Critical literacy and a picture-book-based dialogue activity in Taiwan

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Abstract In order to fill in the research gap related to the theory and practice of critical literacy in Taiwan, this article describes an English Conversation activity offered during the 2005 spring semester at a university in southern Taiwan. The article uses a critical instructional model to analyze students' team dialogues as responses to a picture-book-based exercise. The informants in the study included the instructor and his 26 students. This research is a qualitative case study in that it employs various descriptive data (e.g. students' team dialogues and reflection papers) in an attempt to (1) investigate the extent to which the goals of critical literacy were achieved in the classroom and (2) arrive at some implications for the implementation of critical literacy in Taiwan. This study suggests that instruction based on social-issue picture books is effective not only in promoting literacy learning but also in eliciting meaningful themes for students. Second, it shows that language learning is best understood as socially constructed. Critical instruction should promote not only text-centred responses but also reader responses to social issues; this can lead to more critical stances for students. Third, the study suggests that a critical literacy curriculum should progress from personal/cultural resources to critical social practices and critical stances. Finally, enthusiasts of critical literacy should not insist on including all dimensions of the analytical model used in the study. Instead, teachers should consider their students, teaching purposes and teaching contexts when they use elements from the critical literacy instructional model.

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Introduction

As Michele Knobel indicates in her foreword to a 2007 book (Stevens and Bean 2007), critical literacy refers to a fairly recent development. The term did not appear until the 1980s when it was mentioned by such critical scholars as Ira Shor and Joe Kretovics. Also, it did not display the specific features of an education movement until the mid-1990s when its relevant concepts were applied in the classroom and discussed in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and England. However, according to a 2006 survey (Cassidy et al. 2006) among 25 prominent literacy leaders, 24 respondents said that critical literacy was 'not hot', and 20 of these 25 respondents urged that critical literacy become a hot issue for the new millennium. That is, critical literacy is a research and teaching orientation that merits further consideration.

In some Asian countries that teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL), this should-be-hot topic might even have been silenced. Ringmar (2001) states that EFL students in Asia may well have been left out of discussions regarding critical instruction on the assumption that East Asian cultures are primarily characterized by conformism. Taiwan, an EFL country, is no exception to this viewpoint. As an example, the International Symposium of English Teaching (held annually in November) is one of the primary English-teaching conferences in Taiwan. The 2001–2005 proceedings of this conference contain no research papers directly related to critical literacy and only three presentations associated with critical literacy are included in the 2006–2008 proceedings.

Given the neglect of voices from EFL Asian countries, it is imperative that more researchers explore the potential for and implementation of critical literacy in Asia. Since such studies have rarely been discussed in the literature of language education in Taiwan, a research study on how critical literacy has actually been practised in Taiwan will help researchers and instructors in Taiwan increase their understanding of the applicability of and possibilities for critical literacy in their own setting.

Purpose of the study

In order to fill in the research gap related to the theory and practice of critical literacy in Taiwan, I proposed a collaborative project to a college English teacher in Taiwan, a critical literacy curriculum designed by the instructor and investigated by me for my doctoral dissertation. I observed the activities in an English Conversation class taught by the instructor during the 2005 spring semester. This article is an investigation of the second-week activity, exploring students' responses to a picture-book-based dialogue exercise. The activity was selected because the instructor spent most of the first-week activity introducing the course and upcoming activities that would be provided during the semester. That is, the second-week activity was the first activity in the class designed from the perspective of critical literacy; students' responses to the activity would be their initial learning experiences related to critical literacy. This article is intended (1) to investigate the extent to which the goals of critical literacy were achieved in the classroom and (2) to arrive at some implications for the implementation of critical literacy in Taiwan.

Literature review

According to Stevens and Bean (2007), critical literacy is an approach to literacy that focuses on a learning process in which students are encouraged to pay attention to the relations among language use, social practice, and power. Its concepts are grounded in the critical tradition in Western philosophy from Plato to poststructuralism, i.e. philosophies that see literacy practices as a form of individual and social transformation. In particular, as Mayo (2007) indicates, the term *critical literacy* is historically derived from the work and life of Paulo Freire (1921–1997), who argues that becoming literate requires fostering the ability to understand, analyze, and criticize one's own social context. Accordingly, it is necessary that teachers 'develop radical pedagogical structures that provide students with the opportunities to use their own reality as a basis of literacy' (Freire and Macedo 1987, p. 151).

Critical literacy represents unconventional reading and writing practices in contrast to traditional literacy practices based on transmission pedagogies. However, critical literacy sometimes overlaps with or is replaced by terms such as critical consciousness, critical pedagogy, critical language awareness and critical whole language (Dowty 2007; Edelsky 1999; Fairclough 1992; Pennycook 1999). The definition of critical literacy has been debated and redefined, and possibly refined, as language researchers/instructors have employed different theoretical frameworks. In other words, critical literacy has not been a unitary approach to literacy practice and pedagogy (Clarke and Whitney 2009; Green 2001).

Different theoretical perspectives underscore different aspects of critical literacy and its pedagogic concerns, but their instructional strategies all involve a reflective and challenging approach to literacy practices in the classroom. To the critical instructor, the aim for students in learning a language is not only to master the four skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities) but also to understand the world through a critical awareness of their reading (Fisher 2008; Iyer 2007). Thus, it is imperative to foster students' self-awareness of their reading, writing and other literacy practices, whereby they can transform their role as social agents. Critical literacy is conceptualized as an active and critical engagement with texts in specific social and cultural contexts, i.e. as a social practice (Vasquez et al. 2004).

