

EFL TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH CRITICAL READING PEDAGOGY : MEETING THE CHALLENGES IN THE ASIAN CLASSROOM

Lawrence Jun Zhang
Nanyang Technological University ,Singapore

Abstract

Can EFL teachers teach critical reading in the classroom ? This paper examines two strands of pivotal knowledge and practices in a reading pedagogical course offered in an advanced teacher professional development program in Singapore . Focusing on a pedagogy grounded in sociocultural theory and critical discourse analysis , I describe , interpret and discuss excerpts of critical reading lessons for 35 EFL teachers and present possibilities for change in EFL reading pedagogy . I conclude by emphasizing the intent of this paper to raise awareness among language teachers and to bring ashore challenges facing critical pedagogy for ESL /EFL reading teachers in classrooms in Asia .

Key words

critical reading ; critical pedagogy ; EFL teacher training ; teacher professional development

1 . The Case for a Critical Pedagogy

This paper reports on a study of 35 English Language teachers taking a one year teacher professional development program leading to the award of a Postgraduate Diploma in ELT . It makes an effort to interpret and frame these teachers' initial resistance to and final acceptance of some of the basic principles of a critical pedagogy . It also examines their nascent awareness of the significance of critically approaching texts both as readers themselves and reading teachers for the purpose of enhancing their professional expertise in addition to increasing their English language proficiency . It analyses the process of their negotiating identities , repositionings and other related issues (Pennycook 1994 , 2000) . While focusing on a pedagogy grounded in sociocultural theory of learning (Block 2003 ; Bourdieu 1992 ; Norton 2000) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992 , 2001) using " community texts " (Luke et al . 2001) in this study where the step by step movements of critical reading lessons are described and discussed , the intent of this paper is to raise awareness among teachers as well as to bring ashore challenges facing critical pedagogy for reading teachers in Asian ESL /EFL classrooms and discuss possibilities for change in language teaching pedagogy .

I argue that , although there is a tendency to neglect it in many ESL /EFL programmes , teaching critical reading pedagogy to EFL teachers should be an important part of teacher professional development programmes where teachers in training should be given chances to exercise agency in the process , as , upon completion of the training , they are to be agents for change in classrooms (Crookes & Lehner 1998 ; Norton 2001 ; Wallace 1999 , 2005) . Various reasons are given for such neglect , with the major one being that EFL learners need to develop decoding and vocabulary skills in order to read better . Because of this commonly held view , it is most often the case that the pedagogy of reading is reductionist in orientation and a possibility that the teaching of language proficiency can be done simultaneously with teaching critical reading and thinking skills is not considered . With a sociocultural turn in teacher

education in recent years (Block 2003 ;Johnson 2006 ;Norton &Toohey 2004) ,Ialso argue that the time when they are on the training programme is an opportune platform where reflexivity ,reciprocity and responsibility are crucial to their making further progress in their professional lives towards becoming critical practitioners in and outside language classrooms (Zhang 2004) .Iemphasise the importance of the critical pedagogy advocated in this paper against such a sociocultural context where reverence for knowledge and lack of inclination to challenge printed texts are commonplace (Zhang 2001) .I conclude the paper by discussing some wider implications of such pedagogy for other similar classrooms in Asia .

2 . The Study

By reporting a study of 35 EFL in-service teachers taking a one-year teacher professional development course leading to the award of the Postgraduate Diploma in ELT ,I make an effort to interpret and frame their response to some of the basic principles of critical pedagogy .I also examine their nascent awareness of the significance of approaching texts critically both as readers themselves and reading teachers .I also analyze the process of their negotiating identities ,repositionings and other related issues .Focusing on a pedagogy grounded in a sociocultural learning theory and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992 ;Pennycook 1990 ;Wallace 2005) using community texts ,I take as my objectives the raising of awareness among teachers as well as bringing ashore challenges facing critical pedagogy for ESL /EFL reading teachers in Asian classrooms .I would like to find out if critical reading pedagogy is feasible as part of a teacher professional development program .Specifically ,I addressed the following research questions .

2 .1 Research Questions

- (1) What is the Chinese EFLteachers response to a critical reading pedagogy ?
- (2) Are they aware of the utility of this critical reading pedagogy in EFL reading ?

