Critiquing Culture in Reading Materials Used by ESL Private Middle Schools in the Philippines: A Critical Literacy Perspective

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Abstract This chapter shows to which extent two textbooks published by one of the leading publishers in the Philippines realize their goal of promoting a more critical approach to reading. Guided by the principles of critical literacy, content analysis reveals that despite the wide range of universally acknowledged values covered in the textbook, not all of them are necessarily relevant to the target audience. Also, it was found that the processing questions and activities remain limited to low order comprehension questions and language exercises, with few opportunities for users of the textbook to engage more fully with the values of the text or challenge ways of thinking embedded in the material despite the seemingly critical perspective preface that frames the series.

1 Introduction

Critical literacy practices posit the socio-political dimensions of language learning; that is, the act of reading and writing is subject to social and cultural forces and are never neutral acts. Learners do not really freely produce texts, nor do they read value-free texts. Thus, critical literacy practices are concerned with questions about the ideology underlying a particular text, how it positions its readers, and how it works to privilege some groups while silencing the voices of the often marginalized. In the classroom, teaching literacy aims to promote social critique and transformation by allowing students to recognize the non-neutrality of texts so that the classroom becomes a venue for educating a "citizenry in the dynamics of critical literacy

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and civic courage… [which] constitutes the basis for functioning as active citizens in a democratic society" (Freire 1988, p. xxxii).

Textbooks are an integral part of this process of education as they provide what many consider to be the primary material of the classroom. Reading a text, however, implies more than just comprehension as it is also a way of implicating larger concepts of identity, cultural awareness, and social justice (Case et al. 2005). As such, there exists a need to expand the notion of literacy to include ways of developing students' textual power – that is, not just the ability to decode and make appropriate inferences from reading material, but more importantly, to question and interrogate the latent values and assumptions that may exist within a text and effectively become a 'text critic' (Luke and Freebody 1999). Too often, many students maintain an attitude of passivity and resignation before a text, allowing themselves to be swayed by the interests and viewpoints of writers whose ideas they do not feel compelled to probe or contradict (McLaughlin and deVoogd 2004).

Such critical literacy is important because like all other instructional materials, textbooks are ideologically constructed. Every piece of text, discourse, and activity is carefully chosen and systematically arranged to adhere to a particular framework. This makes the process of reading, both the teaching and the learning of it, embedded in ideological practice (Huang 2011a; Wallace 1999). A clear example of this is when the Americans used education as a colonial tool to overhaul the educational system of the Philippines during the early twentieth century. Reading selections were replete with texts taken from the American cultural experience, including such 'canonical' texts as Lincoln's The Gettysburg Address, Longfellow's Song of Hiawatha, and Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (Martin 2002). Such texts, matched by an equally colonial practice of using a foreign language (English) to teach them, resulted in students feeling alienated, handicapped, and disenfranchised from the very education that sought to liberate them as recorded in the 1925 Monroe Report (Bautista et al. 2008/2009).

Today, it has been many decades after the Monroe Report and yet, the subject of the ideological nature of discourses found in ELT textbooks (including in the Philippines) continues to be relevant. Specifically, there is a need to subject such materials to critical inquiry because the kind of culture they contain may not really necessarily embody those of the students. Although this Anglo-centric nature of ELT materials was addressed by the publication of ELT materials in the 2000s that draw from different cultures around the world, there remains a bias for inner circle content and knowledge-based orientation that do not necessarily engage readers in more reflective practices (Shin et al. 2011). It is in light of these realities that Huang (2011a) argues for a necessary focus on critical literacy, because while "ELT textbooks appear progressively inclusive, it can be easily overlooked that, in fact, the social, historical, cultural and political dimensions of people and their cultures are seldom represented in all of their complexities" (p. 144).

By focusing on critical literacy, it is possible to gauge how deeply and widely textbooks engage students' cultural backgrounds to go beyond content-based approaches to language and develop multiple perspectives that force them to think more reflectively about themselves, other people, and society.

This chapter presents an analysis that examines two textbooks from a Reading textbook series published by one of the leading publishers in the country through the lens of critical literacy theory. In particular, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

(a) What cultural values are presented in the selections of the textbooks?
(b) How are these cultural values explored in the questions and activities?
(c) In what ways do these texts, questions, and activities enable readers to engage critically with the content and contexts of the material?

2   Reading the Wor(l)d: Understanding a Critical Stance in Reading Textbooks

It is possible to distill the key principles of critical literacy according to the following key ideas: (1) "focusing on issues of power [to promote] reflection, transformation, and action"; (2) "focusing on the problem and its complexity;" (3) "[using] techniques that …are dynamic and adapt to the contexts in which they are used;" and (4) "examining [issues from] multiple perspectives" (Mc Laughlin and De Voogd 2004, pp. 54–55).

Since the 1990s, critical literacy has been deemed important by many teachers and researchers, with a number of articles documenting its implementation in various classes. In his review of articles on the application of critical literacy practices in the classroom, Behrman (2006) identified the following as key activities for students: "(1) reading supplementary texts, (2) reading multiple texts, (3) reading from a resistant perspective, (4) producing counter-texts, (5) conducting student-choice research projects, and (6) taking social action" (p. 492). However, most of these studies focused on the implementation of critical literacy in countries that use English as a native language (Huang 2011b).

