



Fostering University Students to Deal with Conflict through Critical Literacy in EFL Reading Class

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Education has been proposed to be the best approach to advance world citizenship and to resolve conflict. Critical literacy is a strategic instructional practice which aims at raising citizens' critical and social consciousness. The current study investigated how critical literacy instruction affected students' responses to conflict and their conception of conflict resolution. Twenty-one EFL college students in an advanced reading class participated in the study. Conflict in society was addressed in class through group dialogue and problem-posing. Open coding was used to analyze the qualitative data from class observation, students' writing assignment and interviews. Findings revealed the students' perspectives of conflict, causes of conflict and conflict resolution. Critical literacy helped the students develop inquisitive minds and critical awareness through problem posing and investigating multiple viewpoints. They were trained to accept and respect differences. Taken as a whole, the present study contributes more robust understandings of the role of critical literacy in helping students become critically literate citizens.

Keywords: critical literacy, conflict resolution, reading pedagogy, EFL reading instruction

Introduction

Conflict stems from incompatible demands, needs, and goals (Mayer, 2000), and can become violent when individuals perceive their view as the only accurate reality (Shapiro, 2010). Conflict in Thailand, where the current study is situated, has become worse of late, and has provoked more violence. This conflict stems from many root causes, such as social divisions, hegemony and privilege, and the omnipresence of inequality and injustice perpetuated by those with authority. It is further exacerbated by the fact that Thai people take clear sides and refuse to listen to different viewpoints. Disassociation between those from different sides has escalated, and the conflict has also intensified (Mitchell, 2006; Sombatpoonsiri, 2017). Hatred and violence have thus dogged Thai society for decades. Learning to live together peacefully alongside diversity and difference remains a significant challenge and has become one of the most important national agendas in Thai society.

Education is seen as the last best hope to resolve conflict constructively (Eisler & Miller, 2004; Mulcahy, 2011). Quality education is needed to help develop mutual understanding, strengthen individuals' ability to tolerate and respect differing views and better handle conflict (Freire, 2007; Godbold et al., 2021). Teachers have mission to promote student learning (Wei & Zhou, 2021) and create classrooms as laboratories which are a simulation of their real-world experiences (Anderson, 1999). In the current study, critical literacy is proposed as a pedagogical framework to equip Thai EFL university students with the skills needed to navigate the world of differences and diversities and resolve conflict.



Critical literacy (CL) aims to teach citizens to be literate and critical and to raise their critical and social consciousness (Freire, 2007). With this in mind, I investigated how critical literacy instruction affected EFL students' responses to conflict and their concept of conflict resolution. The guiding research question was: How do Thai EFL students respond to conflict and conflict resolution after they receive CL training?

Literature Review

Conceptualization of Critical Literacy

Critical literacy (CL) is defined as an instructional approach that aims to teach reading with a focus on critical awareness of language, text and power. Using this approach, students are trained to be aware of the non-static and unneutral meanings of text that are shaped by cultural, political and historical contexts (Behman, 2006; Gainer, 2013) and the experiences of readers. They become critical of their world (Hagood, 2002; Shor, 1987), and see 'the everyday through new lenses' (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 382) from multiple perspectives (Molden, 2007). This will help them have the basis for 'transforming their lives' (Diaz-Rico, 2012; Kim & Cho, 2017) and transforming their society into a more just, humane, democratic, equal and peaceful one (Beck, 2005). There is no unifying pattern of CL classrooms. Issues and controversies that draw students' interest and have significance to their lives should be used as texts in CL classrooms (Vasquez et al., 2019).