Critical literacy involves an active and reflective interpretation of an utterance, text, action, etc., i.e. an art of interpretation stressing the potential of multiple meanings in textual reading and the role of the reader in a specific context. Accordingly, critical literacy possesses similarities to critical hermeneutics, a version of hermeneutics different from conservative hermeneutics as identified by Hirsch (1967). Critical hermeneutics is highly sceptical of given meanings or interpretations and is sceptical of claims to truth and knowledge, whereas conservative hermeneutics embraces the notion that the meaning of a literary work is absolute and immutable, without historical change (Eagleton 1983). Critical literacy should be associated not simply with the relationships among language, meaning and understanding, but also with the social and cultural conditions surrounding human beings. Finally, critical literacy implies a social transformation because students are encouraged to become independent of false consciousness in society.

As a result, the guiding principle of critical literacy is that we should view a text from a sociocultural perspective, in which a given text is understood best as fragments or units of discourse that move within a larger discourse (Vasquez 1999). Larger discourse at this point represents Gee's (2005) notion of *Discourse with a big 'D'* as the

ways people believe, speak and interact with others, i.e. their ways of being in the world. Critical literacy assumes that language learners make sense of a text on the basis of many systems such as the sociocultural system. They construct their own interpretations of the text, influenced by life experiences that go beyond specific social and cultural mechanisms (Jones and Clarke 2007).

Also relevant to the sociocultural aspect of critical literacy is situated learning theory. Sociocultural theories view learning not merely as a mental practice, but also as a social practice based on interaction (Gee 2008; Lave and Wenger 1991). Students enter a classroom with a variety of social identities, but they will assume a particular set of identities related to the classroom activities, the learning goals and the identities of the other participants. That is to say, learning involves the construction of 'identities in practice' (Lave 1996, p. 157), given the fact that learners in a classroom appropriate and reconstruct discourses in relation to different identities within their social world.

In brief, critical literacy perceives literacy in the classroom as a social practice, assuming that education can help students develop a critical world awareness and increase their potential for social consciousness. Lohrey (1998) refers to critical literacy as an ability to go beyond the text surface by using background knowledge to question social, political, and ideological elements in the text and/or in the world, such as social class, race and ethnicity, gender concerns, school culture and other social phenomena. Pennycook (1994) thinks of critical literacy as a form of 'education grounded in a desire for social change' (p. 297), because any academic class involves the interactions of culture, politics and ideology. As such, critical literacy suggests that the text-to-individual and text-to-world interactions can help students reflect on, act on, and change their own and even other people's lives.

Methodology

Qualitative case study research

In an attempt to explore the significance of specific classroom practices in Taiwan, this research is a qualitative case study in that it employs various descriptive data to investigate the activity discussed. Data from different sources are used to illustrate and support the theoretical assumptions of critical literacy. Three qualitative principles are assumed: (1) there is no single reality; (2) reality is based on different perspectives and changes over time for each person; and (3) what we know is meaningful only within a certain context.

As Nunan (1992) indicates, 'a case is a single instance of a class of objects or entities and a case study is the

investigation of that single instance in the context in which it occurs' (p. 79). This study reflects collaboration between the instructor and myself as *a researcher and co-teacher* in the classroom. As a whole, this research is an interpretive case study of 26 student participants in the activity discussed. This article does not intend to be sufficiently representative for generalization. Rather, because it is exploratory in nature, it is viewed as a form of pilot study for those researchers and/ or educators who are interested in the implementation of critical literacy in the EFL classroom.

Setting and participants

The course discussed in this study was offered during the 2005 spring semester at a university of technology and science located in southern Taiwan. The informants in the study consisted of the instructor and his students. The instructor had returned to Taiwan with an American doctoral degree in language education. As a result of the training he had received during his doctoral studies, the instructor espoused the assumptions of critical literacy, particularly its emphasis on social practices and critical interrogation of social conventions. Moreover, he made an effort to incorporate the concepts of critical thinking and critical writing, two important components related to critical literacy, into the course. Accordingly, the instructor was an ideal choice as collaborator for the research for my doctoral dissertation related to critical literacy.

The instructor had taught an elective English Conversation course in the 2004 fall semester, a course with 40 students. He continued the course for 26 returning students in the 2005 spring semester. In a computer-equipped classroom, students attended the class with two 50-min sessions every Wednesday afternoon for the entire semester. These students included 23 male and 3 female undergraduates from the School of Engineering, 24 of whom were third-year students and 2 were fifth-year students at the five-year college. The English level of the class was low, and the students did not have much experience in discussing and writing in English. Students participated in all the class activities in six groups of 4–5 members. Each group sat together, discussing, creating and performing their team dialogue at the end of each class.