In contrast, studies in EFL/ESL contexts focused on students' perception of critical literacy practices implemented in their English classroom (Huang 2009, 2011b; Kuo 2007; Locke and Cleary 2011). These studies showed that students' response was positive since, more than learning the basic language skills, they were also able to evaluate themselves as teenagers and to think about issues from multiple perspectives (Kuo 2007). Furthermore, they liked reading different types of texts that dealt with related themes, especially when they were asked to react to and question these texts (Locke and Cleary 2011). Students also reflected that critical literacy helped them comprehend texts better and made their writing more meaningful (Huang 2011b).

Other studies investigated students' critical literacy practices in the English classroom (Huang 2011a, b; Locke and Cleary 2011; Leland et al. 2012). Results showed that students were able to critically read texts and were able to recognize the silenced voices and perspectives in them. Although they were able to connect their lives to these texts, they "did not immediately make the connection between reading

practices and the critical literacy perspective, and insisted on an understanding of reading as mainly emotional and factual" (Huang 2011a, p.140). These studies reiterate the benefits of taking a critical perspective in the classroom whether with elementary or university-level students.

The need for critical literacy in education becomes even more compelling especially at this time when construction and consumption of meaning has become easier and faster so that we can no longer discern the ideological assumptions that underlie these discourses (Janks 2012). This ideological nature of discourses has been studied to a great extent especially in ELT textbooks and materials, and these studies reveal that the materials do not really embody the culture used by the students using the textbooks (Huang 2011a; Xiong 2012).

In spite of this, there remains a continuing need to constantly evaluate the content of textbooks, as they continue to be the dominant means of teaching and learning in classrooms. In the Philippines, for instance, textbooks are used primarily as a basis for lesson preparations, classroom tasks, and 'value-formation' as dictated by the Department of Education for primary and secondary schools. As such, it is not surprising for textbook publishers and teachers to be concerned with selecting and using texts that promote positive values that may be integrated with classroom lessons.

However, recent studies that evaluated the ideological underpinnings of ESL textbooks asserted the failure of the material to provide students with opportunities to undertake a more critical analysis of language or to question the kind of discourses promoted within it (Case et al. 2005; Olajide 2010).

In this study, the aim is twofold. On the one hand, it seeks to identify what cultural values are presented in two middle school textbooks from the same series and how these values are fostered in the activities and questions that follow. On the other hand, the study also hopes to evaluate the extent to which the critical reading practices are cultivated by the materials presented.

3   The Study

3.1   Materials and Method

This study focused on two textbooks from the 'Our World of Reading' series published by one of the leading textbook publishers in the Philippines: one for Grade 5 entitled *Dream Chasers* (Paterno and Hermosa 2006a), and the other for Grade 7 entitled *Star Walk* (Paterno and Hermosa 2006b). Both textbooks are multicultural anthologies of literary and nonliterary texts from various genres and are used by some of the exclusive Catholic private institutions in Metro Manila, Philippines whose population usually consists of children from middle to upper socioeconomic backgrounds. The book series not only aims to "invite children to explore a new world of experience, character and ideas" through its use of "award-winning stories from the Philippines and other countries" (Paterno and Hermosa 2006a, b), but also

Fig. 1 Authorship of texts
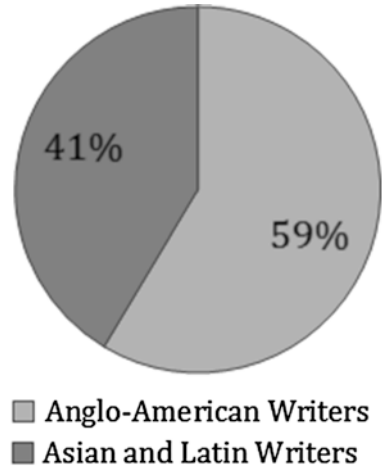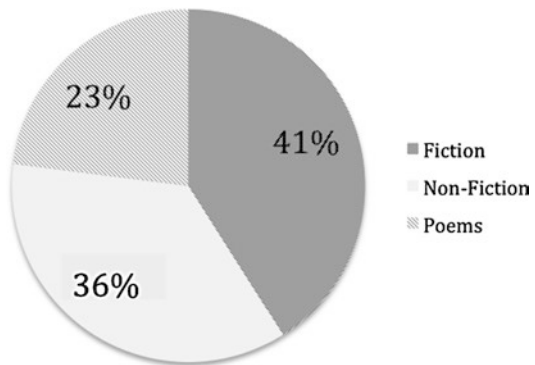(Grade 5 and 7 textbooks)

41%

59%

☐ Anglo-American Writers
■ Asian and Latin Writers

Fig. 2 Grade 5 textbook
by genre

23%

41%

36%

■ Fiction
  Non-Fiction
▨ Poems

aims to teach its users to develop a critical stance by inviting "that child to question, to reflect, and to gain understanding" of an "ever expanding body of knowledge and ability" (Paterno and Hermosa 2006a, b).

The Grade 5 textbook contains forty-seven texts while the Grade 7 one has fifty-two texts for a combined total of ninety-nine fiction, non-fiction, and poetry selections from local and international writers. Fifty-eight texts (or 60% of the total content) are written by Anglo-American writers while forty one (40%) comes from Latin and Asian contexts (See Fig. 1). The use of fiction (short stories and excerpts from novels) dominates both textbooks followed by non-fiction (essays, biographies, informational articles) and finally poetry (see also Figs. 1, 2, and 3).

In addition, a number of literary and non-literary texts from both textbooks are excerpted from longer works. The Grade 5 textbook makes use of more full length short stories while the Grade 7 book uses more texts excerpted from full length young adult (YA) literature. Similarly, in terms of non-literary texts, the Grade 5 book contains slightly more full length essays, informational and opinion articles, biographies, and personal narratives than the Grade 7 one.

