

# ***Critical Literacy Practices Among Chinese English Major Students***

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the feasibility and effectiveness of praxis of Critical Literacy in Chinese English-major classrooms. The results of qualitative analyses of the information obtained from classroom observations, and interviews reveal that English major students generally have a positive attitude and that several factors affect their perception. These elements consist of: 1) the enhancement of thinking skills by CL practices; 2) student interest in pertinent subjects; 3) student language competency; and 4) the effects of CL practices on tests. Several implications for CL pedagogical practice are also provided in light of the findings.

**Keywords:** Critical Literacy, EFL, English Major Students.

## **1. Introduction**

Historically, reading and writing education has been centered on developing students' functional literacy skills, with a particular emphasis on basic linguistic elements like vocabulary, grammatical structures, and phonological awareness. However, with the rise of postmodernism, this practical approach has come under scrutiny by numerous poststructuralists, anthropologists, and feminists who have found that textual meanings are the competitive outcomes of the interested parties that wish to make their interpretations of literacy the dominated one by repressing and "eliminating variation and alternative interpretations" [1].

In such a context, Critical Literacy (or CL) emerged as an alternative to conventional functional literacy. Recent decades have seen TESOL educators accept, apply, and develop several forms of critical literacy in their pedagogical practices. However, compared in teaching English as a second language (ESL), less CL research was conducted in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), at the same time focusing more on teachers and instructional strategies rather than students as the subject of study. Geographically, CL has long been widely incorporated into language teaching in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and other countries. In China, CL research findings are still few and often mixed up with critical thinking research.

The present English teaching hinges on the cultivation of functional skills, namely reading, listening speaking and writing. Though the very pedagogy may seems effective at initial stage of language learning, in the long- run however, it has contributed to the deficit of critical thinking among Chinese students, which is a serious issue in the learning of foreign languages. More English

educators and scholars are becoming interested in the development of critical literacy and critical ability in English language teaching in recent years [2].

The main goal of this study is to understand how critical inquiry and additional readings are employed in CL classes to develop critical literacy in English major students. We'll offer some ideas and practical tactics for setting up the ideal circumstances for developing learners' critical literacy. In addition, it will make some references to a paradigm of language instruction that promotes critical literacy.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Critical Literacy in TESOL**

There is universal agreement that CL is a vast, intricate, and philosophical notion that is frequently understood as a perspective or point of view [3]. In general, the process of challenging conventional wisdom, the social order, and the status quo can be seen as critical literacy [4]. When reading the text, critical literacy entails “an knowledge of how texts and discourses can be constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed to represent, contest, and, indeed, transform material, social, and semiotic relations” [5]. Critical literacy pedagogy is based on the principle of critical theory [6] and avoids taking the status quo for granted. In addition to increasing critical awareness regarding unfair power dynamics, it aims to promote equality and social justice for oppressed groups. By challenging and reconstructing the “normative practices and ideologies” embedded in texts or multimodal resources that “create and sustain stereotypical identities” [7], teachers of critical literacy instead work with students to explore the diverse viewpoints of printed texts or digital resources rather than decoding language in the skills-based way. Students improve functional skills as well as how to critically analyze current societal concerns.

### **2.2. Implementations in EFL**

There is no fixed method for reading from a critical stance [8]. However, scholars have put forward various effective strategies to encourage student to promote their critical reading. The various tactics that urge students to take a critical position toward text include, but are not limited to, questioning (or problem posing), reading supplementary and multiple-perspective texts, and reading from resistant angles.

In critical literacy classes, offering problems to the students and having them respond with questions is a frequent instructional technique. Learners are encouraged to consider what is missing from the texts and how they may address the inequality they contain by being asked questions like, “Whose voices are represented or marginalized” [9,10,11 cited in 5].

Reading supplemental and multiple-perspective texts is a practice used in critical literacy classrooms where students are given several renditions or even opposing texts, images, videos, or collections of lyrics to compare and contrast in order to highlight similarities and differences [5]. Additionally, given that authorship is a contextual activity [12], texts on the same topic may be written by multiple writers with diverse life experiences. Students can learn that texts are processed artificial works rather than an absolute true and full portrayal of reality by encouraging them to appreciate many interpretations of the same text. Thus, giving students texts with diverse perspectives on the same subject might aid in teaching them how to challenge textual authority.

