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Investigating ideology through framing: a critical discourse analysis of a critical literacy lesson

Abstract

This paper examines classroom discourse from English lessons that implemented a critical literacy unit focused on a contextualized social issue. Utilizing the theoretical notion of frame (Goffman 1974), the analysis of classroom excerpts highlights how ideologies about English teaching and learning at times enter the discourse of the classes, not only overtly through the teacher's talk but also through the more subtle, interactional orchestration of activities. These ideologies, it is argued, pedagogically position the lessons with reference to a procedural, exam-oriented frame, undermining the potential of the content of talk and the critical literacy unit. Two key implications are drawn from the analysis. First, that in settings with deeply entrenched pedagogic traditions of standards, exam-focused literacy and the attendant instrumentalist view of language education, critical literacy educators may find it helpful to make these ideologies themselves the target of a critical literacy curriculum. Second, it is argued that the notion of frame can be usefully drawn upon in critical analyses of classroom discourse to make visible and understand how ideology as an interpretive framework shapes classroom talk and the learning made possible by that talk.

Keywords: critical literacy, classroom discourse analysis, frames, ideology, Goffman

Introduction

Critical literacy is a well-established pedagogic approach that aims to raise students' awareness to how language use structures and is structured by the social world vis-à-vis places, identities, and knowledge (Janks 2010a, Luke 2012b). With roots in Freirean critical pedagogy and critical discourse analysis (particularly Fairclough 1992), critical literacy educators situate the teaching of reading, writing, viewing and representing firmly within the social contexts of students' lived experiences. Learning in critical literacy classrooms is therefore geared toward unpacking how everyday textual practices manifest power relations and contribute to symbolic and material inequalities among social groups. There is a sizable body of empirical work that documents how critical literacy as a socially-committed pedagogy of language learning may be implemented in diverse educational settings (e.g., Abednia and Izadinia 2013, Lopez 2011, Morrell 2008).

Much less attention has been paid over the years to how critical literacy itself must operate within existing power structures that impinge upon its practice. These power structures may be of various origins (political, social, religious) and operate at various interconnected levels of organization (global, national, institutional, subject-culture). Recent work has sought to offer more complex and perhaps less triumphant accounts of critical literacy as enacted in classrooms constrained by narrow curricula (Weninger, 2018; Pandya 2014) and critical literacy scholars have also re-emphasized the need for localized formulations of critical literacy pedagogy (Comber 2015, Luke 2012a).

This article aligns with this recent body of work by problematizing critical literacy as classroom pedagogy. Specifically, I examine teacher-student interactions in critical literacy-infused English lessons in Singapore to highlight the structuring effect of ideologies about teaching and learning that originate from and circulate within the larger social and institutional context. The

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data come from a research project that aimed to introduce critical media literacy into English teaching in two Singapore secondary schools. I draw on lesson transcripts from two participating teachers who co-designed and taught the critical literacy lessons. Drawing on the theoretical notion of frame (Goffman 1974), understood within the context of classroom discourse as ‘ideologies in practice’ (Rymes 2016, 207), I examine two ways in which ideology is (made) visible through frames in classroom discourse. An analysis of the production format (Goffman 1981) traces ideology in teachers’ talk as broader social beliefs that frame the critical literacy unit. The analytic lens of framing resources (Rymes 2016) on the other hand is used to examine ideology becoming apparent in the contingent, locally produced framing of particular learning episodes. Both types of analysis highlight the powerful framing effect of an instrumental, procedural ideology that characterizes English teaching in Singapore, manifested and evidenced in the interactional details of a teaching unit that in its content broke from the prevailing decontextualized approach to language teaching.

The article makes contributions to research and scholarship on critical literacy as well as classroom discourse more broadly. In terms of the former, the study highlights the strong influence of subject ideologies on the conduct and success of critical literacy as enacted curriculum at the classroom level. In specific, the paper argues that in contexts where language teaching is couched within a high-stakes, exam-driven subject culture, critical literacy education should consider as its target the oppressive pedagogies that perpetuate this ideology. The paper’s primary contribution to the study of classroom discourse concerns the analytic value of frame/ing for examining the co-constitution of social structure and local context within classroom interactional practice. In particular, the analysis shows how the notion of frame can be operationalized to capture ideologies manifesting in and shaping classroom discourse at multiple levels; as explicit commentary about

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broader societal beliefs (about languages and language learning, for instance) and as more implicit and habituated pedagogical routines. In doing so, the study is aligned with research that has examined discourse as principally implicated in the reproduction of a normative social order within classrooms (Amir and Musk, 2013, Heller 2015, Niemi and Bateman, 2015).

Critical literacy pedagogy

Critical literacy is a pedagogical approach to the teaching of reading and writing and in more recent iterations, to diverse modes and media of meaning-making. One way to understand its aims is to describe what may be considered *uncritical* literacy. Uncritical literacy is understanding reading, writing and meaning-making primarily as a functional, transactional, even cognitive affair: language reflects the world, so in order to successfully participate in that world one simply needs to acquire the tools to decode it and to encode what one wants to communicate. Uncritical literacy entails the transmission and acquisition (or attempts thereof) of reading and writing 'skills' in order to meet externally defined standards of mastery whose ultimate purpose amounts to little more than sorting learners (excellent communicator, poor speller, gifted writer, slow reader). Uncritical literacy entails teaching, learning and knowing how to read and write *without* ever asking the question: How does language represent but also construe the world? Whose interests are served by this representation? How can we change the world and make it more equitable by transforming the way we read, write and think about it (cf. Luke 2012b)? Clearly, these are the questions that do matter for *critical* literacy. In the case of critical literacy education in formal school settings, we may also add further questions: What counts as successful language learning? Which/whose varieties are legitimate targets for learning and why? Which/whose identities and experiences count as legitimate resources for learning in the language classroom? In this way, critical literacy

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aims for students ‘to read both the word and the world in relation to power, identity, difference and access to knowledge, skills, tools and resources’ (Janks 2013, 227) in order to develop an awareness and sense of agency to transform it.