Fig. 3 Grade 7 textbook
by genre
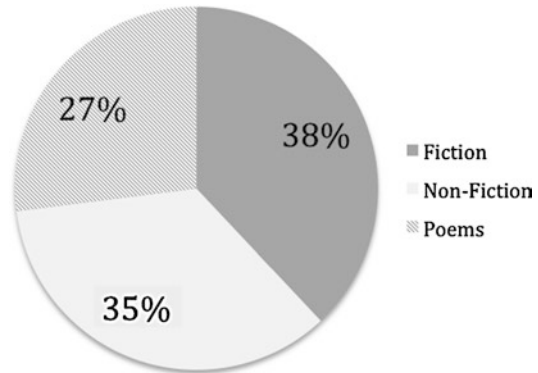
Texts in both textbooks are arranged according to broad topics. For Grade 5, these topics include the following: *A Job Worth Doing* (about different types of work), *The Land of the Morning* (stories on Filipino heroes, events and culture), *Imagine a Place* (texts that describe different places, both real and imagined), and *No Place Like Home* (stories of home). In the Grade 7 book, texts clustered around topics such as *Turning Points (stories on self-discovery)*, *Making Connections* (texts about understanding animals), *On Dreamer's Wings* (stories focused on setting goals and achieving dreams) and *Whispers from the Past* (stories connecting with the past).

For this study, only literary texts and certain nonliterary texts such as autobiographies, biographies, and published diaries with identifiable themes were included. Non-literary texts that were purely informational in nature were excluded from the thematic analysis since these do not convey any clear values. In the end, a total of fifty-three texts were analyzed (from the original 99), nineteen from *Dream Chasers* and thirty-four from *Star Walk*.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The study uses a qualitative research design, a type of inquiry that is 'richly descriptive' and is apt for topics that have not been explored extensively (Merriam 2009). Data collection and analysis were guided by the principles of content analysis and critical literacy theory as outlined in Table 1. In addition, the grounded approach, an inductive process where researchers begin with data and derive themes and categories from these data, rather than beginning with a theory and looking for data that will prove or disprove the theory (Nunan and Bailey 2009) was adopted for data analysis.

The first stage of the textbook analysis involved going through each text and its accompanying questions and activities and looking at its subject matter, purpose, and audience using questions adapted from and developed by Rice (1998) and Reade (1998) (both in Huang 2011a) as well as McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) (See Table 1).

Table 1 Summary of methods

Aspects of critical literacy	Methods	
	Where data are collected	How data are analyzed
Subject matter		
1. What is the topic?	Textual samples (stories, poems, paragraphs/essays for reading, discussion notes)	Determine whether the topics enable students to confront relevant cultural and social realities
Purpose		
1. What is the writer's purpose?	Pre-reading, discussion, post-reading questions, activities, and exercises	Examine the extent to which the questions, activities and exercises allow students to problematize and question the world as constructed by the textbook
2. What kind of political, economic, or social interests are served by the way the text is written? What kind of values and attitudes are privileged in this text?		Examine if or to what extent the textbook provides multiple perspectives on an issue or topic
3. Whose voices are missing, silenced or discounted?		
Audience		
1. To whom is this written?	Pre-reading, discussion, post-reading questions, activities, and exercises	Examine the extent to which the questions, activities and exercises engage students in projects that can make a difference in their own and other people's lives
2. What assumption about the reader is implied in the textbook?		
3. How does the text position the readers?		

To determine the cultural values presented in the selections in the textbooks, the topics of the texts analyzed were categorized according to the values most prominent in the text. To determine how the cultural values were explored in the questions and activities as well as how readers are positioned by these texts and activities, the analysis looked at how these texts and activities allow students to problematize and question the world as constructed by the textbook (e.g., focus on issues of power and help them recognize the silencing of certain groups and perhaps challenge existing structures of inequality and oppression), or to what extent the textbook provided multiple perspectives on an issue or topic. The activities and texts were also analyzed according to how these engage students in projects that can make a difference in their own and other people's lives. The researchers analyzed the textbooks independently before comparing results and discussing emergent themes.

4   Presentation of Data

4.1   Cultural Values Depicted in the Selections

The content analysis revealed that many of the stories extol what are commonly assumed to be traditional and universal values of courage, optimism, honor, determination, love for family, care for the elderly, and love for country. Without seeming didactic, these stories nevertheless help in the socialization of its readers to embrace a code of ethics and modes of behavior deemed acceptable in society. By doing so, these stories help to maintain ways of thinking that are deemed valuable by key institutions in society in order to preserve social relationships and civilized behavior.

Many of these values are situated within the context and experiences of adolescents caught in situations that test their values in the hopes of overcoming preconceived notions and biases and emerge as changed individuals. For example, the reading texts in the Grade 5 textbook deal with courage – courage in fighting one's adversities in life, and courage in fighting for what is right for the community and the country. "The Emperor and the Kite" tells the story of Princess DjeowSeow, the fourth daughter of the Emperor of Ancient China. Because Princess DjeowSeow was so tiny, she had been considered insignificant, until she finally proved her worth in the end when she saved her father from the invaders of the kingdom. Such is the courage also shown by the Tingguians and the Kalinga people, as told in the stories "Gift of the Mountains" and "On the Face of the Mountain," when they fought against those threatening to destroy their land in the name of development. Courage is also central to "We Swear", an excerpt from a historical novel about the 1896 Philippine revolution about an adolescent boy who realizes the meaning of the revolution he is forced to join, and finally gathers the courage to suffer for his mother land. In the Grade 7 textbook, the values of loyalty and friendship are emphasized. For instance, the protagonist in "Dream So Wild" is conflicted between honoring what his father wants him to do and what he wants for himself. Other stories, such as "Marooned," "Wounded Wolf," and "The Dog of Pompeii" feature protagonists who display loyalty to their animal or human companion. In "River Rescue" a young girl rescues a cat from the river when he is separated from his animal companions. The girl nurses the cat back to health but when he recovers, he grows restless for his previous companions. With a heavy heart, the young girl realizes that despite the comfort that she had tried to provide for him, the cat has stronger ties elsewhere and needs to return to be among his friends.