In this study, the researcher used Lewison et al.'s (2015) four dimensions of critical literacy as an instructional framework to design EFL reading instruction. The first dimension is disrupting the commonplace. Problem posing and dialogue become important mechanisms in CL classrooms. Students are trained to have inquisitive minds by asking different types and levels of questions about texts (i.e., literal, inferential, and critical) and issues relevant to their lives and the world. Classrooms are turned into "sites of inquiry" (Smyth, 2011), where students and teachers ask questions and co-investigate their realities. The second dimension is viewing and investigating issues from multiple viewpoints. Students should be encouraged to read and investigate issues from different perspectives. This helps them establish a clearer picture of issues and understand diversities and differences. The third dimension is focusing on sociopolitical issues. Lessons should go beyond the texts being read and should be connected to students' life contexts, making them understand wider sociopolitical issues (Lewison et al., 2015). Students should be challenged to consider the legitimacy of commonsense issues, practices or regulations, and classrooms should become open spaces where students can freely express and exchange opinions and discuss sociopolitical issues (Smyth, 2011). The fourth dimension is promoting social justice through action. Students actively make use of literacy to seek information and investigate problems and critically approach problem solving.

Critical Literacy in EFL Contexts

CL research has risen in popularity and presence in first language. However, there is a relative dearth of empirical studies on critical literacy in an EFL context. Among the few studies, Shin and Crookes (2005) explored possibilities of implementing CL in an EFL context at high school level in Korea. Findings obtained from their classroom discussions and interviews with teachers and students revealed that the students reacted positively to the instruction and engaged in critical discussion of topics with teachers in English. This study also disproved the stereotype of Asian students as passive and non-autonomous learners. Kuo conducted three studies to investigate CL with EFL students in Taiwan (2009, 2013, 2014). Findings from the studies revealed that CL-based instruction was effective in promoting literacy learning, self-awareness, critical thinking, and positive learning experience. Yet, Kuo (2009) argued that there is a need for explicit attention to be paid to the balance of CL instruction and conventional literacy instruction in EFL classrooms.

Huang (2011) addressed such concerns in her study aiming to explore how critical literacy and conventional literacy could be promoted for 36 Taiwanese students in an EFL reading and writing class. Skill-based instruction was provided along with critical literacy instruction to help students comprehend texts and develop their ability to criticize texts. The students could understand texts better inasmuch as they could ask critical questions and examine multiple perspectives of the issues. Bui (2016) conducted a study with a group of twenty-seven high school students with intermediate level English proficiency in Vietnam. CL was used as an approach for teaching English for the students. The study revealed that the students' English proficiency and academic knowledge were improved significantly. Besides, they also had positive attitudes towards both CL and the learning environment which nurtured their use of the English language. To conclude, the previous research studies give explicit attention to investigating whether CL promotes students' change in their conventional literacy abilities and critical thinking rather than raising their critical view of sociopolitical issues. The forefront of CL instruction is to help students go beyond their personal lives and enable them to read 'the word and the world' (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Conflict and Dealing with Conflict

Conflict refers to a situation where two or more individuals whose beliefs, wants, needs, values or goals are seen as incompatible (Bercovitch et al., 2009). Individuals try to satisfy their own needs and demands at the expense of others (Jeong, 2008). They may express their feeling or take actions to achieve their needs (Mayer, 2000). This may be intense, such as in an antagonistic interaction (Jeong, 2008) and lead to a situation where one wins and the other loses. Conflict has recently been viewed constructively as 'a catalyst for heightened engagement and deeper learning' (Jehangir, 2012). Classrooms can become a space where teachers and students work together to create safe learning communities and where students are trained to get comfortable with disagreement and differing viewpoints and see conflict as an inevitably common phenomenon. In the learning community, students are engaged in learning and working to reach a consensus about the conflict and engaged in a meaningful dialogue with others.

To optimize students' learning to handle with conflict, frequent communication among students with accurate information and examination of all sides of viewpoints are needed (Anderson, 1999). Building trusting relationships is also needed and helps students perceive good intentions of others (Johnson & Johnson, 1996), be more open and feel safe to produce optimal contribution and express differing viewpoints (Wright et al., 2018). Recent studies have revealed that the hierarchical teacher-student relationships should be abolished (Godbold et al., 2021) and students should be treated as respected partners whose expert knowledge can contribute to classroom knowledge.