While critical literacy advocates pluralistic pedagogies that attend to the contextual contingencies within which learning is embedded, there are several guiding principles one may consider in designing critical literacy curricula. First, literacy development should be firmly rooted in students’ sociocultural world. This idea goes back to Dewey (1938), Freire (1996[1970]) and others (Gee 1990, New London Group 1996), and is important because locating literacy education within familiar worlds provides the experiential basis for ‘othering the self’ (Luke 2004) – a process of understanding identity (of self and other) as historically and discursively constituted. Critical literacy in classrooms typically entails a process of deconstruction: close linguistic-semiotic analysis of texts in order to uncover the discursive constitution of identities and worlds. Such deconstruction is made meaningful as part of a broader social/cultural analysis that situates individual texts as part of discourse practices or orders of discourse (Luke 2012b). In effect, learning to read in critical literacy is learning to read against the ideological positions offered in texts (Janks 2010a) and learning to write is being aware that writing is a political act of representation, both of self and of those one writes about. At the same time, for scholars such as Janks (2010a), part of empowering through critical literacy is to give students access to dominant forms and genres of communication, since wielding those is an important prerequisite for critiquing them. While critique is central to critical literacy, a purely critical-rational approach to texts, as Misson and Morgan (2006) argued, is insufficient to fully account for texts’ powerful influence on readers. They emphasize the need to combine critique with an exploration of aesthetics and pleasure as the basis for critical literacy. The final pedagogic tenet of critical literacy

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I wish to highlight has to do with the ultimate purpose of critical education, which is transformation (Freire 1996[1970], 83). Within critical literacy, this has been captured by the idea of redesign (Janks 2010a, New London Group 1996), reconstruction (Stevens and Bean 2007) and more recently in the emphasis on digitally-mediated production (Morrell et al. 2013, Pangrazio 2016). Through re-writing and producing texts embedded in meaningful social engagement, learners recognize the importance of discourse as a powerful form of action that impacts the world.

There is an abundance of classroom-based research that reports on the potential of critical literacy to engage and empower learners (e.g., Kim and Cho 2017, Pirbhai-Ilich 2010; Pandya 2019). However, there is a surprising dearth of scholarly literature that explicitly addresses critical literacy as an approach to classroom discourse. It has been suggested that participation and interactional patterns that support dialogue, questioning, and explanation both between teacher and learners as well as among learners are desirable (cf. Sarroub and Quadros 2015). Indeed, some researchers have explicitly identified classroom instructional-interactional strategies to facilitate critical reading in particular. For instance, Ko (2013) identified question-posing as an important teacher move in critical literacy lessons in her research on critical literacy within a Taiwanese university class. The questions, which progressed from comprehension questions to eliciting commonly held assumptions, to uncovering their effects and generating alternatives, together facilitated a critical dialogue with students. Huh's (2016) study similarly identifies strategies that have clear interactional ramifications, such as brainstorming to activate students' prior knowledge or asking questions that critique texts. Yet in both of these studies, classroom interaction is conceptualized as a neutral instructional vehicle for learning rather than a locus for critical analysis.

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Such critical analyses of classroom discourse, I argue, are all the more important as critical literacy continues to face challenges. Some of the challenges stem from the persistence or in some cases intensification of social injustice and the renewed necessity for literacy pedagogies that address them (Comber 2015). Other challenges have arisen as a result of shifts in circumstances within which school education is to be conducted. I am referring here to the globalization of education policy, the conceptualization of education as human capital development, the global competition of and for such human capital, and the resultant assessment regimes that facilitate this global flow and competition (Ball 2009 2012, Lundgren 2015). Of course, all of this plays out on national stages, in national curricula, standards, exams; all of which are to be carried out and managed in local schools and classrooms. As language is a high-stakes subject in many countries, the effects of standardized exams have been especially palpable. Researchers have been documenting these effects: how teachers feel compelled to restrict classroom instruction to drills and uncritical literacy especially around exams (e.g., Hardy 2015, Pandya 2011), with harmful consequences for their own professionalism and well-being (Comber 2012, Loh and Liew 2016).

This is the situation of English literacy education in Singapore's secondary schools, the setting for the study that forms the basis of this article. Previous research on English education in Singapore has established the prevalence of 'examination literacy' (Cheah 1998) in heavily teacher-fronted classrooms where interaction is dominated by IRE sequences (Vaish 2008, Hogan et al. 2013). Despite sociolinguistically-informed national syllabi that conceptualize language learning as meaning-making in cultural contexts, classroom instruction often entails teaching English as decontextualized language skills (Weninger 2019, Kiss and Mizusawa 2018). I have sketched the effects of these various contextual factors on the critical literacy curriculum the research team co-developed with teachers in a previous publication (Weninger 2018). My goal in

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this paper is to zoom in on the classroom level in order to show how an orientation to an instrumental, procedural approach to English teaching provides a structuring frame for the discursive conduct of the class. In order to do that, I will utilize the analytic concept of *frame*, which I will introduce in the next section. Given that frame is not a common analytic tool in critical examinations of classroom discourse, my review will start with situating it within a broader intellectual tradition before describing its relevance for the study.

Frames, interaction and ideology

Micro-analytic, ethnographic approaches to human interaction are interested in describing the intricate and complex processes through which participants engage in shared meaning-making in social encounters. One of the central questions animating such research has been how context is simultaneously a prerequisite and a result of conversational activity; in other words, how context both shapes the structure and content of interactional encounters and is itself intersubjectively constructed through participants' mutual orientation to 'what is going on'. Several influential analytic constructs have been developed to capture this dynamic. From within interactional sociolinguistics, Gumperz' (1977) notion of *contextualization cues* has been foundational in conceptualizing, and empirically analyzing, how participants continuously signal their understanding of the speech activity in which they are engaged. The notion of *frame*, originally proposed by the anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1972) and further developed by Goffman (1974) can similarly be seen as capturing how communicative involvement depends on a situational definition of context that participants share with one another. As Bateson himself stated, and as others have argued (Tannen 1993, Persson 2019, 55), frames and framing are fundamentally about metacommunication as they reveal what interpretive model should be applied to verbal and

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behavioral actions in a particular situation. Contextualization cues in this sense could then be seen as the empirically detectable signs that indicate, on a metacommunicative plane, how one's utterances should be taken up.