Aside from loyalty and friendship, other values evident in the texts include the importance of family, home and asserting one's individuality. For instance, the importance of family and home is shown in a number of texts. "A Family Home" is the story of a girl who does everything she can so her parents would not have to sell their family home – the home her great grandfather built and the home she and her aunts love. "New Home" is about a family moving to their new home. Although feeling apprehensive at first, they were portrayed as excited as they work together to make their new house a home they would come to love. In "Can She Sing", a family

feels incomplete since the mother died, but finds happiness again when the father gets a new wife. Finally, "The Adventures of Culas-Culasito" tells the story of a boy who has the chance to free a local hero, Bernardo Carpio, but gives this up because it means losing his parents. All these texts underscored the need to be an intact and complete family in order to be happy.

However, while some of these values are deemed positive and universal, upon closer examination, they actually provide a worldview that may be in conflict with traditional values in the Philippines. For instance, most Anglo-American coming of age stories, such as those included in the textbook, view independence and rebellion against one's parents as natural phases of adolescent behavior. In the excerpt 'Dream of the Wild' (Grade 7 textbook), the story seems to valorize the rebellious nature of the protagonist who defies his father's direct orders not to dive for black pearls. The story seems to justify the notion of youthful rebellion because it allows the boy to prove that he is, in fact, mature enough to handle dangerous situations. Such a value, while empowering on the one hand, is in direct conflict with local Filipino values that emphasize the need to respect and abide by one's elders. In the same way, a local Filipino folklore entitled "The Adventures of Pilandok" (Grade 5 textbook) seems to showcase the importance of valuing one's family but actually masks the shrewd manipulations of the character to trick the rich and powerful families to get food and wealth for his own.

There are other values in the textbooks that may be considered important in the development of children (e.g., heroism, resilience, love). However, these values are embedded within texts that are not geared toward adolescents. For example, "A People's Revolution" (Grade 5 textbook) features the thoughts and feelings of some of the people (five adults and two students) who joined the People Power Revolution in 1986. Although these excerpts are meant to inform readers about this important moment in Philippine history, the experiences narrated are those of adults, and thus talk about their fears and concerns, which may be difficult for Grade 5 students to comprehend. In the Grade 7 textbook, the pattern seems evident as at least ten texts (19%) are stories that are more adult oriented or demand some cultural knowledge that may not necessarily be within the experience of the intended users of the textbook. For instance, while Jack London's "To Build a Fire" may be a classic tale of human resilience in the face of natural adversities, its descriptions of the harshness and bitterness of winter may not resonate well with young children from a tropical country for whom snow is commonly perceived as exotic and enjoyable.

In other stories, the values of love and loyalty are emphasized but tend to be filtered through adult experiences. "Living with the Enemy," "The War," and "Grief," for instance, are all set during the Japanese Occupation of the Philippines. Unlike "Don't Listen," which is also set during the Japanese Occupation period, these stories do not have a young protagonist as its central consciousness but instead speak of the wartime experiences from the point of view of adult women – a young wife, a mother, and a sister. "Grief," in particular, tells the story a woman whose husband disappears mysteriously during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines. While the story retells the consequences of war on a young married couple, the anxieties of a young wife and devastation she feels may be difficult for middle school children to empathize with.

Perhaps because these texts were excerpted from trade books originally intended for a general adult audience and were included without adaptation or revision in the present material, the rhetorical, syntactic, and semantic structures found in these texts are much more sophisticated and refined compared to others in the textbooks and certainly stand out as being misplaced in a book that is intended for middle school users. The decision to make such inclusions implies a misplaced assumption that the values in the stories written primarily for a more general adult audience can be easily transferrable and appropriated for a younger one.

Certainly, exposure to texts that are outside the experiences of the intended young readers is not necessarily an impediment to learning, and indeed, may even provide a level of challenge for students provided that the teachers can scaffold the material "[so that] students may be in a better position to consider the topic from a distance that enables the critical lens." (Huang 2009, pp. 82–83). However, as the later analysis will show, this was not necessarily the case as some texts with critical potential did not contain processing questions and activities, and those that did, provided limited guidance for students to engage in critical reading.

By far, the most critical value underlying some of the selections contained in the textbooks has to do with challenging the image of America as a benevolent land of opportunity. In the Philippines, there remains a general perception of America and the west as the 'ideal world' that accords one a status of privilege and accomplishment. This value of privileging the west is, however, undercut in some of the materials in the textbooks. For example, "Homecoming" (Grade 5 textbook) is the story of a Filipino who has not had an easy life in America. He comes home disillusioned about America, and finds that his family is as poor as when he had left them. This story clearly shatters the myth of America as the 'land of milk and honey' with the character being portrayed as having lived a life no less better than the family he left behind in the Philippines to escape from their poverty. In the Grade 7 textbook, Guerrero-Nakpil recalls in "The War" the events of Japanese Occupation and eventual deliverance by the American government. However, unlike other texts in the series, which have depicted Americans as heroes and liberators, Guerrero-Nakpil also speaks of the aftermath that awaited survivors of the infamous Death March years after the event where war veterans who returned and did not "want the benefits which America, fifty years too late, was holding out to them" (in Paterno and Hermosa 2006b, p. 525). Such texts clearly demonstrate that there is no shortage of materials that can help young students explore, discuss, and raise their critical understanding of events and issues in their surroundings. However, how these values are explored by the accompanying processing questions and activities remains to be seen.