Method

Background of the Conflict

The political unrest in Thailand from 2008 to 2010 affected Thai people's lives. One of the effects was that Thai people started to perpetuate the ideology of "us" versus "them" (Adunyarittigun, 2017). At large, they had different political ideologies and took sides with either the "Red Shirts" or the "Yellow Shirts". The Red Shirts, formally known as the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), was a political pressure group whose members were mainly people from rural areas but included students and activists who saw the elite class and military's control of Thai politics as a threat to democracy. The Yellow Shirts, formally known as the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), was a coalition of protesters including royalists, ultra-nationalists, and the urban middle class (BBC News, 2012).

During this time period, Thai people became embroiled in violence in Bangkok, resulting in over 50 deaths, hundreds being wounded, and many buildings being destroyed through arson attacks perpetrated by unidentified people (Rougheen, 2010). This example of political division shows how taking sides can

make people less tolerant of others or to perceive differences, thus positioning people along a spectrum of hatred and violence. Political conflict in Thailand affects people at every level of society from the family level to the national level and even in the classroom. In classroom, conflict among students with differing political ideologies could disrupt learning and teaching processes (Wei & Zhou, 2021).

Participants and Research Setting

Twenty-one Thai EFL students (7 males and 14 females) who enrolled on an advanced reading class took part in the study. Participation was voluntary, and students were made aware that they could withdraw their participation in the project at any point without it impacting their grades. Students were in their third-year of an English major program at a large university in Thailand. To be admitted to the English major program, these students were required to get at least 75 (out of 100) on the English test in the Ordinary National Educational Test (O-NET), a national standardized test. Upon studying in the program, they had been exposed to different English skills courses including two reading courses (Reading for Information and Reading for Opinion) in the first year of their studies. Their English proficiency was at upper intermediate level. In this class, the students were introduced to reading strategies for academic texts in English (i.e., textbooks, journal articles, and research articles). English was used as the main language of instruction and classroom discussion, and the students were allowed to use Thai when they felt it was more comfortable to elaborate their responses during discussion.

An experienced male instructor participated in the study. He graduated with a doctorate in reading education, had 15 years of teaching experience and was familiar with the critical literacy literature. His role was as a teacher-researcher.

Instruments

Writing assignment

The purpose of the writing assignment was to elicit the students' views of conflict in Thai society and conflict resolution. After finishing reading and discussing all of the assigned readings in class, they received a writing prompt about the political conflict. They were encouraged to search for further information, discuss their views of conflict, and write a 600-800-word piece to respond to the prompt.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with twenty-one students. At the end of the semester, they were asked 2 questions about their views of conflict in Thai society and suggestions for resolving the conflict. Interviews lasted approximately 15-20 minutes. The students could give their responses in Thai, allowing them to produce more elaborate descriptions of their responses. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Classroom observations

Classroom interactions were audiotaped in their entirety in weeks 8 to 11, when the critical literacy practice was implemented. The data totaled 12 hours of classroom interactions between the teacher and students and among the students themselves. The recordings were transcribed verbatim.

Classroom Context and Procedure

This study took place in an advanced reading class designed for English major students. The students had two classroom sessions per week (1 hour 30 minutes each) for 15 weeks. In the first 7 weeks, the class followed the course outline designated by the institution's curriculum. There were three phases of instruction: pre-reading, during reading, and after reading activities. In the pre-reading, the teacher did a variety of activities to activate the students' prior knowledge, such as showing video clips relevant to the topic, guiding discussions, encouraging students to search for information relevant to their readings, and presenting the information in class. In the during-reading activity, the teacher facilitated mini-lessons on reading strategies essential for reading academic texts (i.e., identifying main ideas and supporting details, guessing word meaning from contexts, and recognizing organizational patterns). Students were required to read academic texts from Wei and Cepko's textbook (2011), each of which contained around 500-1,800 words from humanities and social science disciplines. In the after-reading activity, the teacher introduced the students to post-reading strategies, such as mind-mapping, summarizing and paraphrasing. The students worked in small groups to practice the strategies and to discuss critical thinking questions in the text. The teacher encouraged the students to be active and to lead discussions, and thus gradually transferred responsibility for leading discussion to his students.

