She has

published journal articles and book chapters on these areas.

Language Department  
Le Lai Street, Hoa Phu Ward,  
Binh Duong New City, Binh Duong, Vietnam  
Phone: 84-(0) 650-2220990, Ext. 126  
Email: [thuybuihawaii@gmail.com](mailto:thuybuihawaii@gmail.com)

## References

- Abednia, A., & Izadinia, M. (2013). Critical pedagogy in ELT classroom: Exploring contributions of critical literacy to learners' critical consciousness. *Language Awareness, 22*(4), 338-352.
- Angrosino, M. (2007). *Doing ethnographic and observational research*. CA: Sage.
- Appadurai, A. (2006). The right to research. *Globalization, Societies and Education, 4*(2), 167-177.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bui, T. N. T. (2013). "Can a basket hide an elephant?": *Language policy and practices toward linguistic, educational, and socio-economic equity in Vietnam*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Hawaii at Manoa, USA.
- Bui, T. T. N & Nguyen, T. M. H (2016). Standardizing English for educational and socio-economic betterment: A critical analysis for English language policy reforms in Vietnam. In Kirkpatrick, R. (Ed.), *English language education policy in Asia* (pp. 363-388). Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.
- Bui, T. (forthcoming). Engagement in language policies and practices with and for Vietnamese minority student youth. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*.
- Canagarajah, A. S. (Ed.). (2005). *Reclaiming local in language policy and practice*. Mahwah: Erlbaum.
- Coleman, H. (Ed.). (2011). *Developing countries and the English language: Rhetoric, risks, roles and recommendations*. London: British Council.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2007). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. CA: Sage.
- Darling-Hammond (2009). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our nation's future*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Davis, K. A. (2009). Agentive youth research: Towards individual, collective, and policy transformations. In T. G. Wiley., J. S. Lee., & R. Rumberger (Eds.), *The education of language minority immigrants in the USA* (pp. 202-239). London: Multilingual Matters.
- Davis, K. A., Phyak, P., & Bui, T. T. N. (2012), Multicultural education as community engagement: Policies and planning in a transnational era. *International Journal of Multicultural Education, 14*(3), 1-25.
- Davis, K. A., & Phyak, P. (2015). In the face of neoliberal adversity: Engaging language education policy and practices. *L2 Journal, 7*(3), 146-166.
- Delamont, S., & Atkinson, P. (2004). Qualitative research and postmodern turn. In Hardy, M. A. & Bryman, A. (Eds.), *Handbook of data analysis* (pp. 667-681). London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Gee, J. P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Gee, J. P. (2000). Teenagers in new times: A new literacy studies perspective. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 43*(5), 412-420.
- Gin, G. G. (2013). Designing and implementing a critical literacy-based approach in an Indonesian EFL secondary school. *International Journal of Indonesian Studies, 1*, 1-21.

- Heller, M. (2010). The commodification of language. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 39(1), 101-114.
- Hélot, C., & O'Laoire, M. (2011). *Language policy for the multilingual classroom (Bilingual education and bilingualism)*. London: Channel View Publications.
- Janks, H. (2014). Critical literacy's ongoing importance for education, *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 57(5), 349-356.
- Kirkpatrick, A., & Sussex, R. (2012). *English as an international language in Asia: Implications for language education*. New York: Springer.
- Ko, M., & Wang, T. (2012). EFL learners' critical literacy practices: A case study of four college students in Taiwan. *Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 22(3), 221-229.
- Kuo, J. (2014). Critical literacy in the EFL classroom: Evolving multiple perspectives through learning tasks. *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, 11(4), 109-138.
- Madison, D. S. (2012). *Critical ethnography: Methods, ethics, and performance* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London: Sage.
- Majhanovich, S. (2014). Neo-liberalism, globalization, language policy and practice issues in the Asia-Pacific region. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 3(2), 168-183.
- Maxwell, J. A. (1996). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). CA: Sage.
- McLean, C., Boling, E., & Rowsell, J. (2009). Engaging diverse students in multiple literacies in and out of school. In L. Morrow, R. Rueda, & D. Lapp. (Eds.), *Handbook of research on literacy instruction: Issues of diversity, policy, and equity* (pp. 158-172). New York: Guilford Press.
- Morrell, E., (2007), *Critical literacy and urban youth: Pedagogies of access, dissent, and liberation*. New York: Routledge.
- Morrell, E., & Duncan-Andrade, J. (2008). *The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Lau, M. C. (2012). Reconceptualizing critical literacy teaching in ESL classrooms. *The Reading Teacher*, 65(5), 325-329.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Lopez, A. E. (2011). Culturally relevant pedagogy and critical literacy in diverse English classrooms: A case study of a secondary English teacher's activism and agency. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 10(4), 75-93.
- Luke, A. (2011). Generalizing across borders policy and the limits of educational science. *Educational Researcher*, 49(8), 367-377.
- Nguyen, H. T. M. (2009). An experiment application of the problem-posing approach for English language teaching in Vietnam. In T. Stewart (Ed.), *Insights on teaching speaking in TESOL* (pp. 79-91), Virginia: TESOL Publications.
- Nguyen, T. M. H. & Bui, T. (2016). Teachers' agency and the enactment of educational reform in Vietnam. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 17(1), 1-18.
- Nguyen, V. H., & Hamid, M. O. (2015). Educational policy borrowing in a globalized world. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 14(1), 60-74.
- Phyak, P., and Bui, T. (2014), Youth engaging language policy: Ideologies and transformations from within. *Language Policy*, 13(2), 101-120.
- Pennycook, A. (2004). Critical moments in a TESOL praxicum. In B. Norton & K. Toohey (Eds.), *Critical pedagogies and language learning* (pp. 327-345). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Robert, K., & Bui, T. T. N. (2016). Introduction: The challenges for English education policies in Asia. In Kirkpatrick, R. (Ed.), *English language education policy in Asia* (pp. 25-48). Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.
- Rogers, R. (2014). Coaching literacy teachers as they design critical literacy practices. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 30(3), 241-261.

- Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London: Zed Books Limited.
- Street, B. (2003). What's "new" in new literacy studies? Critical approaches to literacy in theory and practice. *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, 5(2), 77-91.
- Street, B. (2012). New literacy studies. In M. Grenfell., D. Bloome., C. Hardy., K. Pahl., J. Rowsell., & B. V. Street (Eds.), *Language, ethnography, and education: Bridging new literacy studies and Bourdieu* (pp. 27-49). New York: Routledge.
- Street, B., & Leung, C. (2010). Sociolinguistics, language teaching and new literacy studies. In N. H. Hornberger & S. L. McKay (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and language education* (pp. 290-316). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Tollefson, J. W. (2013). *Language policies in education: Critical issues* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Yang, S. (2011). *Critical literacy practices in a Korean EFL context: A case study of Korean undergraduates learning English reading and writing* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Indiana University, USA.