4.2   Exploration of Values in the Materials

In the Grade 7 textbook, only thirty of the fifty-two texts (58%) contained processing questions and activities. The remaining texts (usually poems) contained no processing activities and gave the impression of being mere textbook fillers or

supplementary materials that could be used in conjunction with the other texts. Similarly, the Grade 5 textbook contained twelve texts, mostly poems but with a handful of fiction and non-fiction texts, which contained no processing activities. These figures indicate that around 42% of the total number of texts from both textbooks contains no questions or processing activities.

Including a number of texts without processing questions and activities seems impractical and begs the following question: What is the purpose of these texts? Does this assume that readers are willing to read these texts on their own or that teachers will take up these as supplementary material? From a critical literacy perspective, supplementary texts should provide alternative perspectives to texts with similar topics, which these texts did not really do. As such, it would have probably been more cost efficient and practical not to have included these texts in the first place.

Texts that did contain processing questions and activities followed the same format, which include the following:

(a) Reader's Response question – This is a single question posed immediately after the reading material. The title of the activity implies that it is geared towards allowing readers an opportunity to react to the text.
(b) Checking Your Comprehension – This section contains a series of five to seven questions and seems to comprise the bulk of the processing for the material.
(c) Writing to Learn – Following the comprehension question is often a writing based activity that uses the reading material as a springboard for writing a variety of writing exercises – a short reaction, a summary, an expository paragraph, a dialogue, and so on.

In general, the *Reader's Response* section provided questions that allowed students to react to the text. For instance, in the story "Blues Buster," the question asked students to think about their own reactions to the story's protagonist and how it changed as the story unfolded. Also, in the story "The Matchman," the *Reader Response* section asked students how they would feel having the story's protagonist as a friend. In these cases, the questions provided students with opportunities to engage meaningfully with the text. However, sometimes the questions tended to be queries into what seem to be irrelevant aspects of the text. In the Grade 7 textbook, for example, the excerpt from "Flip Gothic" provided rich material to open discussions regarding identity issues in a transnational context but the Reader's Response question simply asked, "Why does Arminda (the protagonist) dye her hair blue?" which is very anticlimactic given the revelations made by the character in the text. Another fictional story, "The Cave near Tikal," tells of the discovery of a cave that promises to reveal the secrets of the Mayan community that lived there many ages ago. However, a sudden earthquake causes the cave to collapse, burying once more the evidence that could have unraveled a great mystery. The story's intriguing plot coupled with the promise of lost cities and the unraveling of ancient wonders may be something worth tapping for a reader's response. Unfortunately, the question in this section simply asked students, "[w]hat do you think you will remember about this selection a year from now?" which fails to elicit a response to what could be a more emotional aspect of the story.

The *Checking Your Comprehension* section consists of five to seven questions that focused on low-level skills by eliciting text-based and a few inference-based responses. These questions were limited to basic *who, what, where, how, and why questions,* and were arranged to follow the narrative structure of the stories. The Grade 5 textbook, in particular, contained no evidence of higher or critical questions posed to the students to move beyond the details of the text. In contrast, the Grade 7 textbook showed some evidence of critical questioning. Of the thirty texts with processing questions, fifteen (30% of the entire textbook) contained higher order questions such as analysis, application and synthesis questions (using Bloom's categories for the levels of thinking). Some of these higher order questions, however, did not necessarily translate to critical inquiries of issues or seemed out of synch with the rest of the questions.

For example, the story "Flip Gothic" tells the story of Arminda, a rebellious Fil-Am teenager who is sent back to the Philippines because her parents fear that she is becoming uncontrollable. The story is told in epistolary form between the girl's mother, Nelia, and her grandmother. Questions that follow the text included the following: "Why is Nelia sending her daughter to the Philippines to live with her grandmother?"; "You know about the Filipino grandmother from the letters she writes to Nelia, her daughter, about having her grandchild over to live with her. What do you know about her?" and "What does the grandmother think has caused Arminda's problems? Do you agree with her?" (Paterno and Hermosa 2006b).

While the initial questions provided a scaffolding of the story, a later one asked students whether or not they agree with the grandmother's assessment of Arminda's problem (which according to the grandmother is basically a "question of identity"). This higher order question tended to assume that typical middle school children are precocious enough to critique the notion of mixed cultural identities and the problems that such an issue imposes upon an adolescent.

A closer examination of the questions of the remaining fourteen texts revealed that only two texts within the entire Grade 7 textbook contained questions that asked students to examine the material in more critically relevant ways by making them think about their preconceived notions about the country's history or the way Japanese and Americans are perceived in contemporary times compared to earlier years. The other twelve texts may have contained questions promoting higher order skills but these did not necessarily engage students with a critical discourse of the texts. The other fifteen texts with comprehension questions were often of the lower order variety such as those found in the Grade 5 textbook (See Table 2).