Over the next 8 weeks, the students were given repeated opportunities and advice on how to read journal articles and research articles, during which they also conducted and presented a reading project. The teacher had more flexibility to design his own instruction. This allowed him to conduct the critical literacy instruction and to include reading selections and class discussions on the theme of conflict and conflict resolution. The focus of the study took place in weeks 8-11. The teacher implemented Lewison et al.'s CL framework (2015) in his instruction. The students were divided into 4 groups of 5 members each. Each group chose an assigned reading in English about conflict and conflict resolution in Thai society (See Appendix). The students were introduced to problem posing and practiced generating questions (disrupting the commonplace and focusing on sociopolitical issues) and were encouraged to investigate the same issue from multiple perspectives (interrogating multiple viewpoints). They then took turns leading discussions about the readings and issues. To complement the in-class discussion, the discussion leaders prepared a one-to-two-page handout with an extension activity, discussion questions, key ideas and insights or reactions to the reading. The discussion leaders offered opportunities to their classmates to discuss, ask questions, give comments and express ideas or insights gained from the readings.

Based on the assigned readings and discussion, the students were asked to write a two-to-three-page reflection (as individual work) discussing their views of conflict in Thai society and proposing means of resolving the conflict (promoting social justice into action).

Analysis of Data

The qualitative data were analyzed using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) open coding. I read and examined the data to sensitize and internalize the students' perspectives of conflict and conflict resolution, sought themes in the analysis, and generated codes and their definitions. Latent themes were initially developed and later reexamined and collated into potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To ensure reliability of coding, the guideline on the intercoder reliability assessment (ICR) suggested by O'Connor and Joffe (2020) was followed. Two coders, experienced university instructors, were asked to join the ICR check. I provided the coders with training on coding. We discussed problems with the code definitions, and clarification was proposed. Ten percent of the qualitative data were randomly selected and coded independently by the coders. The level of agreement among the researcher and the coders was analyzed using *Fleiss' kappa*. There was an almost perfect agreement between the coders' judgment, with a kappa value of 0.83.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the qualitative data revealed the students' perspectives of conflict and its causes, as well as their views on conflict resolution. In presenting such perspectives, I assigned each student a number for identification purposes. Thus, in this section, "S0036, I", for example, refers to the original quote of student number 0036 from an interview, and "S0043, W, C" refers to a quote of student number 0043 from the writing assignment and a classroom observation. To maintain the students' voices as much as possible, the ungrammatical errors were kept, and the transcripts are written in italics when the verbatim is translated from Thai into English.

Students' Perspectives of Conflict

The students' perspectives of conflict changed from feeling annoyed, ignored, and trying to stay away from conflict to putting more effort in to dealing with it after they received the CL instruction. At the beginning of the study, when discussing the political conflict in Thai society, for example, the students expressed their boredom from, annoyance of, and frustration with the situation, making them feel indifferent, as can be seen in Extract 1.

Extract 1

I would like it (the conflict) to end soon. I'm sick of it. We are waiting for it to end. ..., some people died in the incident. We were indifferent. It happened too long. It looked like nothing happened. (S0438, I)

Moreover, the students believed that the conflict in Thai society was a perpetual problem and made people in the same family neither talk about it nor express what they thought about it. Those who wanted to express their stance had to hide their identities or find a channel where they believed it was safe to express their opinions. They were afraid of being "other", as shown in Extract 2.

Extract 2

It is difficult to deny that Thai society has faced political conflict for a long while.....Many developments which should be done easily get stuck by this nonsense issue. Friendship is ruined. Family is separated. Politics becomes a taboo subject. People who think different from our opinion become an enemy. Showing a different opinion or wearing a different color of shirt can bring you an injury. (S0329, W)

After having received the critical literacy training and discussing conflict in class, the students could better understand conflict and perceived conflict as a natural and inevitable part of human relationships (Burrell et al., 2003; Jehangir, 2012; Lulofs & Cahn, 2000). In essence, they were more likely to accept conflict and paid more attention to it as in Extract 3.

