Asia-Pacific Edu Res (2013) 22(4):549–557
DOI 10.1007/s40299-013-0057-1

Implementing Critical Literacy for University Freshmen in Taiwan through Self-Discovery Texts

Jun-min Kuo

Published online: 31 January 2013

Abstract This study analyzes a critical literacy activity that had 33 non-English-major college freshmen in Taiwan consider who they are. Students were exposed to four self-discovery texts (i.e., texts that can motivate students to reflect on the various roles they play in society) as well as to follow-up assignments and classroom discussions. Grounded theory was used as the analytical method to interpret various qualitative data such as students' assignments, three open-ended questions, and students' reflection papers. Three themes emerged from this research: encountering unexpected issues and assignments, examining oneself from multiple perspectives, and becoming critically literate. This study found that self-discovery texts were effective in enhancing students' self-awareness and in facilitating critical dialogue. Practicing critical literacy sensitized students to their learning while helping them to develop their English ability. In conclusion, the activity not only stimulated students to read the word and the world but also made them conscious of their learning from a critical perspective.

Keywords Self-discovery texts · Critical literacy · EFL learners · Critical dialogue · Multiple perspectives

Introduction

Critical literacy is seen as an alternative mode of language instruction that encourages students to question the status quo and to arrive at appropriate solutions for a more just society (Luke 2012). Critical literacy has been a fairly recent development and did not display the specific features of an education movement until the 1990s (Stevens and Bean 2007). Since then, critical literacy has been increasingly explored by many language researchers in English-speaking countries such as the UK, the USA, and Australia. However, it still has attracted limited attention in many English-as-a-second-language (ESL) and English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) countries; Taiwan, an EFL country in Asia, is no exception (Huang 2012). Only a few studies related to the implementation of critical literacy have been conducted.

For example, Ko and Wang (2012) investigated a required one-semester reading course at a university in Taiwan. They analyzed the critical literacy practices demonstrated by four English-major students (two males and two females) who enrolled in this course. The students were required to read media texts selected from magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*. After students discussed each reading, they submitted a reflective essay. The study concluded that language educators should help EFL learners with different levels of English to enhance their critical literacy while developing their language skills. Another example can be seen in Huang's (2009) study, an action research study exploring an elective reading and writing course. In this course, 35 Taiwanese non-English-major college students read articles from three assigned textbooks and responded to these readings with some critical-literacy-oriented questions. This study concluded that future relevant research and instruction should focus on how to increase students' engagement in critical literacy because some students did not participate in the class or even resisted it.

To address the gap between the theory and practice of critical literacy in Taiwan and to explore the possibilities of alternative materials for critical literacy, this paper reports on one of three activities implemented in an English course at a university in Taiwan. All the activities were designed

J. Kuo (✉)
Tunghai University, Taichung City, Taiwan, ROC
e-mail: kuo0328@thu.edu.tw

to help "youth examine the discourses, narratives, and texts that shape their identities and lived experiences" (Ashcraft 2012, p. 598). In particular, this study focuses on the first activity that had students consider the significant issue of who they are; students were exposed to four self-discovery texts and to follow-up assignments and discussions.

Literature Review

Definition of Critical Literacy

The definition of critical literacy has been debated and refined since the 1980s. Critical researchers and instructors employ different theoretical frameworks drawing on different instructional philosophies. Hence, critical literacy has not been defined as a unitary approach with regard to theory or practice (Morrow and Torres 2002). Different theoretical perspectives underpin different aspects of critical literacy and its pedagogies, but their common features all involve a reflective approach in the classroom.

Critical literacy implies not only mastery of the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, but also comprehension of the meaning beyond the texts from a critical perspective (Dutro 2009). Students should be encouraged to read between the lines of texts, to foster their critical awareness of literacy practices, and to develop self-reflective attitudes toward their lives (Heffernan 2008). To achieve this goal, teachers need to be aware of the features of critical literacy to practice it in their own contexts. Three of the features of critical literacy are discussed as follows.

Three Features of Critical Literacy

Researchers suggest that the guiding principle of critical literacy is that we should perceive literacy as a social practice (Luke 2012; McLaughlin and DeVoogd 2004a; Morrell 2008). Language in critical literacy is not merely a means of communication; it is also a practice that encourages learners to understand their relationship with their social surroundings. Language learning should not be seen as a neutral activity, the function of which is mainly to help learners acquire the four discrete skills. Rather, critical literacy sees language as a medium not only to express ideas but also to initiate interaction among specific cultures and social groups. Proponents of critical literacy believe that language learning enables students to re-examine hidden textual meanings, to explore the relationships among meaning, cultures, and society, and finally, to gain a deeper understanding of themselves.