Contextualization cues have become an important tool in the analytic repertoire of classroom discourse analysts (e.g., Dorr-Bremme 1990; Rymes 2016; Zheng 2016), and *frame* also frequently appears in analyses of classroom interaction (e.g., Hazel and Mortensen 2017, Sherry 2016). However, *frame* rarely figures as the main analytic lens, and perhaps even less so in research that pursues a critical agenda to examine classrooms as sites for the reproduction of societal ideologies. When researchers do utilize frame, they often exploit its potential to capture dynamics in the interactional microcosm of the classroom. For instance, Sherry's (2018) study detailed how students' responses to a teacher-initiated activity shifted (reframed) it from one focused on recitation to an activity that also involved indirect criticism and commentary of classroom events. This is, of course, in line with Goffman's theoretical intention, which was firmly grounded in everyday social-communicative encounters as sites for the production of social order, empirically knowable through careful analyses of unfolding situated interaction. What I propose in this paper is that frame and framing can also be valuably drawn upon in order to tease out the extra-situational origins of certain aspects of interaction that bear on participants' understanding of the situation.

In so doing, I rely on Rymes (2016, especially Chapter 8) who, building on Goffman's ideas as well as social-anthropological approaches to classroom research, proposes ways to examine how social and interactional contexts mutually shape what goes on in classrooms. In order to pinpoint the conditioning effect of broader social ideologies on classroom discourse, Rymes (2016) draws on Goffman's (1981) notion of *production format*. Taking issue with the term 'speaker' as analytically insufficient, Goffman offered in its stead the tripartite division of

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animator, author and principal (together called the production format of an utterance). The *animator* is the person physically producing the words; the ‘body engaged in acoustic activity’ (Goffman 1981, 144). This is different from the *author* – someone who has chosen the ideas and the specific words through which they should be communicated. The third role Goffman puts forth is that of the principal: “someone whose position is established by the words that are spoken, someone whose beliefs have been told, someone who is committed to what the words say” (p. 144). As he admits, the principal is often associated not with a single person but rather with a social group, so that ‘the individual speaks, explicitly or implicitly, in the name of “we” not “I” (p. 145). Through a careful analysis of production format of classroom utterances, Rymes demonstrates how ideas uttered by teachers and students are often authored by and reflect ideological positions, which in turn shape what is possible in the literacy classroom.

Production format allows us to trace the ideological origins of utterances and how they frame classroom interactions and learning. To examine how frames as more contingent or ‘fluid’ interactional accomplishments shape classroom discourse, Rymes discusses several *framing resources* (the type of language used, non-verbal cues, pronoun usage) as enabling different types of participation structures: Who gets to talk, in what register, how, about what and to whom. As Rymes demonstrates, participation structures, instantiated by the way language is used in the classroom, fundamentally shape the process of learning and what counts as knowledge. She argues that analyzing frames and framing in classrooms is a prerequisite to figuring out how we might *break* frame: foster positive, socially relevant, pluralistic understandings of literacy among students.

Examining frames in this way enables us to connect classroom discourse analysis to an examination of ideology. This is because in Rymes’ view, frames can be understood as “ideologies

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in practice” (p. 207) so that detailed analyses of framing in classroom discourse can pinpoint the multi-layered influence of social, political and cultural expectations, oriented to, enacted and negotiated through the production format and participation structure of classrooms. Such a view is consonant with critical discourse analysts’ concept of ideology, defined as “a system of ideas, values and beliefs oriented to explaining a given political order, legitimizing existing hierarchies and power relations and preserving group identities” (Chiapello and Fairclough 2002, 187). Ideology in CDA is fundamentally linked to power; it naturalizes the status quo, and it does so primarily through discourse as social practice (Fairclough, 1989). The notion of frame/ing allows us to explore precisely how this is accomplished by providing a meso-level analytic tool that mediates between ideology as a system and its instantiation in everyday encounters.

At the same time, Chiapello and Fairclough’s definition singles out the ‘political order’ as the focus of analytic attention. This is not surprising since CDA has been, for the most part, interested in political ideology, presumably because of political ideology’s central role in structuring social relations at the macro level. Naturally, there are multiple intersecting ideologies that shape classroom conduct in convergent and divergent ways and the question of exactly what ideologies are evident in discourse and how they reproduce the status quo should be an empirical question rather than answered a priori as a matter of ‘context’ (cf. Blommaert 2005). A more nuanced understanding of power is necessary that takes account of ideology as the various cultural, institutional and situational influences on the constitution of the *interaction* order. This calls for an examination of ‘power as process’ (Bloome et al. 2005) to understand control “as an interpretive framework— what is sometimes called a discourse or paradigm —for defining and acting in the world that pushes out other ways of interpreting and acting, thinking, feeling, believing, and knowing” (p. 140). I argue in this paper that *framing* as an analytical construct allows us to examine

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ideologies as an interpretive framework that mediates between knowledge (socially acquired representations of the world), perception/inference and action, visible in the verbal and non-verbal details of situated classroom interaction.

The overall point of my analysis is this: that critical literacy, aiming to critique, deconstruct, challenge and change the textual-discursive practices that position and constrain us, needs to contend first and foremost with the discursive practices engrained in literacy classrooms and shaped by powerful ideologies connected to the teaching of English. I do not claim that this will be the case for all contexts; in fact, the broader point to make is that critical literacy educators must carefully select their ‘target.’ In some settings, this target could be the pressing issues of poverty, conflict or discrimination (e.g., Comber 2015, Janks and Ferreira 2009). In Singapore, as I learned in this project and as I illustrate below, the target of critical literacy must start with a more mundane but equally entrenched ideology connected to the heavily exam-oriented, instrumental pedagogical script that frames much of English language education. This is not to say that social problems or social inequality do not exist in Singapore; in fact, the country’s ‘illiberal democracy’ has drawn criticism for a very long time. Rather, my argument is that there are other ideologies consequential for students learning and future life that are evident in the classroom, and which therefore could become the subject and substance of critical literacy’s empowering agenda.