While the questions of the material may seem wanting, both the Grade 5 and Grade 7 textbooks contained a rich variety of texts whose themes and ideas could have been explored for a more critical perspective but were left underutilized. For instance, both textbooks contained stories about people from marginalized communities that could have been used to probe values relating to social issues from the readers' contexts but the questions failed to elicit ways of problematizing the topic at a deeper level. This could be seen in the Grade 5 textbook in stories concerning indigenous Filipino communities ("The Children of God", "Gift of the Mountains" and "On the Face of the Mountain"). Here, the texts gave voice to the experiences

Table 2 Levels of questioning in Grade 7 textbook

Text	How many questions	Lower order questions (Comprehension and Inferential)	Higher order questions (analysis, application, synthesis, critical)
Blues busters	6	5	1
Don't listen	6	5	1
Dangerous errands	6	6	0
The football player	7	7	0
The diary of Anne frank (adaptation)	6	6	0
Leaving home	7	6	0
Flip gothic	6	5	1
To build a fire	6	5	1
Another April	7	6	1
The wounded wolf	7	6	1
Housekeeper wanted for gentleman cat	6	6	0
River rescue	6	6	0
Only one woof	7	7	0
Daedalus and Icarus	7	6	1
Wings to fly	6	5	1
The great balloon craze	6	6	1
Airy go round	5	5	0
Through skies never sailed	6	6	0
West with night	7	5	2
One bright star	6	5	1
Dark they were and golden eyed	7	7	0
The dog of Pompeii	7	7	0
Lost and found: Pompeii	7	7	0
The mirror	6	5	1
Shipwrecked in Pandanan Island	5	4	1
The mysterious Mayas	6	6	1
The cave near Tikal	7	7	0
Living with the enemy	5	4	1
The war	6	6	0
Grief	6	6	0

of the Tingguians and Kalinga people, but the processing questions merely asked students for text-based answers while refraining from exploring a discussion regarding the oppression of tribal Filipinos, and valuing traditional, indigenous cultures.

None of the processing questions and activities in the textbooks asked its readers to discuss or even identify the values of the texts. Although a number of texts contained serious critical possibilities, questions were quite limited with no attempt to raise the level of awareness in texts or to encourage a change in perspective that is line with the series' objective to "invite the child to question, reflect, and to gain understanding [of the world around him]" (Paterno and Hermosa 2006a, b). As a result of the material's lack of critical questions, readers had limited opportunities

to take a more critical stance while reading. In addition, because the questions tended to focus on getting students to follow the linear structure of the text, readers were led to acquiesce to the dominant and obvert values of the texts. They may not recognize how sometimes such universal values may come in conflict with local norms or how some seemingly positive values mask essentially negative messages and ideas, as shown in the earlier discussion.

In a similar manner, even the *Writing to Learn* section did not provide students with opportunities to critically engage the issues and values within the texts. Instead, the activities asked learners to use the reading texts as a springboard for practicing language in a very decontextualized manner. As such, they were limited to taking notes, making predictions and doing charts. For example, the writing prompt following "On the Face of the Mountain" (Grade 5 textbook) asked students to pretend to be one of the characters and to write a letter to her cousin narrating what had happened. Although this activity allowed students to empathize with the character, its generic nature did not invite students to dwell more critically on the value of justice (or lack thereof) which was apparent in the story.

4.3 Critical Engagement with the Materials

In general, both textbooks contain positive values that could be considered a well-spring for values integration as mandated by the Department of Education. This is evident in the *Reader Response* section where students are asked to react to but not elaborate on the values in the text. Likewise, these values are left unexplored and unchallenged in the questions and activities that followed each text. Without discussion questions that provide opportunities to challenge ways of thinking embedded in the texts, readers were left to believe that values are culturally uniform rather than culturally determined.

Another striking finding is that in spite of the inclusion of several local and Asian writers in the textbook series, the analysis of the material based on authorship underscored how Western-oriented this textbook actually is. In the Grade 7 textbook, for instance, only seven out of the fifty-two texts are written by Filipinos or Asian writers. The other forty-five texts are written by Anglo-American writers. In comparison, the Grade 5 textbook contains more texts authored by Filipino and other Asian writers while the rest of the selections are written by American, Irish and Australian writers (see Fig. 4). Such a distribution of writers seemed to indicate a deliberate attempt to critique the dominance of a western reading list, but the attempt was a feeble one and was undercut by a prevailing attitude of deference towards Anglo-American writers who wrote about Anglo-American issues, experiences and values.

In conclusion, the analysis of the textbook material revealed that although there was a deliberate attempt to challenge the Anglo-centric framework of other textbooks by including texts written by non Anglo-American writers, this effort fell short of its critical potential. More importantly, while the textbooks contained texts
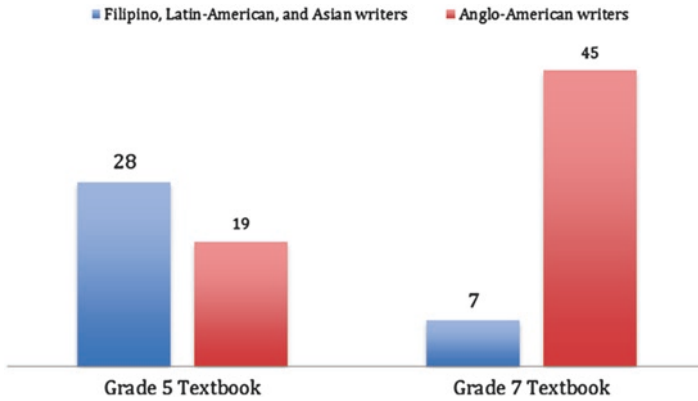
Fig. 4 Comparative distribution of authors in textbooks

that could have been exploited for developing critical literacy practices among children, much of their potential was undermined because of the lack of a clear and consistent pedagogical structure to support the preface that frames the series.