Second, critical researchers and educators emphasize the notion of multiple identities. They suggest that educators use texts to make students become aware of their own identities during the learning process (Heffernan and Lewison 2005). As Stevens and Bean (2007) say, "[w]e use texts and textual markers as key ways of constructing and communicating our identities, particularly in relation to others" (p. 25). The use of texts is not restricted to the reader gaining information; instead, texts can be used as a tool to help language learners establish their identities in relation to others while bringing to light hidden implications. Luke (2005) explains that identities are fluid and based on contextual feedback and that critical literacy sees language learning as a process in which identity formation can be achieved through various literacy activities. When students are engaged in interpreting texts, discussing meaningful topics, and experiencing interaction with others, they are offered opportunities to reflect on themselves (Canagarajah 2004).

Third, critical literacy sees language development as a form of active being. Critical instruction stimulates students to question their lives, to examine the relationship between language and society, and to consider actions that can be taken in society (Leland et al. 2005). With regard to language development, when students are encouraged to connect their learning experience with meaningful topics and real-life situations, their comprehension of the texts can be enhanced (Ballenger 1997; Kim 2004). That is, the purpose of critical literacy is to make students more aware of their condition in society while making progress in language development. Language learning becomes an inquiry-based process. Students are invited to play the essential part in discovering how their multiple identities are constructed and positioned within different social and cultural systems. Then students become active learners through critical responses to different types of discourse (Molden 2007).

Critical Literacy Models

In order to deepen the knowledge of critical literacy and to facilitate its implementation, many research and teaching models have been constructed (e.g., Fairclough 1992; Janks 2000; Luke and Freebody 1999). For example, Lewison et al. (2002) have proposed a framework of the four dimensions of critical social practice. That is, students and teachers should engage in four different types of social practice when they are situated in a critical curriculum. First, teachers and students should disrupt the commonplace by changing routines, habits, beliefs, or theories in the traditional classroom. One of the methods is to have students investigate messages and images from popular culture such as magazines, TV, and the Internet, and to determine how these texts can dictate people's perceptions and beliefs. Second, teachers should make students consider multiple perspectives from the world inside and outside the texts. For example, teachers can have students think about texts from perspectives of different characters or from perspectives not represented in the texts.

Third, critical instruction should focus on sociopolitical issues by deconstructing and reconstructing students' concepts and beliefs imbedded in systems. If students are allowed to bring into the classroom meaningful issues, they will have opportunities to question the status quo. Fourth, students should take action to promote social justice through critical literacy. They can use language and other sign systems to put their ideas into action. Teachers should invite students to approach different texts and multiple realities and to gain a better understanding of the world.

Critical literacy represents an unconventional instructional approach, one that encourages students to use language to explore their identities by questioning the daily world. Students can be motivated to make sense of thought-provoking texts and to express their reflective opinions about who they are. With critical literacy, students play an active role in learning, exploring how they are constructed within a broader framework of social and cultural discourse.

Method

Setting and Participants

Three self-discovery activities were implemented in a General English class during the 2012 spring semester at a university in Taiwan. Each activity lasted 3–4 weeks with approximately 13 contact hours per activity; each activity concerned one of the three major relationships in students' lives. These were relationships among students themselves, with their family members, and with friends. For reasons of space, this study focuses on the first activity concerning students' self-image and attempts to explore how EFL students reacted to critical instruction that emphasized the theme of self-discovery.

The informants in the study were 33 freshmen, 12 males and 21 females from the College of Management. All freshmen at the university whose major is not English have to take an English-proficiency placement test as soon as they matriculate. Students are assigned to different English classes according to their performance on the placement test. The level of the students discussed was high-mid.

Data Collection

For purposes of triangulation (Merriam 2001), various qualitative data were collected. First, the instructor kept a weekly journal, the purpose of which was to record events and ideas for later reflection to gain more insight into teaching (Richards and Lockhart 1996). Second, students' assignments were collected to understand students' reactions to the texts. Third, a questionnaire was administered in Week 17; to insure reliability, the questionnaire was anonymous. It included three open-ended questions: (1) "After these three activities were completed, I gained a deeper understanding of myself. For example…"; (2) "List three likes about the activities"; and (3) "List three dislikes about the activities". This data source would help the researcher obtain an initial idea of how students perceived the three activities. Fourth, each student was asked to write a personal reflection paper in Chinese some time after they had completed the open-ended questions. These papers were employed to elicit students' further feedback on their feelings regarding the whole learning process.