Method

The project

The classroom data to be analyzed below come from a project that aimed to infuse critical media literacy into the teaching of English at the secondary level in Singapore. The rationale for the project came from educational research that has documented the decontextualized, skills-focused,

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teacher-centered pedagogy that in general characterizes English language classrooms in Singapore (e.g., Curdt-Christiansen and Silver 2013, Kiss and Mizusawa 2018, Kramer-Dahl 2008). It was hoped that through collaboration with teachers, a curriculum and pedagogical approach could be developed that fostered engagement with the English language not just as an exam subject but as an avenue for understanding and changing the world. The focus on media literacy, rather than critical literacy, was chosen given that Singapore's English national curriculum at the time (Ministry of Education Singapore 2008) made explicit reference to it as a desirable part of English language education, although without much concrete guidance as to how it should be fused with other aspects of the curriculum pertaining to language structure. While focused on media literacy, the project was informed and supported by the interconnecting and in many ways complementary scholarship on critical literacy (Morrell 2008, Pandya and Avila 2014) as well as media literacy (Alvermann and Hagood 2000, Hobbs 2011, Kellner and Share 2005).

The larger project, which ran from 2014-2017, consisted of three main phases. In the first phase, an online survey was administered to over 200 secondary English teachers in Singapore in order to find out about a) their understanding of media literacy and b) how they currently teach media literacy. In the second phase, the research team (consisting of academic faculty and research assistants; I was the lead-PI) worked with four English teachers from two secondary schools as case studies for a more in-depth understanding of how media literacy could be fostered in the classrooms. First the researchers observed the teachers for a period of 3 weeks in their classroom in order to understand their pedagogic practice. One interview per teacher was also conducted in this phase in order to find out how they see themselves as English teachers. In addition, focus groups with 6 students per class were conducted which aimed to find out students' perspectives on media and English literacy instruction in school.

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During the third phase, which provides the basis for this article and analysis, the teachers taught a unit (comprising 5x1.5hours of lessons) which they had co-developed with three of the researchers (myself, a fellow faculty member and a PhD student research associate). The pedagogic framework guiding the unit and all lessons comprised of four components of critical media literacy: functional, critical, aesthetic and ethical. The scope of this article prevents me from providing a detailed account of the framework or its development; interested readers can find out more in (Weninger 2019) where I describe both at length. In short, the *functional* aspect corresponds to the idea of students as code-breakers (Freebody and Luke 1990) and also incorporates the notion of access (to texts, to information) in multiple platforms and semiotic modalities. The *critical* aspect, perhaps somewhat confusingly when writing for an international scholarly audience, does not refer to social or ideological critique but encompasses awareness of form-function-context connections (in the tradition of the Sydney school, see Rose and Martin 2012) and the notion of design (Kress 2010) in meaning-making. The choice for this label was largely influenced by local educational parlance which reserved the term critical for these aspects of literacy. What is often labeled as critical was subsumed under the term *ethical* in the framework, which also corresponds to the centrality of ethics in discussions about media literacy. In short, the ethical aspect of literacy entails understanding texts as representations, and developing reading and writing dispositions that orient to difference and foster multi-perspectival thinking. Finally, the *aesthetic* aspect aims to give space to students' personal responses, emotions and experiences as part of engaging with texts within classrooms. As mentioned earlier, this is a largely neglected part of critical literacy (cf. Mission and Morgan 2006). Based on our initial observations it was essentially absent from the pedagogy of the teachers we worked with and so its place in the framework was an attempt to see more personal engagement in the co-developed English lessons.

Data and analytic procedure

Classroom data for the analysis were drawn from one of the participating schools and from the stage of the project where teachers taught the critical literacy lessons. The lessons took place over the course of 2.5 weeks and comprised a thematic unit on ‘Who is Singapore for?’ The theme was chosen through deliberation with the teachers, and its aim was to learn about, understand and discuss what the experience of living in Singapore meant for various social groups (migrant workers, the elderly, young families, young men enlisted in mandatory military service, and low-income workers). The topic was particularly timely because of growing public discontent with Singapore’s immigration policy and plans that had seen the steady influx of foreigners as the means to maintain economic growth. This was a period of increased hostility toward non-Singaporeans which primarily played out in the online sphere. The research team thus felt that the unit could tackle these questions by exploring both the concerns and contributions of a range of social groups in Singapore, and in that process to foster multi-perspectival thinking (Hobbs 2011). Before the critical literacy units were taught, two professional development sessions were held with the two English teachers who had volunteered to be in the study: Ms. Lynn and Ms. Grace (pseudonyms), both experienced teachers. During the sessions, the research team presented the media literacy framework, used transcripts from teachers’ previously observed lessons to illustrate the different aspects (functional, critical, aesthetic, ethical) and discussed with the teachers the pedagogic principles that we were hoping would inform the implementation of the unit.

All lessons in the unit were audio and video-recorded, with one audio recorder clipped to the teacher and the other placed in a different part of the classroom. As the first step, all lessons were transcribed verbatim; however, it was a broad transcription focused primarily on verbal

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expressions which was later refined. The second source of data comes from observation notes that were taken for every lesson observed, by two researchers for each lesson. The first analytic step was to read through the transcripts while watching the videos. I was quite familiar with the data (both transcripts and video) before I embarked on the analysis for this paper, although this was the first time the analysis focused on the details of discourse. The interest of the present paper in ideologies and how they manifest in and shape classroom interaction guided my re-reading of the transcripts. Informed by the theoretical-analytic distinction between framing as broader social ideologies and framing as evident in the unfolding interaction, I was looking for instances in the transcripts where these constructs may help capture the constraining effect of frames. As the lessons entailed a fair amount of group work, I restricted my analysis to whole-group discussions.

I selected the two excerpts based on two considerations, in decreasing order to importance: 1) comments on the observation notes that highlighted the activity (typically some form of evaluation of what was not ideal, though not having anything to do with ideology); 2) clarity of the recording (which at times was an issue and could impede the validity of the analysis). The chosen excerpts are quite typical in terms of how the two teachers conducted whole-class discussions, although there were also instances where they deviated from the typical, but due to space constraints those cannot be analyzed in detail here. Once the two episodes were chosen (around 3 minutes and 7 minutes in length, respectively), a close transcription was prepared based on all available audio and video recording in order to aid the analysis, which was then performed with reference to the analytic constructs of production format and framing resources introduced earlier.