The instructor and I both agreed that an English classroom should not ignore the sociocultural and situational aspects of critical literacy. Language educators should see students as individual learners who pursue common goals in classrooms, that is, instructors should conceptualize classrooms as communities of learners (Wells 1999, 2000). Students are involved in a learning process, a process that is socially situated, meaningful and collaborative. In particular, students work together and participate in various activities (1) to take on new skills, (2) to assume new

understandings, (3) and ultimately to forge new socially situated identities. The theory and practice of critical literacy is thus emphasized in this study; language learning should involve not only language development but also the contextual relevancy of social identity. Finally, the instructor and I hoped that the activity discussed would become a process of socialization, a learning process that would be meaningful to students as learners and social agents.

Data sources and procedures

Data collected during the semester include (1) the instructor's journal entries, (2) students' class weblog comments, (3) students' mid-term reflection papers, (4) interviews with the instructor/students and (5) classroom observation. I will use only data related to the activity discussed in this study:

(1) The instructor posted his weekly teaching reflections on a class weblog. These reflections were mainly related to the instructor's self-evaluation of his instruction and students' performances.

(2) The classroom weblog was a Web site where the instructor and his students posted (a) their weekly reflections on what had happened in class and (b) their responses to specific comments from students or the instructor.

(3) The mid-term reflection papers were submitted in the eleventh week of the semester. They were concerned with how they felt about the course, including course materials and activities.

(4) I interviewed the instructor once before the semester, and once every 3 weeks during the semester. Seven students were selected for interviews at the end of the semester because they were from the two most active groups. Each group was interviewed once. I audio-taped, transcribed and interpreted these interviews.[1]

(5) I observed and videotaped all the classroom activities during the semester. Classroom observations allowed me to investigate the activities firsthand. The tapes gave me the opportunity to replay the classroom events that I wanted to analyze. Both data sources were useful

in providing some knowledge of the context, specific classroom incidents, or meaningful behaviours.

Interpretative framework

Lewison et al.'s (2008) model of critical literacy instruction (Fig. 1) serves as an analytical framework; they see critical literacy instruction as 'a transaction among the personal and cultural resources we use, the critical social practices we enact, and the critical stance that we and our students take on in classrooms and in the world' (p. 5). Since language is essentially a social meaning-making process, language is meaningful only when some human interaction is enacted. That is, meaning-making should start in the personal, but move to the social.

Personal and cultural resources are what classroom participants bring into the class to create the content of the classroom practices. The resources can include textbooks, personal experience, social issues, student desires and interests, popular culture and media, etc. In order to build critical instruction from a personal perspective, instructors can either highlight students' personal experiences or emphasize cultural elements significant to students such as social issues and popular culture.

The model refers critical social practices to specific interactions that occur among students and teachers. These practices can be categorized as (1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on the sociopolitical issues and (4) taking action to promote social justice (Lewison et al. 2002). The four-dimension
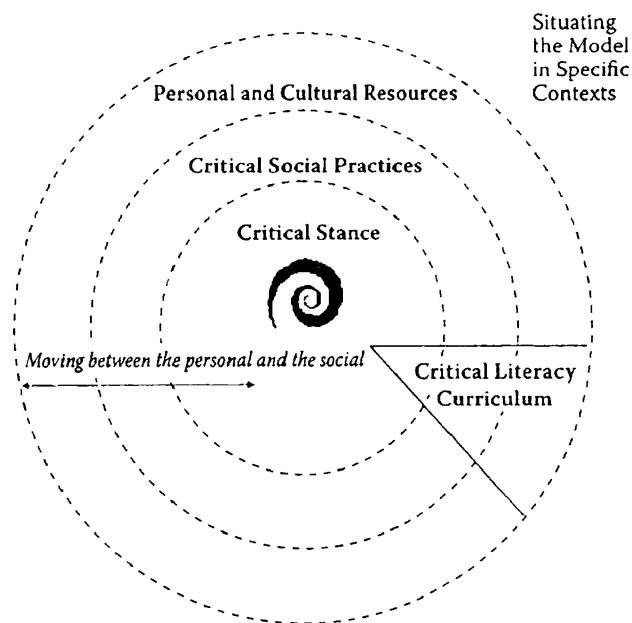

Fig. 1 The instructional model of critical literacy

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[1] Interview questions for students were divided into two categories: (1) questions based on opinions that students expressed in their reflection papers and (2) questions based on the implementation of the activities. Questions in the first category were designed according to students' various responses, while questions in the second category were pre-determined before the interview, such as (1) How would you describe your learning experience in this class? (2) Could you tell me anything about the activities you have attended so far? (3) What topics discussed so far do you like the most or do you dislike the most? Why? and (4) In your opinion, what sort of topics or issues discussed so far are related to social aspects or to your own life? Can you give me some examples?

framework can be used as a useful tool to see how critical instructors have structured their language programs and to examine which dimensions they have privileged or overlooked.

After the instructor has engaged students in the second phase of the model, critical social practices, students should be prepared for the third phase of the model, taking critical stances. These stances represent different attitudes that can enable students to become critically literate: (1) conscious engagement, (2) trying out alternative ways of being, (3) responsibility to enquiry and (4) reflexivity. As Pennycook (1999) says, 'taking a critical approach involves an attitude, a way of thinking and teaching' (p. 340). These four stances are the focus of the third phase of the model and will be used to examine students' responses to the classroom texts with a view to how the students might change their notions of and attitudes towards specific issues.