What motivated this action research were the observed conundrums or problems in EFL reading classes in Asia .Ifelt that the teaching of reading could be more interactive if a critical pedagogy were adopted in teacher professional development courses .Wallace (2005) has observed that in EFL reading classes students usually do not have opportunity for performing higher order thinking tasks (e.g. applying , hypothesizing , analyzing , synthesizing , comparing and evaluating what they read) .Consequently ,they will not learn to read critically ;nor will they reach evaluative understanding of the text and develop their thinking ability . Oftentimes ,students get demotivated in doing independent reading ,as they are used to listening to teachers explanation . Over the years ,students have developed only one strong “reading strategy ” ,that of listening to the teacher explaining the text sentence by sentence .As teacher talk dominates class interaction ,students are not actively engaged in the meaning-making process ,or ,if any ,the process involves readers decoding of text at best .Therefore ,the existing knowledge of students is not effectively drawn out for the benefit of the whole class . There is a lack of richness or diversity in classroom activity .As the overwhelming goal is to comprehend the text ,reading tends to be isolated from knowledge expansion as well as development of other language skills .As a result ,classroom dynamics is weak .

When I adopted critical reading pedagogy as a way of helping EFL teachers to become aware of reading as a social process in addition to improving their language proficiency and methodological richness ,Ifocused on how this could have been explored by referring to how critical reading is defined .To make things simpler ,in addition to asking my students to define the term ,It took critical reading to mean that reading is a social process ,where the social context ,social role of the author ,the text and the reader ,identities of L2 readers ,the different schemata that readers and writers bring into the reading event and the way the text is responded ,interpreted and analyzed ,all have important roles to play in helping the readers understand the text .

3 . Procedures in Classroom Practice

Ifollowed Wallace s recommendation and tried to encourage in-service teachers to take a stance in the spirit of resistance rather than opposition .Thirty five EFL teachers from China participated in this action research .These teachers had teaching experiences ranging from three to five years in their home institutions but had seldom talked about critical reading ,let alone a critical pedagogy .The course was a

weekly 2 hour module that lasted for 12 weeks. Crookes and Leher (1998) work on teacher education that advocates a critical lens in classroom practice and Wallace's Work (1999, 2005) on critical reading are both directly relevant to the present study. Wallace has made an effort to have classified the orientations to critical pedagogy into three main strands: (1) emancipatory (empowerment); (2) difference-oriented (distance oneself from text); and (3) oppositional (resistance from the margins).

3.1 Collecting and classifying texts

The tools for text analysis in my study (as well as lesson procedures) included systemic functional grammar and critical theory. Preparation and delivery of such a pedagogy included classifying the collected texts according to: (1) audience; (2) purpose; (3) context; and (4) culture, and then discussion followed in this framework, as explained below. Altogether about 10 texts of various sorts were collected. These texts include articles published in *The Straits Times*, *Today*, *Channel News Asia* and *The New Paper*, all of which are Singapore based publishers or media businesses. Almost all the texts were of general interest or specifically relevant to this group of EFL teachers from China. One text of general interest, for example, was a newspaper report on the rapid ageing societies we will have to face in 50 years time; and another text titled "Who Is a Singaporean?" for instance, discussed sports talents such as Ms Jing Junhong and Ms Li Jiawei from China, who, after being granted Singaporean citizenships, played for Singapore in international competitions and did Singapore proud but were debated by some Singapore born readers whether or not they were Singaporeans. In other words, such a government policy was contested in the report and nationality in relation to patriotism was redefined.

3.2 Implementing critical reading pedagogy

My teaching of reading essentially centered around the following categories of critical reading questions, as adapted from the *Critical Reading Pedagogy Questions* (Tasmania Department of Education, Tasmania, Australia).

- (1) Textual purpose(s) : What does the writer want us to know ?
- (2) Textual structures and features : What kind of structures and features does the text display ?
- (3) Construction of characters : How are the people constructed /described in the text ?
- (4) Gaps and silences : Who are silenced or missing ? What is silenced or missing ?
- (5) Power and interest : Who are privileged and who are excluded ?
- (6) Whose view and whose reality are represented : What social realities are represented by the text ?
- (7) Interrogating the writer : Is the text fair ? Why does the writer write the text this way ?
- (8) Negotiating multiple meanings : What other interpretations of the text can readers make ?

In organizing the reading lessons, I followed Wallace's (1999) practice by spontaneously eliciting responses from students, organizing think pair share activities, organizing group discussions, prompting brainstorming and debates, or assigning a written essay in which they were expected to reflect on their own EFL professional practice.

4. Results and Discussion

I present the results by answering the two research questions raised earlier: (1) What is the Chinese EFL teachers' response to a critical reading pedagogy? and (2) Are Chinese EFL teachers aware of the utility of this critical reading pedagogy in EFL reading?