Students' opinions expressed in the open-ended questions and the personal reflection papers will be translated from Chinese into idiomatic English. The identity of each student in response to the open-ended questions will be given as L1, L2, and so on. The identity of each student in his/her reflection paper will be given as S1F and S2M, indicating the female student with class number 1 and the male student with class number 2, respectively, and so on.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory serves as the data analytical method in this study. It allowed the researcher to have an open mind because the results were often not expected during the process of data collection and interpretation. This study drew on Corbin and Strauss's (2008) framework of grounded theory to analyze data with shifts from "open" through "axial" to "selective" coding.

The analysis process began by reading all the data for the first time as *open coding*. This is an initial phase for coding data, so the researcher was open to any data items that seemed interesting, relevant, and significant to the study. Corbin and Strauss (2008) offer a basic guideline: who, what, when, where, and how? The second phase involves *axial coding*, which stresses analysis rather than description. Axial coding allowed the researcher to use preconceived categories and frameworks for further analysis and theory development. Initially analyzed in the open coding, data were investigated according to the central theme of the study, i.e., exploring who you are. In the third phase, *selective coding*, the researcher tried to develop a theory based on the interrelated categories found in axial coding. The researcher selected a core category that guided the recurring themes, the important patterns, and the categories. This core category became "a story line" (Creswell 2008, p. 437) for the researcher to write the theory that wove all the classroom phenomena into a coherent whole.

The Description of the Activity Discussed

The activity explored in the study was implemented from Weeks 3 to 6, 2 h on both Monday and Wednesday per

week (approximately 15 h in total). During the activity, students were invited (1) to make sense of a self-discovery text, (2) to respond to the text by fulfilling an assignment inside and outside the classroom, and (3) to discuss with their partner the ideas presented in their own assignment (Table 1). When the entire process was finished, some student pairs were randomly selected to share with the class the thoughts that they had just heard from their partner. "Who Am I?" is a text selected from the *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul* Series. This specific text is a journal about a teenage African-American girl reflecting on the problems in her life. The other three texts were chosen from *Reveal the Real You!: 20 Cool Quizzes All About You*. This book is designed in an engaging way. For example, after readers answer the 12 questions in the first chapter *How Happy Are You?* (i.e., the second text), the score they receive will indicate that they belong to a specific group of people, including "Happy Camper", "Happy… Maybe?", and "Happy… Not!", with some advice afterward. The third text was "How's Your Body Image?", and the fourth "What's Your Self-Image?"

This activity was designed to address both critical and conventional literacy, i.e., literacy that makes students text critics and literacy that helps students increase basic language skills. Prior to beginning work on each of the four texts, students were given a vocabulary sheet in which important words or phrases that would appear in the text were listed. The list was followed by a set of definitions and students had to match each word/phrase with its definition at home before class. When students came to class with their own handout, the teacher (1) had pairs of students check each other's answers and (2) then led the entire class through the words one by one with the correct answers. After students were led by the instructor to make sense of each text, they were given an assignment that usually got started in class and would be finished at home. When students came to the next class with their assignment, they were asked to discuss it with a classmate. Some student pairs were invited to share their impressions of their partner's work. When the activity was finished, students were given a vocabulary recognition test with 15 items.

Table 1 Texts and assignments in the activity

	Self-discovery texts	Assignments
1	"Who Am I?"	A self-introduction poster combining texts and drawings
2	"How Happy Are You?"	A list of ten things that make me happy or unhappy
3	"How's Your Body Image?"	A picture-of-me assignment
4	"What's Your Self-Image?"	Interviews with 5 classmates/roommates about their perception of you and an evaluation of these perceptions

Analysis and Findings

In the analysis, the researcher accessed the data repeatedly and clustered data into recurring patterns from the perspective of critical literacy and/or language learning. Finally, three themes emerged.

Encountering Unexpected Issues and Assignments Related to Self-discovery

The first theme was concerned with how students mediated issues, materials, and assignments to develop their own identity in different situations, i.e., multiple identities that informed their values, interests, thoughts, etc. The following discussion will focus on how students were positioned in a classroom discourse that helped them view themselves and their social environment critically.

