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Author(s)	Lawrence Jun Zhang
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TEACHING CRITICAL READING TO
IN-SERVICE EFL TEACHERS
IN SINGAPORE

LAWRENCE JUN ZHANG

Teaching Critical Reading to In-service EFL Teachers in Singapore

Lawrence Jun Zhang, PhD

English Language & Literature Academic Group, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
Email: lawrence.zhang@nie.edu.sg Tel: (+65) 67903474

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Author

Lawrence Jun Zhang, PhD, an Assistant Professor, teaches MA (Applied Linguistics) courses and supervises PhD dissertations and graduate pre-service and in-service teachers at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is on the web at: <http://zhang.myplace.nie.edu.sg> or <http://larry.jzhang.googlepages.com/home> .

Teaching Critical Reading to In-service EFL Teachers in Singapore

Lawrence Jun Zhang, PhD

English Language & Literature Academic Group, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Abstract

This paper reports on a study of 35 English Language teachers taking a one-year professional development programme 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. It analyses the process of their negotiating identities, repositionings and other related issues (Pennycook, 1994, 2000). While focusing on a pedagogy grounded in a sociocultural learning theory (Bourdieu, 1992) 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 in 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. 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 lacking. With a sociocultural turn in teacher education in recent years (Johnson, 2006), I 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). I emphasise 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). Wider implications of such pedagogy are also discussed.

Introduction

Critical reading should be part and parcel of a literate person's reading processes and experiences although there is a tendency to neglect it in many EFL/ESL programs (Crookes & Lehner, 1998). Various reasons are given for such neglect, with the major one being that EFL learners need to develop decoding or word recognition skills to read better. The pedagogy of

ESL/EFL reading is usually reductionist in orientation and a possibility that the teaching of language proficiency can be done simultaneously with teaching critical reading and thinking skills is seldom considered. With a sociocultural turn in teacher education in recent years (Johnson, 2006; Norton & Toohey, 2004), in this paper I argue that teaching critical reading pedagogy to EFL teachers could be an equally important component of teacher professional development programs 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. The time when they are in the training program is an opportune platform where reflexivity, reciprocity and responsibility are crucial to their making further progress in their professional careers towards becoming critical practitioners in and outside language classrooms. Most often, it is observed that, in Asian cultures of learning, student reticence, reverence for knowledge, and lack of inclination to challenge printed texts are commonplace. However, empirical findings in support of this are insufficient (Zhang, 2003). Therefore, I am interested in examining if it is possible that teachers from such Asian cultures are ready to do critical reading against the background where Asian learners are perceived as such.

The Study

By reporting a study of 35 EFL in-service teachers taking a one-year 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.

What motivated this action research were the observed conundrums or problems in EFL reading classes in Asia. I felt that the teaching of reading could be more interactive if a critical pedagogy were adopted. 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. 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 dynamism 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, I focused 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, I 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.

Procedures in Classroom Practice

In my teaching I followed 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 Lehner' (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).

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.

Critical reading pedagogy

My teaching of reading essentially centered around the following categories of critical reading questions.

- (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. In addition, I also used a critical reading guide developed by the Tasmania Department of Education, Australia.

Results and Discussion

Results show that the in-service teachers' resistance to such a pedagogy was minimal. Although they felt a bit unexpected when I started teaching reading the way that they were very unfamiliar with, 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.

Students' views of society changed because my critical reading pedagogy 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). Their 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 realised 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. 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.

As can be seen from what the in-service teachers commented and reflected on 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 students and in-service teachers from China. 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, so we focus on developing students’ language skills only. The way that reading is taught in this critical reading course has offered me an option of how I can motivate my EFL students to read more actively. This is because through EFL reading they also learn about the world they live in and the various social issues that confront them”.

Conclusion

Crookes and Lehner (1998) suggested that “critical pedagogy should be seen as a social and educational process, rather than as a pedagogical method” 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 an 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 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 potential 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. 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 as a new dimension in reading instruction as a potential solution to the above problems often mentioned by EFL/ESL reading teachers as conundrums. While I acknowledge that the critical pedagogy reported in this brief paper was conducted in Singapore, a foreign land for Chinese EFL in-service teachers, I would like to recommend that teachers in Asian EFL classroom try this pedagogy in the hope of diversifying their teaching methods and enhancing classroom dynamics and interactivity.

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