The following section will mirror this analytic split by first presenting and analyzing an excerpt from Ms. Grace using production format, which will be followed by an analysis of framing

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as interactionally achieved in a teaching episode from Ms. Lynn's lesson. This division is necessary as the two types of framing may not be relevant within every episode of whole-class discussion. As I explicate below, production format is useful for instances where ideologies enter classrooms in a fairly overt way – as voices and ideas that are animated by the teacher (or students) but that may or may not be attributed to an author or principal (in Goffman's sense). We will see this in Ms. Grace's opening 'monologue' in Excerpts 1a and 1b. Framing resources on the other hand can instantiate ideologies in a much more covert way through the micro-interactional details of unfolding classroom talk. In demonstrating how this happens, the excerpts will feature teacher-student elicitation sequences from Ms. Lynn's class. Clearly, both types of framing can occur at the same time as well, as will be noted in Excerpt 2b in the analysis.

Findings

Frames as broader ideologies shaping classroom discourse

I present the first excerpt in two parts (Excerpt 1a and Excerpt 1b) in order to illustrate the way different voices 'external' to the classroom can crop up in the discourse of the classroom and frame what happens therein. This excerpt comes from the very beginning of the first lesson of the critical literacy unit as Ms. Grace introduces the series of lessons the class is about to embark on. In essence, my analysis serves to juxtapose the two parts of her introduction as each providing a very different frame to the entire critical literacy unit: one rooted in a real-world social issue (Excerpt 1a), the other in the concerns of examination literacy (Excerpt 1b). Let us start with Excerpt 1a (bold face is for analytic focus, see Appendix for transcription key).

Excerpt 1a.

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1 **TEACHER:** Okay for today's lesson (.) actually it's a whole series of lessons okay↑ we have about six
 2 lessons that we are going to cover this and next week↑ okay↑ we're gonna focus on who is Singapore
 3 for. Right↑ Now recently I'm sure you have read the ne::ws and even the past few years right↑ ever
 4 since the general election ↑ some people are not (.) happy with the government. **Some people are**
 5 **saying that oh, Singapore is not a happy place to live in, no I'm not happy at all and I've so: many**
 6 **concerns to voice. With regard to my society. And then they say o::h there are so many foreigners**
 7 **coming to Singapore. And it's so crowded. Some of you say a:h every time you take the MRT it's so:**
 8 **crowded, there's no space.** So who is Singapore for. Alright↑ We will be focusing on this theme for the
 9 next two weeks okay ↑this week and next week (.) And for today (.) we will (.) first talk about our rights
 10 and responsibilities. These terms may not be very familiar to you okay↑ but as we go along I'm sure you
 11 will understand it better.

In Excerpt 1a., Ms. Grace has chosen to introduce the broader social significance of the unit theme 'Who is Singapore for' through a series of 'voices' that are explicitly marked as reported speech (*Some people say...You say...*). These ideas expressed through the reported speech could be seen as reflecting the sentiments of some (unspecified) people in Singapore who are discontent with the state of affairs, or even with the government, and seem to be complaining about being unhappy, having concerns or being annoyed by too many people/foreigners in the country. It is perhaps helpful to visually represent what is going on in this excerpt in terms of the production format.

UTTERANCE	ANIMATOR	AUTHOR	PRINCIPAL/BELIEF
Singapore is not a happy place to live in I'm not happy at all I've so many concerns to voice with regard to my society There are so many foreigners coming to Singapore and it's so crowded	Ms. Grace	Some people	Some Singaporeans <i>Government is letting in too many foreigners</i>

Every time I take the MRT it's so crowded, there's no space	Ms. Grace	You (students)	Students <i>Too many people (foreigners) in this country</i>
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Table 1. Production format as first frame

Ms. Grace, we could say, is acting ‘merely’ as animator to the words and ideas attributable to ‘some people’ and her own students in Singapore. It is noteworthy that she groups her students’ alleged utterances as belonging with those of ‘some people.’ This grouping is not only evident lexically in their common complaint (‘it is crowded’) but also through the parallel, list-like syntax (‘some people are saying....and then they say....some of you say’) as well as a shared intonation pattern. Following Goffman (1981), we have said that the principal is the collective ‘we’ whose beliefs and values are represented through what is said. Importantly, Ms. Grace does not herself take an overt stance in response to the sentiments or beliefs she is channeling; for instance, she does not contest or endorse them, or asks the students for what they think. She animates them, but leaves their evaluation open.

As Tannen (2007 [1989]) argued, reported speech is best understood as constructed dialogue; a discourse strategy of animating one’s speech in another’s voice. Tannen further adds that this discourse strategy enables the speaker/animator to create distance between what is being ‘reported’ and herself; in addition, it also frames “information in a way that communicates effectively and creates involvement” (p. 112). This is significant for Ms. Grace’s critical literacy lesson for at least two reasons. First, through the distancing of constructed dialogue, she is able to introduce contentious and politically sensitive sentiments into the classroom. Given that teachers in Singapore are advised not to overtly challenge the government or its policies in classrooms, the distancing achieved through constructed dialogue is in fact a politically safe and perhaps necessary strategy for Ms. Grace. Second, by so doing, she is framing the English language classroom as a

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space where such ideas are possible and relevant topics. Such framing is facilitated by her withholding evaluation of the beliefs she is voicing on others' behalf.

Excerpt 1b is the continuation of the teacher's introductory monologue, which I separated only for analytic purposes. Ms. Grace carries on with her introduction of the new unit, and once again uses constructed dialogue as part of her utterance. However, the framing this creates for her critical literacy lesson, I argue, is rather different from Excerpt 1a.

Excerpt 1b

12 **TEACHER:** Alright↑ so we will talk about our rights and responsibilities a::nd at the end of the lesson you
13 will also be able to list three rights and three responsibilities of the different groups of people in
14 Singapore. Alright↑ **Now if you have concerns like oh no but it's our English oral exam this week you**
15 **know and next week so can we do more oral practice? Now we have done it last week (.) and you**
16 **know what↑ this will be great content for what you might be tested on. (.) Alright↑ If they were to**
17 **ask you about Singapore about the society uh uh the society about people in Singapore, uh the**
18 **different people from all walks of life and then you have something to say. Okay↑ what are your the**
19 **rights and responsibilities as a Singaporean. (.) Or as an international student living in Singapore.**
20 **Okay↑** So bags on the floo::r take out your pe::ns (.) alright↑ I will be giving you notes to write
21 something later↑ Okay↑ Are you all ready