In either their responses to the open-ended questions or their reflection papers, all students indicated that they had never expected to discuss such questions as those shown in Table 1. Some students pointed out that they had taken these self-discovery issues for granted. As L13 indicated, "These questions might sound easy, but they are truly philosophical and need much time to ponder." Specifically, different data suggested that students responded reflectively to these identity-oriented concerns. For example, S14F liked the first assignment, in which students, following the instructor's example, were required to complete a half-A4-size poster using different methods (e.g., numbers, drawings, and English words) to provide clues about themselves. While working with a partner, students needed to ask their partner questions in English regarding the partner's identity. In the next class, both members of several student pairs were selected to introduce their partner's poster to the class. S14F considered making a poster, guessing information, and sharing their discussion brand-new ways of self-introduction. Students were no longer asked to tell where they were from or who their family was, as in the typical statement "My father is a businessman and my mother is a housewife". On a deeper level, some students incorporated their real-life experiences into this self-expressive work, which, in turn, became a meaningful aesthetic artifact beyond the linguistic level. As we can see in S14F's reflection paper:

> I spent much time at home figuring out how to talk about myself and it was fun to see my poster amaze my partner and other classmates after they learned about me as a girl who likes the American comic book "Transformers," the touching novel "The Kite

> Runner," the cute cartoon character Pokemon, and so on. Most importantly, I wish I were taller.

Second, students also favored the other topics and pertinent materials because they all related to their personal lives. Many students compared the quizzes about happiness, body image, and self-image to a pop psychological test. In every quiz, students were offered many interesting situations that made them rethink their lives and seek possible responses. As S20F said, "These quizzes gave us a lot to think about regarding how we would react in similar situations. Ha, I'd never care about a zit on my face before a date. That's not me. The quiz 'How Happy Are You?' seemed sort of correct about what kind of person I am." Moreover, data showed that the post-quiz assignment was extremely popular with many students. From their perspective, a list of 10 things making one happy/unhappy was a simple but thought-provoking idea that they had never experienced in their previous English classes. Most students showed positive attitudes toward this assignment as a springboard to deepen their understanding of themselves. In fact, many students believed that completing such a list led them to examine many things to which they were so accustomed that their perceptions had become automatic. For example, S27M reported that he had never thought of exploring such a self-discovery subject. It was meaningful while he was trying his best to relate his college life to this task: "I started considering what kind of person I am and why I get upset or mad in specific situations." Examining S27M's responses to this assignment, we can find that things making him unhappy were associated with academic performance, study load, dormitory life, friendship, gloomy weather, and so on.

Third, students also expressed favorable attitudes toward such topics as *body image* and *self-image*. In response to the body-image quiz, students agreed that this topic deserved considerable attention. As S28M said, "Body image is important to everyone, especially young adults like college freshmen." He continued that physical attraction was a concern that bothered him and his peers a lot, but he appreciated that the instructor asked students to exchange their reflections on body image only with one partner and with no class discussion. While helping students complete the quiz, the instructor shared with students the acne problem that he had had as a teenager. Interestingly, during the break S6M told the instructor that he had been bothered by acne on his face (cf. S6M's post-body-image assignment in Fig. 1) in Appendix and asked the instructor for advice on skin care. This unanticipated event made this activity critical because it had students revisit how their ideas of eyes, ears, etc., were formed. However, this activity would have become more critical if time had been allowed for a discussion regarding such questions as (1) how definitions of beauty (e.g., attractive ears) are constructed, (2) who develops the ideas about beauty, and (3) who would benefits from these definitions. Ultimately, this classroom incident made the instructor rethink the relationship between the instructor and students. In his weekly journal he noted:

> This incident struck me. I shared a troubling problem that I had had at these students' age because I wanted to be empathetic with students. This experience made me think about Gorzelsky's (2002) words about the transforming effects of critical literacy, i.e., modifying "the interactional habits that enact authoritarian relations" (p. 310). For instance, I didn't expect to see a male student approach me for advice on skin care. Then I realized that I had been stereotyping male and female Taiwanese teenagers. This unplanned incident shows that change can affect all the classroom participants, including both teacher and students.

The above discussion suggests that students' responses were grounded in their lives. The situations presented in the pop quiz made students re-assess their identity in different situations. All the self-discovery issues were presented in the texts, brought up during the discussions, or elicited from the assignments, to which students responded reflectively to different degrees. In conclusion, students reacted to the activity within a larger social framework; texts, assignments, and interactions with others moved students from the personal to the social.

