CamTESOL 2020: 21st Century ELT:Approaches for Effective Practices

Journey through a Research and Development Project on Promoting Critical Literacy in the Secondary English Language Classroom in Hong Kong

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What is Critical Literacy?

Critical literacy views readers as **active participants in the reading process** and invites them to move beyond passively accepting the text's message **to question, examine, or dispute the power relations** that exist between readers and authors. It focuses on issues of power and promotes reflection, transformation and action.

(Freire, 1970)

Critical Literacy is about **asking questions**, looking at different points of view, and asking, "**Is everyone included in what we are reading?**"

(Hughes (2007). Retrieved from Teaching Language and Literacy K-6. Retrieved from: https://faculty.ontariotechu.ca/hughes/Contexts/CriticalLiteracy.html)

Critical literacy is "the ability that gives us **potent ways of reading, seeing and acting in the world**"

(Janks, Dixon, Ferreira, Granville & Newfield (2014). *Doing Critical Literacy*, p.1)

Why Critical Literacy?

Our students live in an information saturated era and need to understand how they are being influenced.

There is a need to help students to "reclaim" the power of being an English language user

Developing Critical Readers and Writers through Reading-driven Units of Work at the Junior Secondary Level

Project Objective

To explore means to foster students' literacy skills to enable them to become **critical, discerning, discriminating and responsive** readers and writers.

Research Questions

Project Statistics

4 Years 2015-2019

8 Schools 46 Classes

18 Units of work

100+ Co-planning meetings

Examples of Themes Tackled

Fast fashion
Child labour
Animal rights
Social media
Gender
Advertisement
Charity

Semantic Cues (meaning)
Syntactic Cues (grammar)
Graphophonic Cues (letters/ sounds)
Create
Evaluate
Analyse
Apply
Understand
Remember
Education Environment
Employment Government Inequality
Media/Social Media Poverty

“Texts have social effects, that they are designed to recruit us into their version of “the truth” and that language can be used for both good and ill. Knowing that texts are not neutral, we need to develop ways to see where they are coming from and to recognise their designs on us, their readers.”

(Janks, et al. (2014), p.1)

Framework of a CR&W unit of work

Critical Literacy Elements

Positioning in Roald Dahl’s Matilda

Positioning – Focusing on Choice of Words and Expressions

Roald Dahl's attitude to different characters in Matilda

Look at how Roald Dahl depicts the Wormwoods and Miss Honey. Comment on the way they are dressed, the way they speak and their attitude to education. Refer to the clip and your reader P.90-100.

Stereotypes

Questioning assumptions behind stereotypes and disrupting common perceptions

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Image of a billboard advertising a hamburger meal

Influencing

consumption, life style, social value, etc

Critical Literacy Strategies

Posing Questions - Problematising

A recent survey asked Hong Kongers which comic characters they liked. The three most popular are no surprise - Old Master Q, McMug and McDull

(Excerpt from a Hong Kong textbook)

- Which survey?
- Are the survey results authoritative or reliable?
- What doesthe author want us to think, feel or do?
- What are the author's assumptions?

A photo showingtwo characters from the Old Master Q comic book

https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3062479

A photo showing the comic characters McMug and McDull

https://www.hktdc.com/suppliers-products/McMug-and-McDull-Blanket/en/1X07062G/1644789/

Juxtaposing Texts – Contrasting Positions

Excerpt of a Hong Kong theme park brochure promoting an educational encounter with animal in captivity

Cartoons addressing issues arising from animals in captivity

Juxtaposing Texts – Contrasting Positions

An ad for a hamburger, with the tagline “Big, Beefy, Bliss” and a slogan “I’m lovin’ it”

An advertisement

A subvertisement

http://arguingtruthandjustice.blogspot.com/2015/10/does-mcdonalds-make-you-want-mcdonalds.html

https://rightfoodright.wordpress.com/category/diet/

Switching – Role Switching

(Task 3)

Attitudes to girls' Education

If I were ……. I would support/not support girls' education. This is because…

Neeraj as a child	Her mother	Her father	Her teacher	Unheard voice? Boys
Yes: • school is interesting and fun • I could socialise with other girls and learn new things and chat about life • it's unfair that I have to do all the chores • if I were educated I could become a teacher and earn money • I could help my family if I had a job • I could help the community if I become a teacher	**No:** • it is useless. It won't help her find a husband • we need her to stay at home • she must do all the chores like collecting water and grazing the cows. This takes time. • there would be nothing for her to do in the village even if she was educated • she must learn how to be a good wife and mother	**No:** • I will find a good husband for her so she doesn't need to be educated • it's a waste of time as her husband will look after her • she must help her mother and then when she is married her husband • she must herd the cattle and take them away if there is drought	**Yes:** • it make girls more confident • they are more expressive • they can get a better job	**No:** • there wouldn't be enough money to send me to school • they must help Mum by doing the household chores so I can go to school