These four stances, the core of the third phase of the framework in Fig. 1, may seem too abstract in investigating students' changes in perspectives and attitudes. Teachers should nevertheless manage to encourage students (1) to generate more reflections on social issues related to their lives and (2) to know more about themselves. This involves a critical aspect of language education, a notion that sees language education as not so much about learning language but as about learning from language. I will rely on such data as reflection papers and interviews in re-examining how students could change their attitudes towards specific topics discussed in the classroom. In brief, the three-phase framework is used as a theoretical lens in the analysis of the data rather than in the design of the activity.

Data analysis and triangulation

This study employs the aforementioned model as the analytical framework. Such a framework reflects a theoretical concept of language instruction, which is used to examine the activity from a critical perspective. Accordingly, the analysis protocol used in the study is mainly discourse analysis rather than conversation and interaction analysis. As Nunan (1992) indicates, 'discourse analysis is distinguished from conversation and interaction analysis in the use of predetermined analytical categories' (i.e. the model in Fig. 1). Moreover, discourse analysis is conducted on both written and spoken language.

The data will be employed to make meaningful inferences regarding the activity according to the framework. First, they can be used to investigate the classroom curriculum and students' responses. Second, they can be used to minimize the danger of a one-sided representation of the activity. Thus, data triangulation is achieved from the cross-examination of various data (e.g. data drawn from different sources, at different times, in different places, and from different persons), in an attempt to reveal some tentative, but meaningful and illuminating truth.

Depiction of activity

During the first interview, the instructor mentioned that during this new semester he was determined to make his classroom more interactive and make his students more familiar with a critical way of learning. As a result, the key changes in his teaching were (1) to engage his students in different social issues and (2) to support students in exchanging their own and others' perspectives before creating team dialogues that could reflect required readings. Accordingly, he designed an activity called picture-book-based dialogue for the class in the second week. By cutting and pasting, the instructor consolidated the picture books *The Story of Ruby Bridges* (Coles 1995) and *A Picture Book of Anne Frank* (Adler 1993), along with selected illustrations, onto fewer pages. Thus, the copy of each book was a shortened version. Before they came to the class, students were required to preview these two versions in a reading packet. Originally, the instructor had planned to use the former picture book only. However, I proposed using a second picture book with a similar topic and having students compare two books. The instructor agreed to use these two books together for the activity because of the courageous female protagonists and thought-provoking issues in the books.

During the first session of the class, the instructor divided students into six groups. He gave each student a handout with six reading comprehension questions, asking students to skim the whole story about Ruby Bridges quickly before they tried to find answers to the questions. These questions were designed to help students better understand how Ruby Bridges was courageous and determined to be educated when she was the only African-American child in an all-white elementary school in New Orleans in 1960. The instructor spoke English during his lecture, but used Mandarin at times to delineate some crucial ideas and facts in the story. As planned, it took 20 min for the instructor to explain the story to students. Afterwards, 20 min were allocated for me to help the students make sense of the book about Anne Frank. As mentioned earlier, I had suggested using the story of Anne Frank, together with the story of Ruby Bridges, to create a two-text set of specific social issues from different perspectives. During my teaching, I also used a handout with eight reading questions to help students comprehend the picture book about Anne Frank. At the end of the first class

session, I concluded my teaching by giving a general idea of the story of Anne Frank.

In the second session of the class, each group was required to create a team dialogue by (1) integrating the stories about Ruby Bridges and Anne Frank into their own dialogue, (2) relating the stories to their own experiences or (3) using their creativity and imagination. While students in groups were discussing and working on their dialogue either in Chinese or in English, the instructor sat at a computer table in front of the classroom waiting for each group to submit their team dialogue. The moment any group gave him a completed dialogue, the instructor would type the dialogue into the computer. It took about 25 min before all the six groups finished their dialogues. Once each group had finished its dialogue, the group members were given personal time to practice. After all groups had handed in their dialogues, the instructor called students from each group to deliver their team dialogue to the entire class. As the groups performed, the instructor displayed their dialogues on the screen using a LCD projector. Since the previous groups took up all the time, the last group was unable to present its team dialogue.

Data analysis and interpretation

Personal and cultural resources

In terms of critical literacy instruction, the students played an important role in setting up the activity. Either on the class weblog or in interviews, students highly praised the version of the course taught in the previous semester as an engaging and interactive learning experience. This positive evaluation about the previous course, in turn, influenced students' beliefs about teaching and became a motivation to take the revised course. Students' specific expectations of the course influenced how the instructor planned to approach his teaching activities. One change made in this semester was that students were asked to discuss in groups and write a team dialogue in response to required texts every week in the class. Discussion was required among the six student groups as a learning venue where they could express thoughts, exchange ideas, share personal experiences and move towards a critical understanding of key issues brought up in the class.

Group 2's dialogue (Fig. 2) is a demonstration of personal and cultural resources that students brought into the classroom. Initially, I was confused by the dialogue, a product of concept transaction and negotiation made by Fly and other group members.[2] At first glance, the dialogue

seemed irrelevant to Anne Frank's life, except for the names Anne and Hitler. Having difficulty in making sense of the dialogue, I asked Fly during the interview why and how his group came up with a text that did not reflect the story of Anne Frank in an understandable way. After chuckling, Fly grinned and replied:

> It is about a situation in which one person is seriously talking to the other, but the other responds with a curt attitude. It is kind of irrelevant [to the stories], I know. However, we like to subvert stories. Who says that students need to write everything that sounds normal or totally based on books we read. Serious lessons can be taught in a funny and relaxed way. In fact, this dialogue reflects our personal experiences in Taiwan, like when you meet persistent Mormon missionaries on the street, or like when you are being badgered by aggressively talkative salespersons.