UTTERANCE	ANIMATOR	AUTHOR	PRINCIPAL/ <i>BELIEF</i>
Oh no but it's our English oral exam this week and next week so can we do more oral practice	Teacher Grace	Students	Students, perhaps also teachers and parents <i>English lessons should focus on exam practice</i>

Table 2. Production format as second frame

At a basic interactional level, what Ms. Grace accomplishes through her voicing of students' concern here is anticipating objections or deflecting criticism. In fact, we could invoke another Goffmanian term here and say that Ms. Grace changes her footing to the ongoing talk. Goffman (1981) proposed the term *footing* to describe how participants use subtle linguistic means to signal their alignment or stance to the ongoing interaction and its participants. In excerpt 1b, Ms. Grace ventriloquizes (Tannen, 2007) or 'speaks as' her students ('oh no but it's our English oral exams this week') and in doing so accomplishes a momentary shift in footing to a playful frame that laminates the ongoing participation framework. This is a quite mundane discourse strategy that we all deploy from time to time in classrooms and other social situations. However, breaking down the utterance into its production format allows us to see the more crucial point: that the origins of the belief that is given voice in this instance go well beyond the students in this particular classroom, or the impending oral exams. It is a position to which many in Singapore are 'committed'; that classroom teaching should prioritize exam preparation, especially when compared to something as seemingly frivolous as a critical literacy unit. Further, that Ms. Grace actually felt the need to bring up this possible objection is itself testimony to the powerful framing

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effect of *structures of expectation* (Tannen and Wallat 1987) – in this case, expectations about what should happen in an English classroom.

But what is equally crucial here, I argue, is how Ms. Grace responds to the objection attributed to students, or that she in fact responds. Unlike in Excerpt 1a where the negative sentiments animated by Ms. Grace were left ‘hanging’ without evaluation or response, in Excerpt 1b she offers an answer which in essence leaves the legitimacy of exam practice uncontested. I want to emphasize that what Ms. Grace said or her underlying belief is not somehow ‘wrong’ – it is after all clearly a positive thing that the unit gave students plenty of opportunities to express themselves and thus practice for their oral exam. Yet her acquiescing to the dominant expectation that exam preparation is primary curtails the potential of the critical literacy unit in two crucial ways. First, her reassurance that the unit will be good practice for the oral exams in essence puts an instrumental framing on the critical literacy unit that potentially undermines the open-ended, socially relevant framing it received in the first part of her monologue. Second, her response represents a missed opportunity for Ms. Grace to contest the crippling ideology of examination culture in Singapore.

Ideology as interactionally contingent frames

The next set of excerpts comes from the second teacher in the study, Ms. Lynn. The analysis aims to explicate how framing as a local, interactionally contingent accomplishment impacts the structure and nature of classroom discussion. This is different from the focus of the previous section which looked at framing as resulting from ‘external’ voices entering into the classroom interaction; although it was clear that the framing effect of those voices still depended on how they were woven into the structure and content of talk. In this section, I aim to show that what could

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unfold as a rich discussion of rights and responsibilities in society gets framed largely as a procedural activity. The excerpts are from the second lesson of the critical literacy unit which starts out with Ms. Lynn reminding the students of some of the ideas discussed in the first lesson about rights and responsibilities. During that first lesson, students were shown and given pictures of social groups in Singapore (students, migrant workers, elderly, young families) and they worked in groups to come up with three rights and responsibilities that they felt were relevant for their group. As that activity took place close to the end of the first lesson, Ms. Lynn wanted to spend more time on the outcome of the groups' discussion and also to make sure that students were clear about the difference between one's rights and responsibilities. To do so, she starts the lesson with a rather broad question addressed to the whole class, after asking students to take out the handout they worked on during their group activity.

Excerpt 2a.

- 1 **TEACHER:** [...] As a group you also discussed three rights and three- three responsibilities of the ↑ (.)
- 2 different groups. Okay ↑ Are you clear (.) the difference between the rights and responsibilities?
- 3 (2.0)
- 4 **TEACHER:** Anybody ↑ Girls there ↑ Clear ↑ Rights and responsibilities of that social group that was given
- 5 to you yesterday.
- 6 (2.0)
- 7 **TEACHER:** Alright. Maybe I want to just check ah ↑ whether you really know. ((*addressing a specific group*
- 8 *sitting in the front*)) What was the picture given to your group. (1.0) Yesterday.

I include this excerpt here to highlight how Lynn 'frames' the activity that is about to unfold. Seeing that she receives no response from students (evidenced by the periods of silence

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after her uttering the questions in lines 2 and 4), Lynn chooses to ‘check whether students really know’. In short, she explicitly states the goal of the coming segment as making sure students understand the differences between rights and responsibilities – arguably not an easy pair of concepts especially since they do not figure in the Singapore secondary social studies curriculum. Yet the next seven minutes of interaction between the teacher and the students does not lead, in my evaluation, to a sense that students have in fact understood the difference, largely because what starts out as an opportunity for deep discussion gets interactionally framed as a fairly structured IRE sequence. Broadly, and starting at the end of Excerpt 2a, Lynn takes turns with each group (there are altogether five) to check on what they have written as rights and responsibilities for the social group they worked with during the previous lesson. In Excerpt 2b, we will look at her exchange with one of these groups in more detail.

Excerpt 2b.

- 1 **TEACHER:** [Alright.] You- you discussed this one right? ((*holding up a picture of the social group*)) Okay.
- 2 This particular picture. Alright↑ ((*T looking at the group*))
- 3 (3.0)
- 4 **TEACHER:** One right and one responsibility. Different from the one you shared yesterday.
- 5 (3.0)
- 6 **TEACHER:** I think yesterday I recall you were saying that they deserve a break.
- 7 **STUDENT1:** Ya.
- 8 **TEACHER:** Okay↑ Another right another responsibility. Refer to your notes↑
- 9 **STUDENT1:** A shelter.
- 10 **TEACHER:** A shelter.
- 11 **STUDENT2:** Respect.