What Teachers and Students Have Said About the Project

Teacher: Student empowerment as a result of open-ended student response

I love to hear student voices, I love to hear their ideas and somehow I didn't have any standard model answer, I would be very happy if they can generate their own answers and use the language in a really authentic way.

And then questioning, after reading the cartoon or the text, they have to be able to generate some questions, to challenge about the phenomenon that they see in the society.

But if… but I think the students can… it really challenges some of the students, especially the good ones. I think it's good, so they can think… sometimes it's hard, I know… because it's not something really concrete, it's something abstract and then when they tried to… for myself as well, when you try to understand…some concepts, maybe the process can be quite painful or can be quite… maybe sometimes you'll feel confused, is it really like that?

Teacher: Shift in teaching focuses

- from low-order comprehension to exploring the critical aspects
- the role of language choice to position the author, the reader and the subject matter

Well, I guess in the past, I used to focus on grammar or say for example, try to help develop them with some strategies, say for example focus on the suffixes, prefixes, and they can try to understand how to predict or to get the meaning of the words; but I guess now I would look at the meaning more and I would draw their attention to different perspectives of the writer or the reader, etc.

I also want them to think about why the language would be used this way, but not the other way.

Teacher: More diverse selection of texts

- images / multimodal
- covering multiple perspectives (e.g. counter texts)
- authentic / inspiring / interesting

…if you want students to… really have their own voice, you should provide them with a very comprehensive picture, including the text that we choose and counter text, and then allow students the rooms to think about… explore their own opinion.

Teacher: Challenges

- The project as an add-on, eating into time earmarked for teaching the textbooks
- A mixed experience for some students and teachers because of the need to grapple with abstract ideas or concepts

Not much time in teaching textbooks, let alone covering so many areas [in the Seed project]…

…sometimes it's hard, I know… because it's not something really concrete, it's something abstract and then when they tried to… for myself as well, when you try to understand some concepts, maybe the process can be quite painful or can be quite… maybe sometimes you'll feel confused, is it really like that?

I think the students were quite struggling when they were taught those units. Because they need to do a lot of analysis, they don't even understand what the question is. They spend a lot of time asking me what is the definition of positioning, and I feel it very hard to describe what is positioning in English. This is how the writer tries to put you in this angle, and they don't understand what it means.

Teacher: Challenges

- Student readiness in terms of their language knowledge and proficiency

Our students… are not really ready, for this kind of high order thinking. When they find it difficult to manage basic language presenting their own ideas, if you ask them to go further to think critically and even critical literacy, it seems it is a bit difficult. Sometimes I think students feel quite frustrated, so I don't know, but I think it may not be a bad idea to let them experience this because they can know what other students with higher language ability are doing. They can compare how can people doing this while we have it. Is good experience I think.

Student: Diverse Selection of Texts

- the variety (e.g. use of films)
- inability to see the coherence among the texts in the text set

The content was too disconnected, feels like putting different themes together. [I] don't think I have learnt a lot.

Student: **Gains in perspective and understanding of the issue in focus, yet varied evidence of awareness of how language is used for positioning or influencing**

Student: Empowerment / Disempowerment due to task design, which invited or did not really invite open-ended responses

(On the final task) There was nothing to talk about if you wrote in the letter that we should continue to go to the theme park, because this unit is on loving and protecting animals. We are expected to write about why we should stop going to the theme park and how captivity would affect dolphin's well-being.

In reality, we all wanted to go. We therefore think that our thinking was very much restricted by the value promoted in this unit. We couldn't talk about what we really believe in.

Way Forward

- Critical Literacy in small doses
- More thoughtful selection of themes and content, and task designs
- More professional support for teachers to implement Critical Literacy instruction in the classroom

Contact Details

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If you would like to find out more, come to:

(1)our poster session on **the project** (today, from13:25-15:30 at Building A); and

(2)our workshop on **“Using the Four Resources Model to Promote Real, Relevant and Reflective Reading for Meaning in the Secondary English Language Classroom”**
tomorrow at 11:20-11:50 a.m. (Room i409)