Results show that the in-service teachers' resistance to such a critical reading pedagogy was daunting at the start of the course. They felt a bit unexpected when I started teaching reading using critical pedagogy, a way with which they were not very familiar. Their understanding was that all texts were intended to convey meaning objectively and the act of deriving meaning from printed texts entailed reading. Nothing was mentioned regarding how readers were positioned by writers and subjectivity and identity were all intertwined in readers' interpreting of texts. However, as the lessons progressed, some of the main principles of critical pedagogy gradually sank in. They learned that critical reading entailed going beyond textual meaning to search, contextualize, compare/contrast, explain and evaluate the hidden grammar, including the author's purpose, values and attitudes. They also realized that they needed to put the text in its historical and cultural contexts; taking a stance during reading was essential as

they became aware that no texts were neutral . By comparing ,contrasting their own values and beliefs with those represented in the text and evaluating the logic and strength of arguments they were able to draw analogy between what they had read and the real life world around them . Instead of resisting the critical pedagogy I adopted ,they showed more interest in the diversity of methodological options available for teaching EFL reading . Due to space ,I present the following excerpt of an episode of a critical reading pedagogy oriented lesson to illustrate the process .

Excerpt 1

Text :2 Billion Senior Citizens in the World By 2050

LZ :What comes to your mind when you see “senior citizens” ?

ST :Grey hair ,physical disability to move around for food ,inability to survive on their own ,cannot contribute to society because of old age .

LZ :Do you believe this is really the case ?Why do you think the report is written in such a way ? What is the purpose of the writer to do so ?

ST :I believe so . The writer wants to warn the general public of issues caused by the ageing population .

LZ :Do you believe that the severity is really that much ?

ST :Yes ,because that s how the text says it .

ST :What kind of value systems do you think the writer has when you read this piece of writing ?

ST :Iam not sure .

LZ :Think of Chinese culture and how the aged are taken care of and how they contribute to society in some other ways ,e. g. ,taking care of their grandchildren so that the working mums and dads can keep working and earning income to support the family . Don t you think this is also one way of showing the value of being a senior citizen ?

ST :Yes . But somehow I did not realize this point when I was reading it .

LZ :Look at the use of figures/statistics :“ 2 billion senior citizens in the world by 2050 .” What effect does the use of figures/stats have on you ?

ST :Striking ,amazingly fast ageing society we are in . We will have to face various challenges such as shortage of workforce .

LZ :Do you see any social equity in the text when senior citizens are described as a burden and a challenge for society ?

ST :At the start I didn t ,but I now realize that expressions such as “developing nations fear” give readers strong impression that developing nations will have to face even worse problems . In a way ,it is an unfair statement on the social issue ...

As is evident from the limited data presented here ,students views of society also changed because the critical reading pedagogy I had adopted addressed social and political issues and it was committed to the pursuit of social justice ,as was in the case of Wallace s (1999 ,2005) . The students views of pedagogy changed because critical reading pedagogy was interventional and it was a dialogic process in classroom procedure ,where interactivity dominated classroom teaching . This gave the teacher ample opportunity to make the reading lesson alive (see e. g. Zhang 2007) . Their views of text changed because they realized that (1) all texts were ideationally biased ;(2) texts arose out of social relationships ,in particular ,relationships based on power ;(3) texts related to each other intertextually ;and (4) texts had a history as did the discourses embedded within them (see Wallace 2005 ,for detailed discussion) .

Students views of reading changed as well . Reading was no longer regarded purely as a cognitive process . The social nature of the learning act became prominent . Reading is doing . As a social process , in which meaning negotiation involves other social issues and interpretations ,reading did not occur in a vacuum ;rather ,meaning was negotiated within communities or communities of practice and knowledge construction occurred in a context specific manner . This is evidenced by the way the lesson was conducted and the teacher student interaction took place in the classroom ,as shown below .

Excerpt 2

Text : Who Is a Singaporean ?

LZ : We can see the inherent power relations in the text —everything is manipulated by the writer to serve his /her purpose —either to sensationalise the phenomenon ,to promote the sale of the newspaper ,to disadvantage a certain group of people in order to put another group at an advantageous position .

ST :So ,readers are repositioned by the writer ,and the ageing senior citizens are “ Othered ” by the writer .

ZJ :You are right . We need to realise that our feelings ,attitudes ,and values are all manipulated by language and its use in various textual and cultural contexts . We are able to become agents of social change in order to remove inequalities and injustice .

ST :But is this still reading that we are talking about ?