After students shared their personal experiences in Taiwan, it became clearer how the dialogue was relevant to the story and their lives. The desire to be unique made this group's dialogue creative in a personal way. Students identified with characters in the story and embedded its theme within a different storyline based on personal material. In addition, they related the books to things or people surrounding their lives. In other words, students drew upon resources around them as the basis for their team dialogue and group discussion.

The analytical framework suggests that critical instruction depends on personal experiences and cultural resources that the instructor and students bring to the classroom. In order to encourage students to respond to texts reflectively, teachers should build a curriculum that can connect classroom activities with students' lives outside the school. Students should (1) be exposed to various literary exercises relevant to their interests and knowledge and (2) be engaged in a learning environment that starts with the personal and moves to the social. Taking the current activity as an example, students were invited (1) to create their own team dialogue based on their lived experiences and (2) to experience critical social practices as we can see below.

Critical social practices

Disrupting the commonplace

The instructor allowed me (1) to share with him my opinions about his curriculum, (2) to sit in his classroom as an observer researcher and (3) even to co-teach some activities such as the present one. This collaboration helped the teaching gain more strength from a critical viewpoint. Thus, I became an instructional peer in the classroom; I

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[2] All participants' names in this study are pseudonyms for the sake of confidentiality.

Fig. 2 Group 2's picture-book-based dialogue

A = From this two story, we learn the war is very terrible

B = Yes. I agree.

A = The people have know the terrible price paid in lives and human suffering for prejudice and hatred.

B = Yes. I think so.

A = And I think the Anna is very very poor,

B = Yes. I agree. But it's not my business.

A = And I also think the Hitler is a bastard

B = Yes, Yes, I agree.

A = Well, and I think you are a bastard

B = Yes, Yes, I agree .... !?

shared my expertise in English with students and helped them understand readings while they were discussing and creating their dialogues. In addition, I played an important role that made a difference in the class when I suggested the notion of a text set—'a group of books and other print and media materials such as magazine articles and video clips designed to support the study of a particular theme, genre, or issue' (Vasquez et al. 2003, p. 33).

As mentioned earlier, the instructor had chosen the story of Ruby Bridges as the only text to be used in the activity. Later, I recommended the story of Anne Frank as the second item for reading, thus creating a text set—two books that are conceptually related in some way in terms of similar themes, text types and topics. I suggested the notion of a text set for the class in an attempt to promote in students more new perspectives and connections that build deeper and more complex understandings.

My involvement in the classroom and course design added more depth to the class as a social practice. First, my role as a participant observer in the classroom altered the teacher's instructional habits and students' learning beliefs, i.e. routines and notions accumulated from previous teaching or learning experiences. Second, my participation became a new way of thinking embedded within a larger discourse in the classroom, a discourse that was composed of multiple perspectives from the text, the instructor, students and me. In turn, the discourse was constantly mediated and negotiated by all the classroom participants. Finally, the agreement between the instructor and me on using two picture books turned the activity into a learning event that was related to sociopolitical issues. The entire activity was based on the participation of the instructor, the students and myself as a co-teacher and researcher.

Considering multiple perspectives

Using two picture books on similar social issues helped the instructor create a space where students would be exposed to multiple perspectives that would challenge them to think differently. Some students expressed their discomfort with the serious topics presented in the picture books, which confronted and challenged their learning experiences as EFL students.

For example, John said that he was not used to these dark and deep stories. He suggested that the instructor use the fairy tales he used to read in his childhood, specifically those happy-ending stories that most people can easily understand. In his opinion, the text set was too complex to understand, unlike the stories he had read since he was a small child. John was not alone in his view. Happy, for example, argued during the interview:

> Both stories were too dull and too serious. I don't like them. I prefer reading materials used in most private language institutes in Taiwan. I mean stories that can allow us to learn English in a relaxed atmosphere. I'd like that better! I don't like topics such as war and racial discrimination. It would be better to avoid these kinds of stories if I could choose.

In contrast, other students saw these two stories in a different way, considering them effective stimuli for more critical thoughts: (1) 'These books are good for deeper

thinking. On the contrary, books used in the past are too easy and didn't give much opportunity for students to think during the process of learning'. (WC); and (2) 'It's like telling stories based on illustrations. Then, we can study history while learning English. That is intriguing!' (Tony). The competing narratives among students diversified the discussion by students, in which they talked about the books, negotiated different opinions, and completed a new mode of perspective—their team dialogue.

Focusing on sociopolitical issues

After all the six groups had completed their dialogues, the different groups were given time to memorize and rehearse their dialogue. Some groups based their works on the stories of Ruby Bridges and Anne Frank and dealt with social issues that merit further critical discussion. Group 5's dialogue (Fig. 3) is an imaginary description of Anne and Peter, a boy that Anne fell in love with when the boy and his parents shared the secret apartment in which Anne's family hid during World War II. It was about the time before Anne and Peter went to their own beds.