Extract 3

Formerly, I did not pay attention to any problem. For example, the problem such as violence in the South of Thailand. I thought I didn't care. ... Now I looked at the problem and tried to understand it more. Even though I am just a small unit in our society, I might be able to help solve the problem if I pay more attention to it. (S2202, I)

Causes of the Conflict in Thai Society

Findings revealed what the students viewed as causes of conflict in Thai society. Three causes were suggested. The first is avoidance of honest communication. This is the major cause that made people feel uncomfortable and uneasy and led to the presence of misunderstanding and a division of “us” and “other”. For instance, the majority of the students were uncomfortable and insecure discussing what they felt and thought about the political conflict to anyone, even to their own family members. They were afraid that they would be forced to be the “other”. As shown in Extract 4, some attempted to find a safe channel or space such as Facebook where they could express their opinions freely without disclosing their identity.

Extract 4

I cannot talk about the situation or what happened. I had to find some other outlets that I can express my opinions about the situation....I have to post my opinions that I disagree with on Facebook. If I had talked about what I thought, ... this might have made me feel upset later. (S0370, I)

The second cause of conflict was consumption of inaccurate information and one-sided information. One-sided information about “the other” often leads to labeling as “other”, which can prejudice the way individuals respond to others. Lulofs and Cahn (2000) defined these types of labels as “unspoken inner stereotypes” (p. 24). We form an expectation about individuals from the information that we perceive and from the way that we interact with them. The students admitted that they and their family members typically received information from partisan sources; information was often tied to one particular political affiliation, and they recognized that this could portray an inaccurate stance from and/or actions of the other. No matter whose information (the Yellow Shirt or the Red Shirt) they received, the information presented would be one-sided. Hence, what they saw or listened to probably did not correspond to the reality of the other. This made the students create a misperception of the other, project hostile feelings and foster feelings of distrusting the other (Habermas, 2003; Johnson & Johnson, 1996). As S0685 stated during the class:

“Some people see only one side of the fact. They might think what they believe is the reality. I still question whether it is accurate”.

The third cause of conflict was a lack of acceptance of and respect for differences. Findings revealed the students’ views that not accepting or respecting differences was a cause of conflict in Thai society. An example of this can be seen in Extract 5, which is from an observation of a class discussion about conflict in the three southernmost provinces of Thailand (Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat), where the majority of the population is Muslim. The students believed that the government showed unfair conduct towards Muslim people in the deep South of Thailand because the government had no respect for differences.

Extract 5

The question is “In our country, does the government treat those people who hold different religions equally to the majority of people who are Buddhist?” What do you think? Okay, we’ve discussed about the way the government treat the Muslim people in the south. It is obvious that they haven’t shown enough respect. What about other religions? How about Christian? Do you think we ... respect Christians the same as we respect Buddhists? (S0024, C)

Diversity and differences in cultural and political beliefs are commonplace and ubiquitous in Thai society. The denial of others’ existence is one of the main reasons behind the conflict. In particular, our values and beliefs impose upon our behavior and prescribe our actions and expectations about others’ behavior (Lulofs & Cahn, 2000). When we do not acknowledge the existence and the legitimacy of others’ differences and only pay attention to our own needs and interests at others’ expense (Johnson &

Johnson, 1995), this will limit our expectations of other people's behavioral diversities and make us unwilling to listen to and respond constructively to different opinions. It is very likely to create grievance and hatred of others. (Jeong, 2008)

Students' View of Conflict Resolution

The analysis of the qualitative data revealed 3 means of resolving conflict.

1. Critical Thinking, Inquisitive Mind and Dialogue

The students believed that there is a need to train people to think critically and to have an inquisitive mind, which are the fundamental characteristics of global citizens necessary to deal with conflict in a peaceful means. Students thinking critically will question the credibility of information, evaluate its reasoning, express their opinions about issues that surround their classroom, society, and community, and make informed judgments about the issues (McLean, 2006). Critical thinking can also make them intellectually "armed", not be easily convinced in a world of social, cultural and political conflict (Endres, 2001) and enable them to resolve conflict in a peaceful way (Machel, 1996; Shapiro, 2010).