5   Discussion

Critical literacy deals mainly with an epistemological understanding of meaning and language practices in connection with power relationships. It maintains that such language is never neutral and as such, foregrounds how texts serve particular purposes and interests. Because of this, critical literacy is intrinsically tied up with classroom practices of reading with its goal to promote "ways in which knowledge and ways of thinking about knowledge and valuing knowledge are constructed in and through written texts" (Hammond and Macken-Horarik 1999, p. 529).

At first glance, the preface of the textbook series implies a critical perspective especially in its transformative goal to "provide experiences that allow each child to build upon an ever expanding body of knowledge and ability, and to invite that child to question, to reflect, and to gain understanding" (Paterno and Hermosa 2006a, b). But a closer analysis of the materials, including how the values are coded within, revealed otherwise.

In summary, the textbooks contained universally acknowledged values, but not all of them were necessarily relevant to the target audience of middle school children in a second language context. There seemed to be an assumption that universal values found in texts originally published for an older adult audience were easily transferrable to a younger one without encountering problems of comprehension and appreciation. In other words, it implies that contexts have nothing to do with values; as long as a story contains a positive value, young readers will still be able to relate to the experience and identify with the value even if it is presented through

the experience of an adult. With regard to how these values are explored, it was found that discussion of the texts remained limited to low order comprehension questions, nor is there an attempt to critique much less unearth the values of the texts.

Another interesting finding was the presence of rich material for critiquing culture and values in both the Grade 5 and Grade 7 textbooks. Perhaps, there was just a need to expand how such critiquing could have been better incorporated within the framework of the questions and activities of both textbooks because critical literacy needs to be seen as "an important topic not just for adolescent readers, for all readers" (Leland et al. 2012, p. 436).

Moreover, the analysis revealed that there were generally universal and positive values embedded in the texts. Yet, a closer inspection shows that these values are actually mostly Western values consistent with findings of past research on the dominance of Anglo-American texts in ELT material (Shin et al. 2011; Xiong and Qian 2012). A handful of texts and their processing activities, particularly in the Grade 7 textbook, demonstrated a deliberate attempt to include texts that challenged the Anglo-centric framework prevalent in other textbooks in the market, but this effort was not consistently maintained and was undercut by the deliberate attention called to the 'award winning texts' of Anglo-American writers without doing the same for all the other writers in the series.

The dominance of Anglo-American writers in the reading materials designed for Filipino students demonstrated the privileged status of such writers. One can argue the benefits of including texts from other cultures in a textbook, and the "universality" of the values embedded in such texts, but because they were filtered through the Anglo-American experience, they positioned the readers to imagine themselves within the context of the stories even if they were not. As such, there seemed to be a tacit assumption that values are not only universal, but also culturally transferrable when in truth they are not. In fact, it is not uncommon to note how such positive values and norms in ELT textbooks are often embedded within Anglo-centric experiences which are then propagated as if they are universal ones (Shin et al. 2011; Xiong and Qian 2012). Even when textbooks used materials to depict local cultural experiences, a closer examination of its ideological assumptions revealed that such local texts did not necessarily resolve issues of inequality but may in fact contribute to its continuing propagation (see Opoku-Amankwa et al. 2011). Without a more critical perspective, readers of texts assume and ratify their inclusion into the communal values of the text without realizing that texts are often designed to be acceptable and accessible to like-minded readers (Widdowson 2003). Because of this, there is a need for teachers and textbook developers to recognize the ways in which texts transfer assumptions, values and beliefs to readers that are far from neutral or universal.

Yet another finding of this study was that in general, the low level questions and activities coupled with the lack of value identification and critical inquiry tended to make readers adopt an attitude of textual deference. Although the books included several examples of local texts, which have the potential to engage readers critically, they were often left underutilized. In addition, the reading-writing connection,

considered an essential component in developing critical readers, was often contrived and superficial with prompts that sought to practice discrete language skills rather than enabling students to think more deeply about the topics.

6   Practical Directions for Language Materials Development

In light of the discussion points highlighted here, there are a number of practical directions for textbook writers and developers especially given the reforms taking place in the Philippine educational landscape at present.

With the recent implementation of the K to 12 Program together with the mother tongue-based multilingual-based education or MTB-MLE policy, there is now stronger emphasis on developing critical thinking skills across the grade levels as well as highlighting the importance of plurality, cultural diversity, and student engagement. An integration of a critical reading framework and strategies alongside traditional comprehension exercises may help students foster a keener awareness of real life issues. As such, textbook developers and writers ought to make more conscientious decisions in the selection and development of materials and activities that more clearly reflect a critical literacy perspective.

Materials developers can include texts that contain potentially problematic issues – whether these may pertain to the "genre, topic or discourses embedded in the text" (Wallace 1992, p. 103) that can initiate a discussion among the students about related personal and social experiences, and encourage them to raise questions about their own socio-political contexts. For example, while most textbooks are organized according to themes (e.g., love for family, loyalty to country), textbook developers might want to consider texts that talk about a different angle, perhaps a different form of loyalty to country – not the usual stay and serve the country – to trigger a discussion of the different ways they can serve their country, and thus question 'traditional'notions of loyalty. There is also a need to include other modes of texts – visual and perhaps digital – in addition to the traditional written essays and literary pieces. As digital natives, students of the twenty-first century probably spend more time reading non-academic texts and thus should be exposed to these kinds of texts early on. With the push for teaching English as an international language (EIL) – one that recognizes the purpose, context and audience for which the language will be used, it has become increasingly more important to use intercultural texts. Culture-specific texts allow readers to see cultures other than their own and give them opportunities for addressing such differences. Such texts also expose textbook users to other varieties of English, and thus help them build up their repertoire of vocabulary and expressions necessary in developing strategic competence, which is crucial in communicating in multicultural contexts.