Examining Oneself from Multiple Perspectives through Critical Dialogue

The second theme arose from the ample opportunity for students to approach texts and assignments through dialectical interaction between teacher and students and among students themselves. Then students contemplated real-life issues and examined themselves from multiple perspectives. Borrowing Freire's (2000) concept, Bartlett (2005) described such critical dialogue as "a pedagogical process, in which teachers and students actively pursue learning through discussion and debate of sociopolitical realities, processes that entail a particular theory of knowledge" (p. 346). Students said that dialogue during the activity stemmed mainly from post-assignment discussion from the level of pairs to the entire class. In addition, asking each student to interview five friends about their opinions of the student was effective in inviting multiple perspectives and helping students gain a new understanding of themselves.

Promoting multiple perspectives has been seen as an important aspect of critical literacy. It can be brought up either from texts or from classroom participants themselves (McLaughlin and DeVoogd 2004b). In her classroom,

Huang (2009) used a set of questions to help students understand articles from multiple perspectives. Using a different approach, the instructor used a post-assignment discussion technique to make students bring into the classroom their viewpoints recorded in the discussion sheet. However, both methods enacted critical literacy "through students' constant reshaping of beliefs concerning social issues" (Valdez 2012, p. 283). Many students said that sharing reflective ideas with others yielded multiple perspectives, leading students to change their perception of themselves. Two examples are as follows:

> Discussing with others was a valuable experience. My partner was male, and it was interesting to discuss a topic with a classmate of the opposite sex. I'm shy, so I always feel clumsy and embarrassed while talking with males. A discussion with them in class made me talk and gave me a chance to know more about things from a different angle. (S3F)
>
> Understanding others' ideas through discussion was meaningful. Learning ideas from male classmates, especially when their ideas were different from mine, made me wonder whether my concepts were stereotyped. For example, the [post-activity general] discussion with the class about body images made me realize that many male teenagers do care about physical attraction. That's different from my perception of my brother. (S24F)

It is important to note that S3F and S24F, both female, agreed that a dialogue between people of opposite sexes attracted their attention and drew more varied viewpoints on specific topics. According to Jones and Clarke (2007), using texts to help students relate to their experiences is a connection-making practice. This dialogue was a disconnection-making practice because students were encouraged to react not only to the similarities but also to the differences. As mentioned before, a critical dialogue can also occur between teacher and students. That happened when the instructor talked about his finding out about the tradition of Groundhog Day mentioned in the text "How Happy Are You?" With the instructor's sharing in mind, S11F went home and googled this term for more information. Finally, she called her aunt living in the U.S. and discussed with her what she had learned from the instructor and by herself about Groundhog Day.

Many students thought of the interview assignment the most impressive practice in the activity, making them examine their self-image through reflective interaction with their interviewees. This task was challenging but engaging to students because these college freshmen had never conducted an interview. Students played an active role during the interview process. As some students indicated, they felt awkward at the outset of the interviews because "no one would on purpose ask their close friends such identity-based questions" (S27M). However, such an embarrassment soon became a stimulus for them to continue this interesting assignment. More importantly, students agreed that a reflective conversation with friends was critical because it invited others to read their self-image and it encouraged students to gradually discover themselves at a deeper level:

> In daily life I wouldn't ask friends what kind of person I was in their eyes, so their answers were valuable. Some of their perspectives on me were true and not new, but I was surprised when I was described as 'a smart girl who likes to giggle'. That had never crossed my mind. (L11)

What has been discussed shows that students enjoyed discussion and sharing from different viewpoints. Such a critical dialogue made students (1) experience a type of learning that they had never encountered before (L14), (2) become aware of their lives and their identity (L15), and (3) understand what Taiwanese teenagers think (L12). In conclusion, students' new understanding of themselves reflected their linguistic and social realities. It can be confirmed from the postmodern perspective (1) that identity is not static but dynamic in nature and (2) that each individual may demonstrate different identities through participating in various activities every day. In brief, identity information was constantly negotiated from multiple perspectives through critical dialogue with other people both inside and outside the classroom.

Becoming Critically Literate in the Learning Process

Many students compared this activity with their prior learning. While many of them provided positive remarks on their self-awareness experience, three students cast doubt on what they had learned in the activity, wavering between conventional and critical practices. Accordingly, the third theme reflected both the certainty and the uncertainty of the practice of critical literacy in the EFL classroom.