Dialogue is suggested by the students to make the voices of all people heard and to address unanswered questions, but more importantly dialogue must be open. In dialogue, people get opportunities to listen to and learn from others' diverse perspectives on a certain issue. No matter what opinions they hold—advocating or resisting opinions—people must be prepared to listen to and learn from different realities. They can ask questions, express their opinions actively and freely, and criticize issues (Giroux, 1985). As a result, dialogue frees them from an ignorance of reality and helps promote mutual understanding and cooperation (Freire, 2007; Roth, 2009). The students proposed dialogue as a peaceful means to resolve conflict in Thai society as shown in Extract 6.

Extract 6

Dialogue between people is the second means in resolving conflict in society. To settle conflict, people have to communicate with others. ... it is very important to accept others' opinions. Sharing opinions is the significant process. People have to show their thoughts, listen to others' thoughts and develop those thoughts. ... Listening to others leads people to many new ideas. (S0701, W)

2. Information from Multiple Sources

Seeking information from multiple sources helps lessen misconception of others and positively build mutual understanding. The analysis of the data revealed that getting information from multiple sources helped the students see a complete picture of an issue from the advocate's view and the resistant view (Alford, 2001). This helped the students understand other people's viewpoints and ways of thinking as shown in Extract 7. In addition, they were able to make judgments about the accuracy of information and make informed judgments about an issue appropriately.

Extract 7

As they (protesters) are receiving the information from only one source, they lack the knowledge from the other side or the opposing side. ... To give the protesters the knowledge or information about ... from other sources is the way to let them think and compare the information that they gain so it will make them realize the reality. (S2376, W)

3. Acceptance of Differences and Diversity

Accepting and respecting differences and diversity helps people see the presence of others and the interdependence of one another (Adunyarittigun, 2017). The students proposed that respect for

differences and diversities is a means for resolving conflict. From a class observation, they discussed violence in the three southernmost provinces, where incidents, such as bombing attacks, killings of officials and monks and arson attacks at schools, have happened. The unrest in the provinces does not appear to be close to an end. This has caused people all over the country to have concerns about the situation there as the people in those provinces suffer from continual violence and threats. The majority of the population in these three provinces are Muslims, and their ways of life are different from people in other parts of the country. Most Muslims send their children to study in Pondok schools—educational institutions where the teaching of Islam is mainstream (Narongraksakhet, 2008). Yawi or Malay language is spoken in everyday life, and some people there cannot even speak Thai. Yet, the students' discussion disclosed that they supported the use of Yawi as one of the official languages in the provinces as illustrated in Extract 8.

Extract 8

Teacher: *What are the good points of allowing Yawi as the official language in the south of Thailand? Or bad points?*

S0024: *The good point is that it's our sign of acceptance, a sign of our respect towards their rights, their pride of being Muslims, being Malaya. ... but we have to give them what they want to make them feel like they are being respected. But there are also drawbacks later.*

Teacher: *S0024, why do you think letting them use Yawi as an official language is a way to show respect to them? Why is it so important to show respect to people?*

S1758: *Respect in differences We are in the central Thailand and they are in the south. They speak their own language. We respect differences.*

Discussions such as that illustrated above, strongly suggest that students accept and respect the legitimacy and existence of the Muslims in those provinces. Rattanapol (2006) and Shapiro (2010) argue that appreciation of and respect for differences can form powerful and effective resistance to the use of violence and conflict.

Having experienced critical literacy training, the students shifted their view of conflict from feeling indifferent, annoyed and suffering from the political conflict in Thai society to accepting it as a natural phenomenon and an inevitable fact of human relationships. They also perceived the causes of the conflict and suggested different means of resolving the conflict.