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- 12 **TEACHER:** Respect from others↑ Very good↑ It's their right to be respected. And the responsibility
13 would be↑
- 14 **STUDENT 3:** Respect others.
- 15 **STUDENT4:** To find a home ((chuckles)).
- 16 **TEACHER:** To↑ (.) Uh responsibility of this particular group.
- 17 **STUDENT2:** (xxxx)
- 18 **TEACHER:** Louder↑
- 19 **STUDENT2:** No no no no (.) to be sensible.
- 20 **TEACHER:** To be↑ Sensible.
- 21 **STUDENT3:** Responsible?
- 22 **STUDENT2:** You know to seek help from-
- 23 **TEACHER:** Seek help from?
- 24 ((1.0 brief inaudible misunderstanding))
- 25 **TEACHER:** Okay. Different from (xxx) but- (.) It's the way you phrase it okay↑ It's their responsibility to::
26 ↑ (.) To s- seek help from others. Whether it's the government or their employers. If they need help ah.
27 (.) Okay↑ If they need help they↑ (.) it's their (.) responsibility to then seek help. Alright uhm (.) Let's
28 look at Edwin yours was which one. Which picture?

We can see in Ms. Lynn's first turn that what started out as a broader question whether students really understood the differences between rights and responsibilities (Excerpt 2a) has been reframed by this point (this is the second group to go) as an elicitation routine focused on groups stating one right and one responsibility from their worksheets. In fact, this type of elicitation is very common across the corpus of lessons from three of the four participating teachers.

There are multiple framing resources at work here that together produce the framing of this activity as one focused on procedure, rather than substance. First, and perhaps most obvious, is the IRE recitation script (Mehan 1998) that is well-known to researchers of classroom discourse. As Mehan (1979) argued, this type of sequence is generally deployed for questions with a known answer so that the entire exchange becomes simply a way of displaying knowledge familiar to teachers and students alike. Others (Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, and Long 2003) have called such questions *inauthentic* because teachers have prespecified answers in mind. However, what is interesting and important in Excerpt 2b is that at least on a surface level, Ms. Lynn's question is authentic: she actually does not know what the students might potentially say in their turn. Also, as evident in Excerpt 2a, she does not simply set out to review material already covered, since the groups did not get to share much of their discussions in the previous lesson and in fact Ms. Lynn was not sure whether they have understood the difference between rights and responsibilities. But of course, as scholars have argued (Nystrand et al. 2003, 145; Sherry 2018), the authenticity of a question cannot simply be judged by the wording of the question itself but rather by how it is taken up in subsequent interaction. Sherry's (2018) analysis of a grammar-focused activity demonstrated how an inauthentic teacher question resulted in dialogic discourse because of the ways students took it up in subsequent turns. In the episode transcribed in Excerpt 2b, we see the reverse: the teacher's evaluation turn (line 10, line 12) itself limits the ability of her own question to generate broader discussion by a mere confirmation (through repetition) of the students' responses as correct or adequate.

Apart from the sequential organization of turns, there are other framing resources that prevent this episode from developing into a more open-ended discussion about students' understanding of rights and responsibilities. Among them are Ms. Lynn's continuous specification

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of what type of response ‘she is after’ – in a way supporting the unfolding structural contextualization of her question as inauthentic, and thus framing the episode as recitation. This specification is primarily achieved lexically and starts at the end of Ms. Lynn’s initial turn when after requesting for ‘one right and one responsibility’ she further specifies that the group’s response needs to be different from what the group shared the day before. In line 7, after reminding the group of one of their answers from the day before, Ms. Lynn continues with this almost list-like request for answers: ‘Another right another responsibility.’ Her instructing the students to refer to their notes (line 7) further cements the activity as a recitation, not necessarily of known answers but a recitation where unknown answers delivered as single-word responses are not only acceptable but desirable. The teacher’s intonation similarly underscores the interactional framing of this classroom episode as *procedurally* oriented: most of her utterances have a rising intonation (e.g., lines 8, 12, 18, 23) even when the utterances are not syntactically structured as questions. This overlays the exchange in Excerpt 2b with an intonational contour in which her rising tone frames much of the conversation as listing items – given that this tone is typically reserved in English for either questions or lists. The structural patterning of talk, the lexical delimitation of her questions as well as the intonational contour of Ms. Lynn’s utterances together act as framing resources that create a recitation out of a potentially authentic question.

What are the implications here for critical literacy? Despite Ms. Lynn’s intention to ensure students understand rights and responsibilities, there is little evidence from the substance of students’ contribution that they have done so. In fact, a very curious pattern in student answers can be detected over the whole stretch of the roughly 7-minute-long activity. It seems that student answers to what is a right versus a responsibility pivot around a grammatical distinction; Excerpt 2c from earlier in the activity gives a very clear demonstration of this. Here the last group is

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reporting on their discussion of rights and responsibilities of young Singaporean men completing their mandatory military service.

Excerpt 2c

- 1 **TEACHER:** So the right is?
- 2 **STUDENT9:** Oh no the responsibility. (1.0) To listen to [to-]
- 3 **TEACHER:** [Okay] responsibility is to listen to their↑
- 4 **STUDENT9:** Superiors.
- 5 **TEACHER:** Superior↑ Okay↑ Listen to their trainers↑ And their right?
- 6 **STUDENT9:** To be listened to.
- 7 **TEACHER:** To be listened to. Okay↑

Here students differentiate between right and responsibility through a logic of grammar – the same act can be both, you just need to do a grammatical transformation: Your responsibility is to listen, and your right is to be listened to. The same pattern can be observed in Excerpt 2b above: after the students identified ‘shelter’ and ‘respect’ (which the teacher recasts as ‘respect from others’ in her evaluation turn) as rights of migrant workers, Ms. Lynn asks them to name a responsibility. I will reproduce that segment of talk from Excerpt 2b here for ease of reference:

Excerpt 2d.

- 1 **TEACHER:** [...] And the responsibility would be?
- 2 **STUDENT 3:** Respect others.
- 3 **STUDENT4:** To find a home. ((chuckles))
- 4 **TEACHER:** To? (.) Uh responsibility of this particular group.