When I asked what the dialogue meant, LP, one of the students in Group 5, said that what happened to Anne Frank was a very sad story about war and children, and so they tried to capture a possible moment of intimacy between Anne and Peter. While being interviewed, these students identified with characters, especially the child protagonists, in the stories they had read. Moreover, Happy elaborated that the stories resonated with the images of war children they saw in the media: 'This dialogue is a classic story about war as the same as what we have frequently seen on TV—a story about young kids who are born poor and whose parents die in the war'.

Similarly, Group 1's dialogue represents a historical account about what happened to Anne Frank and her older sister in a concentration camp, as seen through the eyes of the students. According to WC, when he and his classmates tried to write a dialogue about the war, they thought of the scenarios in the story in which Anne and Margot (her older sister) were taken to a camp. The picture book about Anne Frank only mentions that Anne and Margot were hungry all the time in the camp before they died of disease and hunger late in 1945, but Group 1 used their imagination and their mental image of war to bring up a social issue about how children might be treated in a concentration camp during the war. The dialogue accentuates the sisterhood between Anne and Margot through the way Margot took care of Anne.

Taking action and promoting social justice

The current critical aspect relates to the notion of agency, emphasizing reflection and action that transforms the world. It involves any form of expression through which students position themselves positively and actively. During the activity, students created different dialogues through which they expressed their positions in relation to the world. Group 3's dialogue (Fig. 4) was an example in which students employed language to imagine a different world.

The dialogue shows students' intent to change the world and make it different. In the dialogue, students displayed a vivid imagination because they wanted to change the world by killing Hitler or even by killing
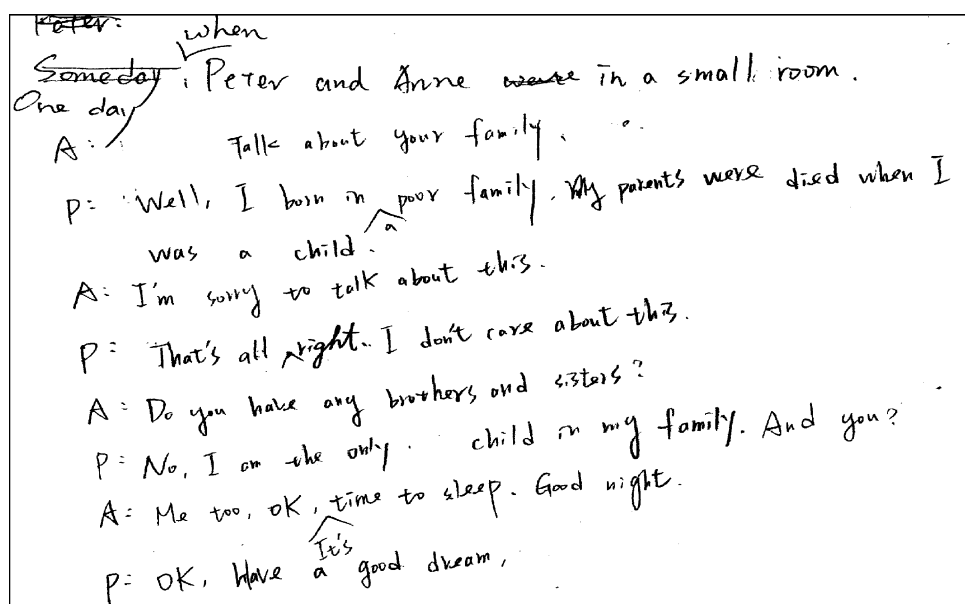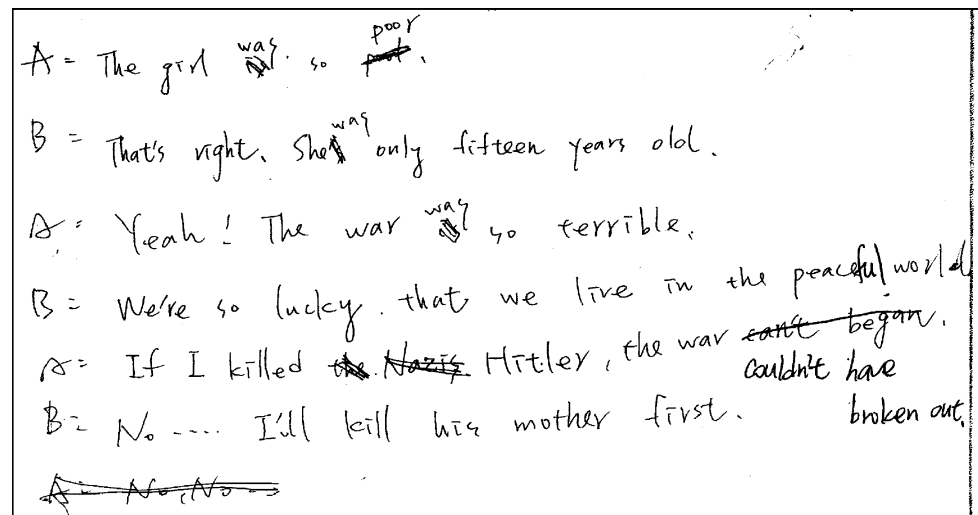
Fig. 3 Group 5's picture-book-based dialogue

Fig. 4 Group 3's picture-book-based dialogue

Hitler's mother. Although it may sound brutal or illogical, the dialogue left a deep impression on the instructor because he thought that the dialogue was *excellent* in a critical way. In his opinion, the dialogue not only showed students' speaking ability, but also revealed unique and powerful thought: 'I think that the dialogue about killing Hitler's mother is very good. It is absolutely an incorrect method, but it's always good to receive new, creative, or critical responses from students. It's wonderful that students learn to change something or solve something'. The solution proposed in the dialogue was viewed by the instructor as a critical stance that students took, a stance 'reflecting and acting to change an inappropriate, unequal power relationship between people' (McLaughlin and DeVoogd 2004, p. 18).