Finally, textbook writers can also include multiple texts that talk about the same topic (Behrman 2006). This way, students understand that authorship is subjective and constructed. They will see that authors are shaped by ideological, cultural,

political, and social forces and that these influence the 'truth' authors render in their texts. For example, the refugee crisis in Europe will be discussed differently by someone who works closely with the refugees and by someone who just observes from the outside. The picture they create of this issue will be presented differently, owing to their differing experiences and contexts.

With regard to the choice and design of the activities, textbook writers and developers may wish to review more carefully how well the questions and activities for each selection integrate with one another so that there is a clearer rationale in the accomplishment of each task towards a more defined objective. In addition, rather than simply asking students to read texts and demonstrate their understanding of it, perhaps material developers can also incorporate activities that challenge students to manipulate their understanding of them, thereby moving from being merely 'text decoders' and 'text users' to 'text analysts and critics' (Luke and Freebody 1999). In order to do so, they need to extend their questioning repertoire to include ways through which students can become more aware of the ideologies or assumptions that underlie texts. For instance, instead of simply asking what the topic of a text is, students can also explore how the topic is being written about, or use their background knowledge (or research skills) to consider what other ways of writing about the topic exist, which voices are being privileged or marginalized, and in what way is the text trying to position its readers in relation to the topic (Wallace 1992; Janks et al. 2014; Luke et al. 2001). Asking these kinds of questions can be particularly tricky because children, and people in general, are rarely asked to consider the notion of voice or the writer's intentions and yet, this is precisely why such questions need to be asked. Doing so may help students to cultivate a stronger stance vis-à-vis the texts they read. More importantly, inasmuch as students are taught the strategies to identify and recognize the various elements of a text, they should also be overtly taught to utilize strategies that allow them to detect cultural biases and differentiate between the explicit and implicit values in a text. This way, students may learn to raise questions and resist the dominant ways in which a text positions its readers.

Incorporating a variety of authentic problem-posing activities is another practical direction for material developers. These may complement the discussion of the texts and expose the ways in which power structures are inherent within the fabric of a text's discourse. The following are a few sample problem posing activities and approaches that may help foster critical awareness and understanding of values in a text:

- **Changing perspectives**: In this activity, readers are asked to examine the motivations of different characters and perhaps even retell the story based on their understanding of a different character. Doing so may help student identify how certain values get privileged depending on the point of view of a character.
- **Switching**: In *Leaving Home*, where the protagonist's mother and father dissuade her from leaving home because she is female, students may be asked to reimagine whether or not a male protagonist would encounter the same situation. This activity can be adapted any number of ways, substituting gender issues for

social class and ethnic race. This kind of activity helps students to examine more closely and raise questions about the intersection between values and social constructs.

- **Mind and Alternative minds**. (McLaughlin and Allen 2002 in McLaughlin and DeVoogd 2004). This activity involves asking readers to compare and contrast the perspective of two characters. Readers are asked to share what they think about each character's perspective, which may serve as a basis for a critical discussion as students juxtapose their interpretations of each one and the values they may represent.

Although it might seem that incorporating a critical stance may be daunting especially for the primary levels, it is actually easier than one might think. Children as young as primary levels have been introduced to critical literacy practices with more than a margin of success (see McLaughlin and De Voogd 2004, for instance).

In the final analysis, material developers need to design activities that foster critical awareness through a careful selection of thought-provoking texts and a substantial amount of activities designed to help students raise thoughtful inquiries regarding the world around them. This study has acknowledged that the existing materials already provide a surfeit of values and ideas worth exploring. What students need are activities that ask them to recognize and challenge the values and ideas contained therein. For this to happen, however, we need teachers and material developers who themselves are committed to engaging in critical literacy practices.

7   Conclusion

In recent times, the rhetoric in classroom discourse has shifted towards a more critical perspective in order to provide teachers with greater self-reflexivity in posing questions regarding the construction and interpretation of textbooks (Pennycook 2001). Using the lens of critical literacy, this chapter analyzed and discussed values embedded in two middle school textbooks by a leading publisher in the Philippines.

Clearly, in spite of their best intentions, the two textbooks seemed to be driven towards the accumulation of specific knowledge and skills without providing much of an avenue for critical reading. Moreover, the prevalence of low-level comprehension questions prevented students from developing a more critical stance when reading texts. As such, students were 'trained' to become passive readers, adopting a position of deference because they fail to question or critique issues and values embedded in the texts, even in something as seemingly innocuous as a table of contents.

If students are trained to be critical readers of texts, then they can use and transfer these literacy practices to recognize and uphold or to question and reject values, beliefs, and ideologies they encounter beyond the textbook. Such critical foundations eventually pave the way for adults who are more able to understand and evalu-

ate the ways in which authors shape readers' perspectives. As such, it is incumbent upon textbook developers to perhaps adopt a more critical perspective when undertaking the task of textbook development, particularly those geared towards younger audiences. It is likewise important to examine other textbooks geared towards primary and middle school children to create a broader picture regarding the quality of textbook production in the country.

Alongside this, teachers themselves also need to exercise greater critical awareness of carrying out the functions of their profession. Because whether teachers care to admit it or not, all teaching, both in an L1 or L2 context, is essentially politically motivated and textbooks and teachers alike play a crucial role in the way such politics are eventually played out in the classroom. It is therefore recommended to determine further ways in which textbooks anchored in a critical framework are complemented by strategies undertaken in the actual classroom.

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