ZJ :What do you think ?What s your definition of reading ?

ST :Reading to learn new words .

ZJ :Yes ,you are right ,but if we only focus on this level ,our critical ability will never develop .

ST :Ok . Lets think about this in our future teaching .

ZJ :Where are you and where are your identities in the text ?Who are you in your reading of the text ?What kind of schematic knowledge came to your mind when words such as “ developed ” and “ developing countries ”surfaced in the text ?

ST :Poor ,shabby looking houses ,dirty streets and high rising skyscrapers .

ZJ :Well ,you see ,we all have stereotypical ideas . These are used by the writers for their own purposes .

ST :I did not know that the text had so much for us to look at . We thought in reading a text as long as words meanings became clear and that if syntactical difficulties were solved ,textual meaning would become clear as well .

LZ :In fact ,when we read ,and particularly when we teach EFL ,we have to help students understand the text by asking three types of questions :literal ,interpretive /inferential and evaluative ...critical reading looks at how readers interpret and evaluate the text ,which is imbued with ideological positionings of particular groups of readers —favouring some and short changing others .

ST :Ok . This means ,in fact ,we as readers were manipulated and positioned by the writer .

ZJ :You got it . That s really what we have been trying to analyze in these lessons ...

As can be seen from what the in service teachers commented and reflected on regarding the critical reading lessons I conducted within the critical pedagogical framework reported above ,the issue of teaching critical reading to Asian EFL students or practitioners alike is an important one . Any thinking of Asian learners ,especially Chinese learners ,based on old mental frameworks of them being Confucius ,could be misleading . This is because societies have been changing rapidly and the ideological change comes along with the socio economic change taking place in any given society . The same applies to in-service EFL teachers from China ,or possibly in any place in Asia . The key point to strike home is the induction of them to the ideas of developing critical reading abilities and teaching reading critically in classroom practice . Once the students and in service teachers understand that a particular approach benefits their EFL learning and /or teaching ,they are ready to take up the challenge .

Crookes and Lehner (1998) recommend that the simultaneous development of English communicative abilities together with the ability to apply them be taken as joint goals in EFL /ESL critical pedagogy in order to develop a critical awareness of the world and the ability to act on it to improve matters . Just like what one of my in service teachers said after the critical reading lesson ,“ most often ,EFL reading teachers have no awareness of the social issues in teaching foreign language reading skills . The default thinking is that learning to read in EFL is only a matter of linguistic issue ”(see Zhang ,Gu & Hu 2007 ,for discussion) ,so most teachers focus on developing EFL pre service teachers /students language skills only ,including word recognition ,skimming ,scanning ,and so on . The way that reading is taught in this critical reading course has offered me an option of how I can motivate my EFL in service teachers /students to read more actively as a way expanding their professional expertise knowledge ,

understand society and do their own share to make the world a better place to live in ,and meanwhile increase their linguistic competence . This is because through EFL reading they also learn about the world they live in and the various social issues that confront them .

5 . Conclusion

Crookes and Lehner (1998) suggested that “critical pedagogy should be seen as a social and educational process ,rather than as a pedagogical method ” (p . 326) because it is more concerned with how language can effect personal and social change than it is with how to teach language more effectively . While I agree with what they say ,the way I conducted reading lessons within a critical pedagogy framework further suggests that any intent to include elements of critical reading in ELF reading lessons did enhance the dynamics of the reading class as well as students active participation in the dialogic reading process . The in service EFL teachers enjoyed it . This suggests that it is possible to teach critical reading and develop a critical pedagogy in Chinese in service teachers and Chinese EFL in -service teachers are open to pedagogical innovations that would potentially benefit them .

I concur with Wallace that the most common practice in reading instruction has much to do with how teachers understand the teaching of reading and reading itself . If the teacher and students alike are not confined to the “hermetic bounds of the text ,they will not take whatever they read as true ” (Wallace 1999 :109) . Instead ,they should be encouraged to exploit the text as a means to developing integrated language skills and critical thinking . To this end ,critical reading can be introduced not only as a new dimension in reading instruction but also as a potential and possible solution to the above problems often mentioned by EFL /ESL reading teachers as conundrums . While I acknowledge that the critical pedagogy reported in this paper was conducted in Singapore ,a foreign land for Chinese EFL in service teachers for professional development purposes ,I would like to recommend that teachers in Asian EFL classrooms try this pedagogy in the hope of diversifying their teaching methods and enhancing classroom dynamics and interactivity for optimal instructional outcomes .

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