However, the solution offered in Group 3's dialogue was not only creative but also thought provoking and useful for further investigation. If the instructor had been able to give the students more time to discuss this solution, the class would have had more opportunities to examine the dialogue from multiple perspectives. With a teacher-led discussion, a feminist viewpoint might have been brought up, that would have considered the issue of social justice and questioned the validity of the proposed solution—killing Hitler's mother to stop a war. Moreover, Group 3's students would have been able to find their proposed solution problematic because it uses violence to prevent violence. The students could have examined themselves and interrogated their own critical stance shown in this team dialogue. Above all, critical teachers should encourage students not only to become creative learners in response to the texts offered in the class, but also to become critical respondents who can be allowed more opportunities to deconstruct and critique their own responses. Thus, such a self-interrogation will become an ongoing critical process.

Critical stances

During the English Conversation class implemented the previous semester, the instructor removed some words or phrases from the everyday dialogues in the textbook and asked students to guess a possible expression and fill in the blanks. Topics included transportation, cooking, car rental, asking directions, etc. With an awareness of the need to change, the instructor had told students at the end of the course offered in the previous semester that they would be asked to think more and write more during group discussions in the next semester. In other words, students were conscious of a possible change when they enroled in the course implemented this semester. Happy noted that he expected the class to progress, as it did the previous semester, in a comfortable and relaxing atmosphere: 'We still have a lot of things to do in the class. What I mean by relaxing is that we are allowed to use our creativity and imagination while working on our dialogues through thinking about many different issues' (interview, April 25, 2005).

Therefore, students were situated in a different class, a learning environment where tensions and risks occurred. For example, many students were not used to a reading packet with many articles. These reading materials challenged not only students' learning habits, but also their identities. From a different perspective, Jay during the interview shared a comment on the current class:

I don't think these articles are too serious or gloomy. Discrimination is everywhere in our society too. Unfairness to children is very common. For example, I am frequently mocked because of my dark skin. It's all right. But some [classmates] use special tones, words, and attitudes, which make me very angry.

Some even call me *black ghost* [black].[3] It makes me uncomfortable because it sounds like you're inferior. Being called 'black ghost' is very, very annoying.

While some students showed anxiety concerning the reading packet because they had trouble making sense of its articles, Jay thought that these different articles were serious but meaningful. He further pointed out that the story of Anne Frank reminded him of his own situation as someone with dark skin, a situation that bothered and even angered him. Finally, it can be argued that a change in reading materials made students have a stronger sense of themselves and of their power as learners. In other words, students had changed their attitudes towards learning in the classroom through conscious engagement and alternative ways of being, the first two aspects of taking a critical stance.

The third and fourth aspects of taking a critical stance involve (1) taking responsibility to enquire and (2) being reflective. In order to be more specific, we can question whether students move beyond initial understanding and whether they finally interrogate and try to change their ways of being in a given society. The answer to the concern can be found in Linda's reflection paper:

> During the first half semester, we were taught a lot of different stories before discussing and creating dialogues based on them. These stories were related to racial discrimination, family violence, child abuse, and other social issues. They made me realize that there are many dark sides [to our society] that cannot be prevented. It is not possible to change someone's ideas overnight. There must be someone walking ahead of other people, setting an example.

Linda's reflection shows that she was aware of the status quo that she encountered, and that she was also reflective about the process of transformation, which takes time and energy. The activity helped students to think critically and, as in Linda's example, to start questioning who they were and addressing how they could change through whatever literacy medium—social-issue picture books, discussions, written dialogues, interviews, weblog statements or reflection papers. This finding confirms West's (2008) opinion that literary responses can help students not only to deepen their understanding of the text but also to reflect on their socially situated identities.

Findings and implications

This article has described an English Conversation activity in Taiwan, a social practice that empowered students with a better awareness of social justice. Specifically, this research used a critical literacy instructional model to analyze students' team dialogues as responses to the books. The analysis indicates that these Taiwanese students were engaged in a critical curriculum that moved from the personal to the social. At first, students were invited to make sense of two social-issue picture books. Their personal understanding of these books served as the basis for their team dialogues, in which different social issues such as children at war and racial discrimination were raised. Finally, the instructor created additional opportunities for students to express their perspectives and values through the class weblog and midterm reflection papers.

This study suggests that instruction based on social-issue picture books is effective not only in promoting literacy learning but also in eliciting meaningful themes for students to discuss. This research shows that language learning is best understood as socially constructed; students' team dialogues were a good example confirming that meaning is socially negotiated and mediated. It implies that critical instruction should promote not only text-centred responses but also reader responses to social issues; this can lead to more critical stances that students as transformative agents can adopt. In order to sum up, the study suggests that a critical literacy curriculum should progress from personal/cultural resources to critical social practices and critical stances.