Students stated that the vocabulary sheet and the related exercises changed their perception of English learning. Such a word-definition matching exercise resembled a word game, making students actively seek the meaning of each listed word/phrase. Before the teacher had students in pairs work on the sheet in class, each student was required to complete it at home. When the instructor led students in discussing their answers to the matching exercise, he tried to help students understand words/phrases within a larger social context. For example, some students said that they would not forget the meaning of the phrase "get along like two peas in a pod" because the instructor not only taught them the meaning of *pea* and *pod* but also used the example

of two female students who had introduced themselves as best friends at the beginning of the semester. Another instance happened when students came across the word "clique" in a text and the instructor used the movie *Mean Girls* to briefly discuss the phenomena of girl cliques and school bullying in American society. This intervention helped students remember the word on a linguistic level and understand the word on a socio-cultural level. As S19F recalled, because she had seen the movie earlier, she was able to reflect on the movie later from an alternative viewpoint. This event suggests that critical literacy should not be limited to the awareness of social issues because it can also start from the comprehension of vocabulary within a larger social framework.

Accordingly, this critical English language teaching helped students become critically literate in their learning. In response to the self-discovery texts, L19 said that Taiwanese students in senior and junior high school were required to understand every word in a text to score high on exams, but there were too many idioms and colloquial expressions that prevented them from fully understanding the texts. Such doubt about self-discovery texts suggests that it is important for critical educators to bear in mind Janks's (2000) "access" dimension of critical literacy that emphasizes provision to students of access to multiple discourses, genres, modes, literacies, and cultural models. As shown in this activity, the instructor asked students to work on a vocabulary sheet at home and to go through the words, idioms, and colloquial phrases on the sheet in the classroom, which was an effort to shorten the gap between students' academic English ability and their lack of access to idioms and colloquial expressions.

S5F said that these texts were so engaging that she became willing to preview and review them, which had never happened in her previous English classrooms. From a socio-cultural angle, she indicated that such texts were part of their lives even though some of the concepts were more related to American culture. She could still approach these texts vicariously as a teenage girl in Taiwan. S24F provided a critical perspective on this learning experience: "This activity not only helped me develop my English ability but also made me become more willing to pay attention to my life and people around me. The topics we had discussed made me change to some degree because I started thinking about my relationships with others." From the perspective of language learning, some students came up with some ideas that could be considered in the future. S6M said that interaction should be a basis for English learning, but that this activity did not allow sufficient time for discussion. S30F suggested that students could also make a list of ten places that students like to go after class.

Three students conceded that they had been engaged in the activity, which had grabbed their attention and made them explore themselves. However, they still formed an ambivalent attitude. S20F confessed that she enjoyed exchanging ideas with others, but that she was not used to this type of learning and she preferred using a textbook in the classroom. L13 said, "The self-discovery texts were not dull, but regular textbooks might be more effective in helping me enlarge my vocabulary and increase my English ability." L16 said that this activity lacked grammar drills and taught too many colloquial expressions. He/She also suggested that "this class should offer more practice and explanation for job-oriented exams such as the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication)."

The students called into question the critical instruction discussed so far as being unable to teach students enough grammar, help them enlarge their vocabulary, or provide other exercises such as drills to perform well on exams based on concepts of accountability. As some students mentioned, in junior/senior high school teachers controlled the classroom, offered the meaning of vocabulary words, and interpreted texts from a standard textbook. Consequently, S20F, L13 and L16 were caught between their present and previous experiences, which positioned them as learners who critically responded to this activity in different ways.

Conclusion

This study indicates that the self-discovery texts were effective in enhancing students' self-awareness and in facilitating critical dialogue among classroom participants. Students examined their roles in different contexts from multiple perspectives through being engaged in meaningful issues, assignments, and interactions. Moreover, practicing an unconventional approach sensitized students to their learning while helping them develop their English ability. It can be concluded that the activity not only stimulated students to read the word and the world (Freire and Macedo 1987), but also made them conscious of their learning from a critical perspective. In this EFL classroom in Taiwan, although it was the first time students experienced instruction that involved conventional and critical practices, most students agreed that they had benefited from such an activity both as critical thinkers and as EFL learners.

The four dimensions of critical social practice (Lewison et al. 2002) can be used here to review the discussed activity from a deeper perspective. First, the instructor disrupted the commonplace using four self-discovery texts. In the opinion of students, these alternative texts positioned them to encounter unexpected issues and assignments related to self-discovery. Specifically, this response highlights the importance of text selection in implementing critical literacy (Kempe 2001). Second, the activity was critical when students examined themselves from multiple perspectives. This critical dimension was based on dialectical interaction

between teacher and students and among students themselves. Students examined and shared their experiences through making sense of self-discovery texts and listening to the viewpoints of their classmates. When students juxtaposed and compared multiple perspectives, they gained a deeper understanding of themselves and the world.