Critical Literacy, Perspective of Conflict and Conflict Resolution

In this section, I would like to discuss how critical literacy training contributed to the students' perspectives of conflict and conflict resolution. The students were given critical literacy instruction which developed their ability to read English texts strategically and their ability to think critically. Problem posing, which is used as a means of learning in this type of class, helps students have inquisitive minds and think critically about texts and issues. The students were trained to question texts from the literal level to the critical level. They were asked to read authentic texts about conflict in Thai society, which could be considered as the 'codes of discussion' (Freire, 2007). They could start asking questions such as what is the text about, what is the purpose of the article, who is the intended audience, does the author have any bias, whose voice is included in the text and whose voice is missing, and what is an alternative for solving problems (McLaughlin, & DeVogd, 2011). In the problem posing process, students are not only engaged in critical thinking (McLean, 2006) but also allowed to voice their interpretations and opinions (Wood et al., 2006). The students became knowledgeable about the issues and were able to question the credibility of sources, think critically about broader, more complex issues surrounding conflict and any controversial and critical issues that affected their life and society (Bartlett, 2005). They could use sound reasoning and make well-informed judgments about the issues. This would not make

them easily convinced by faulty reasoning and inaccurate information from partisan sources and would lead them to not participate in destructive conflict.

Before discussions, the students were encouraged to read articles on the same issue and to search for further information from other sources. They listened to a presentation about the issue from the discussion leader. During the discussion, they had opportunities to explore and to be exposed to diverse opinions from not only the advocate's viewpoints but also resistant viewpoints. In the critical literacy classroom, the students were required to make use of a 'powerful literacy' (Kempe, 2001) to accept or resist socially constructed meanings about the issues that they read, listened to, investigated, and discussed. This led them to seeing that a text can be interpreted from various perspectives (Alford, 2001). The students learned to respect differences and diversities, and accept coexistence of the 'other'. The awareness of coexistence, existence of differences and care for the other contributes to not viewing their understanding as the only correct and acceptable reality (Shapiro, 2010).

Teachers have an important role in critical literacy classrooms. They need to create an "egalitarian classroom" (Anderson, 1999) as a "site of inquiry" (Smyth, 2011) and site of investigating reality. The teacher in this study attempted to create safe spaces where the students from different political ideologies, no matter what political "colors" they were affiliated with, could freely participate in listening to diverse ideas, sharing their opinions and experiences, criticizing ideas rationally, exchanging information, debating, and proposing ideas constructively. To make egalitarian classroom discussion take place in this context, the teacher needed to show the students that he was not the authority of the knowledge, and that he acknowledged his acceptance of differences, was ready to learn from others (Oxford et al., 2021) and built a safe environment for discussions. To achieve this, the teacher created a supportive environment that promoted open and honest communication such that the students felt at ease sharing their opinions (Izadinia & Abednia, 2010). It was noticeable that when the students discussed the issue of political conflict in Thai society, for example, they felt safe to reveal what political ideology they held (Anderson, 1999). The friendly classroom environment appeared to make the students believe they had rights to bring their understanding of the world to share in this class, to make inquiries about texts and to defend themselves confidently (Endres, 2001). They even challenged others' ideas as shown in Extract 9.

Extract 9

S1026: *I think they're dissatisfied with the aristocracy and the government ... and how the government treats them as a grass-root.*

S0024: *Grass-root? Okay. And what makes people "grass-root" people? What is the characteristic of this term?*

S1026: *Their occupations, their annually income.*

S0024: *It sounds like it was the battle between classes.*

S1246: *I don't agree with you guys in many aspects. When we talked about poverty, well, ... you are poor. You are grass-root, so you are oppressed. In fact, over fifty percent of these people are not poor. They have a house, cars. Although they don't have a car, they have a motorcycle. I think they should not be called "the poor". The problem is that some people gave them the ideas that they are poor, their socioeconomic status is not equal to others. This makes our society have grass-root and aristocracy and middle-class people.*

S0024: *Interesting. But I have a slight disagreement with your statement. Do you really think the majority of the protestors have average lives like us? (Class observation)*

To build trust and establish a safe and friendly classroom atmosphere, it is very important that a teacher should not reveal a "politically correct" position (Anderson, 1999). Instead, teachers need to offer alternatives for students to explore on their own. It is very common that students want to know what political position their teachers hold, and there is no need to hide this reality. What the teachers might need to consider doing is sharing their view and reasons, as this can be an important opportunity to help

students learn to respect differences and to tolerate other views that differ from their own (Anderson, 1999).