First, Ms. Lynn does not acknowledge the contributions of Student 3 and Student 4 as there is no audible evaluation of (or any kind of reaction to) their responses. This is probably because, as far as I can tell from the video, Student 3 and Student 4 are not part of the group who the teacher is currently focusing on and are thus not considered ratified participants. The main point, however, is that both students mirror others' responses for the previous question by simply switching the grammar – if having respect from others is a right, respecting others is a responsibility; and if having shelter is a right, finding one is a responsibility. Further, there is an audible chuckle after Student 4 utters his contribution. While this is a tenuous argument, I think it is possible to interpret his chuckle as a meta-comment on what is going on – the realization of a somewhat comical pattern (almost like a language play) where a potentially very difficult conceptual distinction becomes a matter of simple syntactic transformation. It is also quite telling that in all the instances of this pattern, Ms. Lynn does not contest students' answers; in fact, in Excerpt 2b she seems to endorse the view that the difference between rights and responsibilities has to do with language ('It's the way you phrase it okay', line 25). She also agrees with the view that migrant workers are responsible for seeking help (rather than the idea that receiving adequate social support is a human right) – in fact this statement itself could be analyzed using the production format as animating the ideology of self-reliance as the first line of defense that permeates social policy in Singapore (Teo 2015, Wen 2013). In sum, the analysis has shown that a potentially deep discussion about rights and responsibilities gets framed by the teacher (and is readily taken up by students) as a recitation activity. The procedural frame enacted by Ms. Lynn, I argue, is rooted in an ideology of subject pedagogy that prioritizes 'delivering and covering content' above understanding.

Discussion and Implications

The analyses of classroom excerpts from the two teachers' lessons demonstrated how ideologies entered and shaped the implementation of the critical literacy units. The theoretical notion of frame was analytically operationalized as production format and framing resources in order to make visible the subtle ways in which broader ideas about English language teaching and learning impacted how the activity unfolded. In Ms. Grace's lesson, the analysis pointed to the powerful effect of framing as an opportunity to shift away from decontextualized, skills-heavy learning toward English lessons where contentious issues could be discussed. But as the analysis also showed, such a framing was subsequently undermined by the very same discourse strategy of constructed dialogue to reinforce the hegemony of the examination literacy: that what we do in the English class prepares students for success in the exams. In Ms. Lynn's class, classroom talk instantiated a heavily procedural frame that prompted surface responses at the expense of deeper exploration through personal, emotive or experiential talk which the question itself could have triggered. These are fleeting, tiny interactional moments that when repeated become habituated, embodied pedagogic practice that is very difficult to break away from – even with a rich and contextualized curriculum. As Curdt-Christiansen and Silver (2013) aptly conclude in their analysis of the enactment of an innovative literacy curriculum in Singapore primary classes, it is like pouring 'new wine into old skin.'

It is important to note that the origins of these ideologies reach far and deep, certainly beyond the two teachers and their schools in this study. They arose out of a colonial legacy that established the presence of English as the language of the elite, in Singapore and in the region. In the case of Singapore, even after full independence in 1965, English was retained as a key instrument for national and economic development (Hill and Lian, 1995), which culminated in the

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language becoming a medium of instruction for all students in 1987. The exponential growth of the economic currency of English in the last twenty years, the intensification of educational globalization and competition, and the increasing corporatization of education have converged to facilitate a bureaucratic ethos (Weninger, 2018) among Singapore educators. The exam-oriented, procedural pedagogic frames identified in the analysis are thus manifestations of a much more complex ideological history pivoting around English.

Given the entrenched pedagogical scripts of uncritical, exam-oriented literacy instruction, critical literacy in Singapore may need to begin by deconstructing the ideologies supporting and reproducing a view of language and literacy as mere instruments for getting ahead in a competitive educational environment. Literacy pedagogy, conceptualized not as a set of teaching methods but as enacted, embodied discursive practice, needs to be critically analyzed for not only how it limits classroom learning but also how it positions the English language itself, other languages, students and teachers in subject-specific ways (e.g., as test-taker, great speller, teachers who gets results) as well as within a broader ideological landscape of school education. Until pedagogy as ideological practice becomes the very subject of critical literacy, it will be impossible for teachers and educators in Singapore to envision English language learning to be anything but *uncritical* literacy, committed to ‘covering material and delivering content.’

This suggestion is in line with what others have said about critical literacy as contextualized practice. As Janks (2010b) states, we cannot pin down exactly what critical literacy is “because power manifests itself differently in different contexts and at different historical moments” (p. 40). As she further argues, critical literacy is political, but it is the local micro-politics of everyday life that it should target. This is especially crucial to understand for teachers in Singapore where the label ‘critical’ is often viewed suspiciously, given the explicit mandate of public education to

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groom a compliant citizenry (Ho, Alviar-Martin, and Leviste 2014). There is no mandate, however, against innovative literacy pedagogies that break the mold that examinations hold over language learning. Indeed, it is the instrumental ideology toward language and language education that must be challenged first and foremost.

An analysis of frames and framing is one possible way of making visible and understanding how ideology shapes our conduct as classroom teachers. In critically-oriented classroom discourse analysis, issues of power are of central importance – and of course ideologies are the discursive means through which power is propagated and legitimized (Fairclough 1989). Following Bloome et al. (2005), if we understand power and control as an interpretive framework, then frames can help us understand how that framework is situationally activated in social encounters such as classrooms. Such framing may entail a surfacing of ideology in explicit comments, ideas that teachers and students express verbally, or through somewhat more indirect discourse strategies such as the constructed dialogues in Ms. Grace’s talk. The production format as an analytic tool is helpful in pinpointing them and how or whether they are taken up in the class. Framing as evidencing an ideologically rooted interpretive framework may shape classroom discourse more contingently, for instance through strict demarcation or restriction of participant frameworks in place of open-ended dialogue, as we saw in Ms. Lynn’s class.

Yet although frames organize experience, they are by nature vulnerable (Goffman 1974) – and this is the promise that frame as a theoretical idea holds for critical literacy. As Goffman observes, the organization of our experience is vulnerable to keying, to fabrication and all sorts of transformations that disrupt our sense of ‘what is going on’ and redefine the situation. Although classroom talk as an example of institutional talk is perhaps less ‘vulnerable’ in Goffman’s sense, what is needed then for critical literacy as classroom pedagogy to work is to make classroom talk

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vulnerable: to cultivate, as teachers, an interactional orientation where we not only welcome students ‘breaking frame’ but we ourselves do so from time to time; to break the rigid participation structure, the expectations around what is appropriate to discuss, to think or to believe in our literacy classrooms. A pedagogy of critical literacy then is not about group work or project work or collaboration, but rather about ensuring a classroom discourse environment where the answer to the question ‘what is going on’ is not always predictable.

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