Third, the instructor and students focused on sociopolitical issues when the teacher reflected on his relationship with students and when students were motivated to explore different self-discovery issues and to interpret themselves through real-life experience. This reflects the critical literacy notion that literacy cannot be limited to the classroom; on the contrary, critical educators should address issues related to students' lives and then make students consider meaningful issues. Fourth, a critical literacy classroom should help students take action to better understand themselves. Students in this activity experienced a process of reflection and action; they were able to become self-aware and critically literate in their learning. Such a change in attitudes, beliefs and concepts was a form of social action that can be achieved through critical moments, i.e., the time "we seize the chance to do something different"… "we realize that some new understanding is coming about" (Pennycook 2004, p. 330).

A final thought is related to the doubts of a few students on the critical approach with regard to their language improvement. Critical instructors can assess students through responsive assessment such as logs, scrapbooks, narratives, interviews, role-playing. In Harrison's (2004) opinion, such assessment emphasizes personal experiences, multiple perspectives, students' responses, the entire learning process, etc. As S9F indicated, the activity was a prolonged experience in which students were provided with ample opportunities to practice their four skills while relating their lives to emergent issues. Responsive assessment should help students understand different types of assessment and change their notion of language development.

Acknowledgments The research of this study would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the associate editor who provided many insightful comments. He is also indebted to the support provided by the National Science Council of Taiwan under the research Grant NSC 100-2410-H-029-038.

Appendix

See Fig. 1.

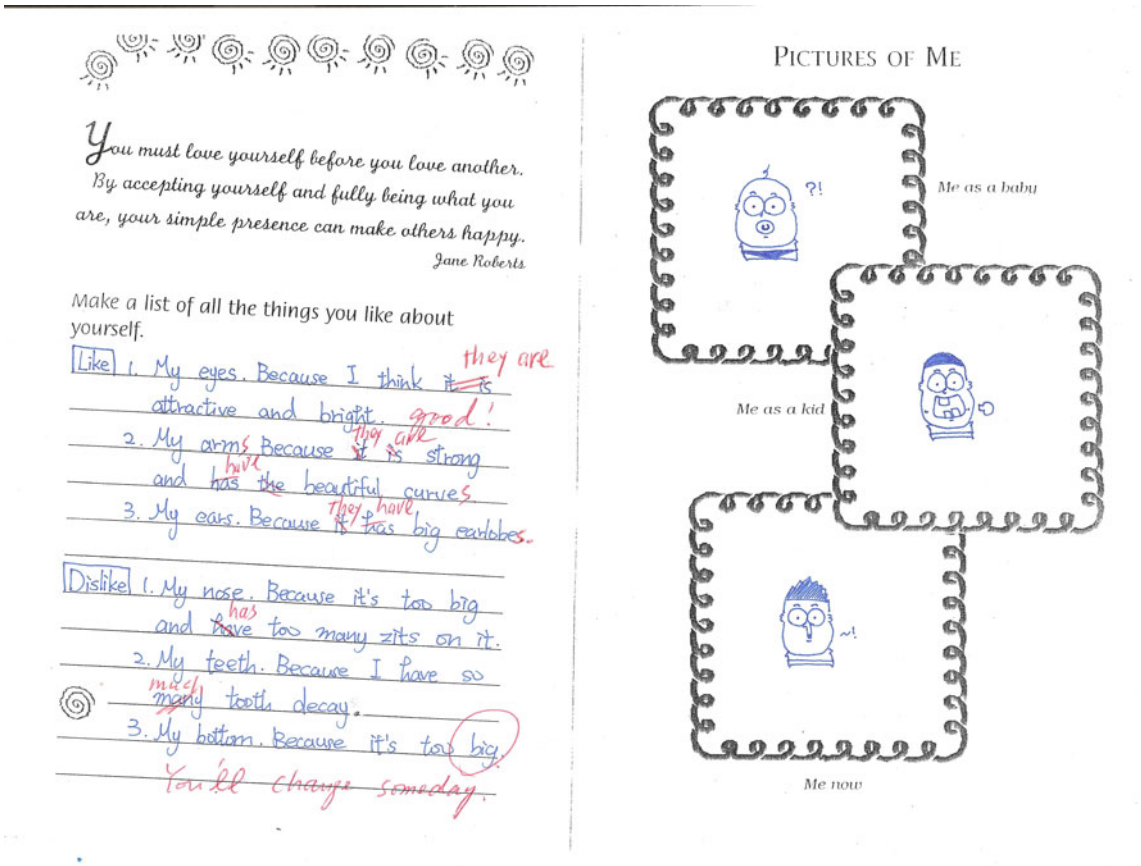

Fig. 1 S6M's picture-of-me assignment

References

Ashcraft, C. (2012). But how do we talk about it?: Critical literacy practices for addressing sexuality with youth. *Curriculum Inquiry, 42*(5), 597–628.