Limitations

This study investigated the responses of the students towards conflict after they received CL training. Although this study focused on investigating their response to the conflict in Thailand, the reading materials, which needed to be academic and related to the conflict, were limited and not directly related to the political conflict. It was very challenging to search for the appropriate academic reading materials. The teacher could access academic articles which were related to conflict in the three utmost provinces in Thailand and inequality and injustice in Thailand. The study would have provided a clearer view and gained more insights into their view of the conflict had the students been exposed to reading materials with the most relevant content.

Second, the study took place in an intact reading class spanning 15 weeks. Consequently, the teacher spent most of the time covering lessons designated in the curriculum and thus the actual CL instruction could only be conducted four weeks. Yet, he would have liked to have provided the students with more CL instruction and the related reading materials.

Finally, the students may not be representative of EFL higher education students in Thailand as they were English major students. Nevertheless, whilst the generalizability of the study was limited, its design and implementation gave valuable insights into how EFL students can develop their critical awareness and how they can deal with conflict in a constructive way.

Suggestions for Further Research

Further research could also delve deeper into the role of teachers in CL instruction in terms of how they position themselves as a mediating factor for students (i.e., movement between accommodating, regulating, and nurturing student activities), how teachers' beliefs and responses towards CL instruction impact the learning process and vice-versa, and what challenges teachers are confronted with when implementing CL.

Conclusion

Our lives are surrounded by new media and technology which enables students to access vast amounts of information. If students unquestioningly use inaccurate and misleading information, this may cause them to get involved with conflict and deal with it in a destructive way. Teachers applying critical literacy in their class, however, have the ultimate goal of producing a knowledgeable and critically literate citizenry that has critical consciousness, critical literacy skills (Gainer, 2013), and significant critical awareness that can ultimately help transform conflict into peace, and thus make our society better. The findings of this study reveal positive responses to conflict from the students who received the CL instruction and their suggestions for resolving conflict in our society. I would like to highlight the importance of training EFL students to do problem posing. Problem posing is a major mechanism in CL classrooms. The findings further illustrate that teachers should start from problems relevant to students' lives and their knowledge of the world (Freire, 2007) and then guide them how to do question-generation. In this approach, a host of questions can be initially asked by teachers, ranging from comprehension questions to critical questions. Moreover, to help students pose questions more effectively, I illustrated how teachers should model and demonstrate posing questions and provide students with opportunities to generate their own questions. This study also shows how teachers have an important role in creating

public spaces where communication can be open and honest, and where students feel safe to have thoughtful dialogue and differences are acknowledged and respected. As the discussion highlights, a CL instruction helps EFL students develop meaning making, problem posing, problem solving and critical awareness (Yoom, 2015). However, teachers need to become critically literate themselves, value social justice and show respect for students and differences (Anderson, 1999).

In addition, I also illustrated how sociopolitical issues can (and should) be integrated into EFL lessons. In the CL classrooms, students are encouraged to get engaged in meaning construction and meaning negotiation and in learning how language, power, sociopolitical systems and issues are interrelated. They make use of a second language to critically question, discuss, debate and critique problems in their school and society, as well as vigilantly challenge “the taken-for-granted” ideologies of injustice, marginalization and disenfranchisement in their classroom, family and society (Luke, 2012). This can make students challenge and resist the mainstream that marginalizes them and motivate them to take action to make changes. Finally, I further highlighted how a first language should be used to facilitate learning when needed in EFL classroom. In the case of students who are not fluent in English, for example, it might be difficult for them to simultaneously handle speaking English and complex abstract concepts such as conflict, inequality, and injustice. To facilitate their learning, thinking and dialogue, their mother tongue should be allowed for discussion. This will make the learning environment less stressful for the students and encourage them to participate in discussion and learn more effectively (Freeman & Freeman, 2011).

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Appendix

Sample of Readings

- Bualuang, A. (2006). Social development and security of people in the south of Thailand. In S. J. Sirijaraya (Ed.), *King Prajadhipok's Institute Congress VI on "culture of peace and sustainable democracy"* (pp. 141-145). King Prajadhipok's Institute.
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