The model for data analysis in this article suggests that critical literacy should be regarded as a way of language instruction from a sociocultural perspective (Lesley 2008). Critical literacy cannot occur without the resources that the instructor and students bring to the classroom. Accordingly, the context in which the learning occurs does matter. As Lankshear and Knobel (2007) suggest, 'reading and writing can only be understood in the contexts of social, cultural, political, economic, historical practices' (p. 2). The complexity of the three-ring model can be useful for language researchers and/or educators in specific contexts and allows ample flexibility for instructors to implement their critical literacy in different situations.

For example, university freshmen in Taiwan are students who have just graduated from senior high school, an educational system in which most students study English to prepare for standardizing testing rather than for their own enrichment. If these students' English teachers intend to engage these students in a critical literacy approach, and if they are apprehensive that their students may struggle with such alternative instruction, these teachers can base their critical instruction on one or two components in the second

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[3] In Chinese, blacks can be referred to negatively as 'black ghosts'. Analogously, Caucasians can be referred to as 'white ghosts'.

ring of the model, i.e. critical social practices. With regard to the notion of disrupting the commonplace, teachers can assess their students' performance while working from the assumption that there are no 'wrong' answers. This teaching belief will be not only new to the students but also useful in helping the teachers ensure that their evaluation is a positive experience for students.

For Taiwanese teachers who advocate critical literacy, potential elements of this model in their classroom may include (1) personal and cultural resources (e.g. acknowledging popular culture among young adults as a significant source of knowledge in the classroom), (2) considering multiple viewpoints (e.g. having students discuss gender issues from pair work to entire class efforts), (3) focusing on the sociopolitical (e.g. having students elicit their lived experiences as a starting point for critical reflection on relevant social issues) and (4) taking action to promote social justice (e.g. asking students to re-write a real-life story in the newspaper according to their personal experiences).

Towards a conclusion

As Shor (1999) indicates, 'coming to critical literacy is [a] rather unpredictable and even contentious process filled with surprises, resistances, breakthroughs, and reversals. It's not [an] easy or open road…' (p. 11). The metaphor of a road suggests the dynamic unpredictability in the implementation of critical literacy. Critical researchers and educators are constantly challenged to develop, modify and re-evaluate their own theory and practice of critical literacy. In my case, the activity gave me many opportunities to understand the instructor and students, and this became an impetus for me to keep to the road of critical literacy. A critical reflection on this study is needed as a final conclusion.

Most students discussed in the study took a positive attitude towards the present activity, a collaborative learning journey that allowed them to reflect on their thoughts and lives. Some time after his interview, John told me in private that he liked the activity very much because it encouraged thinking, creativity and collaboration and because the activity motivated students to have their voices heard. But John was still worried about his future performance on various tests for his career after graduation, such as the TOEFL iBT (internet-based test), the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication), and the GEPT (General English Proficiency Test).

Students in Taiwan are encouraged to pass these language-proficiency exams and to receive related certificates in an attempt to become more competitive in the shrinking job market. Many universities in Taiwan have used these exams to establish a threshold of a specific language level

as a graduation requirement. Moreover, it is a common belief that students from universities of technology and science are less proficient in English than students from the so-called traditional universities. As a result, receiving high grades on the exams mentioned above can be particularly helpful for students like John and his classmates. Although John showed a great deal of interest in the class discussed, he was still afraid that the class might not help him prepare for the tests.

This concern reflects Fox's warning about the emergence of a new literacy practice: 'Every time a new orthodoxy hits the school system and we throw out the old to bring in the new, we are in danger of losing our way' (p. 105). Accordingly, critical teachers should not be in a rush to make students become critically aware of the classroom texts at the cost of reading delight and spelling/grammar correctness. As mentioned previously, it is not necessary for critical instructors to design their curricula based on all the components in the instructional model in Fig. 1. EFL teachers can draw on a few elements shown in the model when they plan to implement a critical activity. For example, teachers can stress critical social practices by using different modes of expression as classroom material (e.g. picture books and animated cartoons) and by introducing multiple perspectives in the classroom.

This study suggests that enthusiasts of critical literacy should not insist on including all dimensions of the instructional model in their curriculum design. Instead, teachers should consider their students, teaching purposes and teaching contexts when they use elements from the critical literacy instructional model. In addition, the study found that most of the students' reflection papers indicate that this critical literacy activity changed their notion from a repetitive, boring or even 'painful' (Jeffrey) job to a happy journey. Moreover, this activity turned language learning into a reflective process for social change. However, looking again at the activity implemented in the 2005 spring semester, I found that the activity should have extended longer than two sessions; a teacher-led critical discussion should be provided to direct students to deeper understanding of the discourse that classroom participants may bring up in the classroom.

Other suggestions for future instruction and research are as follows: First, EFL critical educators need to be patient and compassionate with students who might well be limited in English proficiency or might have not developed the habit of preparing for a critical literacy class. Second, critical instructors can implement more activities based on collaborative enquiry. Third, future research on critical literacy should pay attention to students from different educational systems or learning contexts for further comparison and contrast. Fourth, more professional programs in which pre-service teachers are trained to teach and learn within a critical literacy framework should be provided for

the needs of education in the twenty-first century (Rogers 2007; Van Sluys et al. 2006).

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