Ballenger, C. (1997). Social identities, moral narratives, scientific argumentation: Science talk in a bilingual classroom. *Language and Education, 11*(1), 1–14.

Bartlett, L. (2005). Dialogue, knowledge, and teacher-student relations: Freirean pedagogy in theory and practice. *Comparative Education Review, 49*(3), 344–364.

Canagarajah, S. (2004). Subversive identities, pedagogical safe houses, and critical learning. In B. Norton & K. Toohey (Eds.), *Critical pedagogies and language learning* (pp. 116–137). New York: Cambridge University Press.

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

Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education.

Dutro, E. (2009). Children writing "Hard Times": Lived experiences of poverty and the class-privileged assumptions of a mandated curriculum. *Language Arts, 87*(2), 89–107.

Fairclough, N. (Ed.). (1992). *Critical language awareness*. London: Longman.

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

Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. South Hadley: Bergin & Garvey.

Gorzelsky, G. (2002). Ghosts: Liberal education and negotiated authority. *College English, 64*(3), 302–325.

Harrison, C. (2004). Postmodern principles for responsive reading assessment. *Journal of Research in Reading, 27*(2), 163–173.

Heffernan, L. (2008). Overview: Why do we need an instructional theory of critical literacy? In M. Lewison, C. H. Leland, & J. C. Harste (Eds.), *Creating critical classrooms: K-8 reading and writing with an edge*. New York: Erlbaum.

Heffernan, L., & Lewison, M. (2005). What's lunch got to do with?: Critical literacy and the discourse of the lunchroom. *Language Arts, 83*(2), 107–117.

Huang, S. (2009). EFL reading through a critical literacy perspective. *English Teaching & Learning, 33*(3), 51–93.

Huang, S. (2012). The integration of 'critical' and 'literacy' education in the EFL curriculum: Expanding the possibilities of critical writing practices. *Language, Culture and Curriculum, 25*(3), 283–298.

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

Jones, S., & Clarke, L. W. (2007). Disconnections: Pushing readers beyond connections and toward the critical. *Pedagogies, 2*(2), 95–115.

Kempe, A. (2001). No single meaning: Empowering students to construct socially critical readings of the text. In H. Fehring & P. Green (Eds.), *Critical literacy: A collection of articles from the Australian Literacy Educators' Association* (pp. 40–57). Newark: International Reading Association.

Kim, M. (2004). Literature discussion in adult L2 learning. *Language and Education, 18*(2), 145–166.

Ko, M., & Wang, T.-F. (2012). EFL learners' critical literacy practices: A case study of four college students in Taiwan. *The Asia-Pacific Educatioin Researcher*. doi:10.1007/s40229-012-0013-5.

Leland, C. H., Harste, J. C., & Huber, K. R. (2005). Out of the box: Critical literacy in a first-grade classroom. *Language Arts, 82*(4), 257–268.

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

Luke, A. (2005). Evidence-based literacy policy: A critical alternative. In N. Bascia (Ed.), *International handbook of educational policy* (pp. 34–61). London: Springer.

Luke, A. (2012). Critical literacy: Foundational notes. *Theory into Practice, 51*, 4–11.

Luke, A., & Freebody, P. (1999). *Further notes on the four resources model*. *Reading Online*, Retrieved December 18, 2012, from http://www.readingonline.org/research/lukefreebody.html.

McLaughlin, M., & DeVoogd, G. L. (2004a). Critical literacy as comprehension: Expanding reader response. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 48*(1), 52–62.

McLaughlin, M., & DeVoogd, G. L. (2004b). *Critical literacy: Enhancing students' comprehension of text*. New York: Scholastic.

Merriam, S. B. (2001). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Molden, K. (2007). Critical literacy, the right answer for the reading classroom: Strategies to move beyond comprehension for reading improvement. *Reading Improvement, 44*(1), 50–56.

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

Morrow, R. A., & Torres, C. A. (2002). *Reading Freire and Habermas: Critical pedagogy and transformative social change*. New York: Teachers College Press.

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

Richards, J. C., & Lockhart, C. (1996). *Reflective teaching in second language classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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

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