Taking on new identities or examining the positions of the writers and textual elements are ways to implement the approach of reading from resistant angles. Students can learn that a text can be interpreted from a variety of viewpoints by being forced to reinterpret the same material with fresh identities. Instructing students in “functional grammar” [13] or “lexical categorization” [14]

analysis of authors' positions and textual elements might help them resist the idea of author-neutrality and be aware of the hidden ideologies and intentions in texts.

### 2.3. Classroom-based Studies in Asian EFL Context

As mentioned in previous section, there were fewer studies on critical literacy practices in the EFL context in East Asian countries. The following will introduce two studies explored critical practices in EFL contexts in Korea, Taiwan China, and Mainland China.

Yang [15] conducted a co-research on 31 non-English major freshmen with an English-speaking instructor at a Korean institution to investigate the interaction between CL practice in reading and writing. The intermediate-level EFL students were obliged to compose essays and participate in group discussions of online texts after learning some CL tactics. The author's adaptation of the Four Resources Model served as the theoretical foundation for the analysis of the data. The results demonstrated an advantageous connection between students' CL practice in reading and writing. The key motivators for the students to engage in CL practice included course credit, the instructor's teaching approach, comfortable discussion partners, engaging themes, and the ultimate objective of scoring highly on English examinations.

Ko [16] conducted a 9-month case study using the textbook as teaching aids in a reading class while working with an experienced English-speaking instructor. 39 English-major college students at intermediate and advanced language levels were there as participants along with the instructor. Students were required to present in groups, have conversations, and write reflective essays about the readings throughout the course of the project. The findings indicated that the EFL students' CL proficiency had increased and that they reported a general positive attitude toward CL practice. Additionally, the participants' attitudes about CL were influenced by their literacy learning experiences and language competence levels, but these factors had no bearing on how well they developed their CL skills. Finally, the author counseled CL educators to strike a balance between teaching basic language skills and CL and to build a supportive environment that encourages students to take a variety of viewpoints.

A novice instructor named Tian [17] spent four months using an action research methodology to investigate the attitudes of 61 Chinese sophomores in non-English majors about CL practice. The textbook was chosen as the primary source of instruction, and other reading materials and problem-solving techniques were applied to direct the students toward CL exercises. She concluded that these EFL students generally approved of CL but did not anticipate the instructor to spend a lot of time on it in class after reviewing the data gathered through surveys, teacher's notebooks, and observations. However, this training in deed improved their critical awareness.

In conclusion, these researches described above successfully incorporated CL into Asian EFL reading and writing classrooms and provided insight into how to instruct CL to Asian EFL students. However, Yang appeared to be the only person to go into detail about what influences students' attitudes toward CL practice.

Furthermore, there is no specific research that focuses on English major students in mainland China. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to advance those areas.

## 3. Methodology

This study took place in the English Department, College of Foreign Languages of Nankai University, a top-tier university that belongs to the "985" Project. My identity as a junior student here contributes to the choice of the research site.

This study adopted interview as a means of eliciting students' thoughts and feelings. In the process, purposeful sampling was used. The interviewees include two freshmen, two sophomores,

and two juniors. They were chosen based on a comprehensive consideration of their linguistic proficiency and ability to perform critical literacy practices (See in Table 1). By using such criteria, my aim is to ensure that different student perspectives would be included in this research and, as a result, to put more emphasis on the character of students' educational experiences when using a critical literacy approach. The interview was semi-structured and an interview guideline (see Appendix) was worked out for flexibility. The guidelines included several types of questions: 1) the participants' language study background, such as their language learning purposes or their linguistic proficiency; 2) the participants' views on the supplementary reading materials and critical questions involved in the CL practice; 3) the participants' views on the focus of the English course and suggestions on teaching. The interview was carried out in Chinese for the convenience of expressing ideas. Also, direct observation of classroom activities as the supplementary source of the semi-structured interview was applied. Through direct observation, researchers could get a wealth of important first-hand information [18]. Based on that, classroom observations from this semester from my perspective as a junior student and relevant audio-taped classes were used as supplementary materials for the study. To get an intuitive understanding of the participants' reactions to CL instruction, I observed some of my classmates' performances during the CL activities from both the junior and sophomore classes. Moreover, the classroom practice was audio taped with a digital screen recorder, and some of the audio taped information provided clues for choosing interviewees.

Table 1: A Case Profile of the Six Participants.

Participants' Pseudonym	Grade	English proficiency	Willingness to Engage
Venessa	Junior	Advanced	High
Michael	Junior	High intermediate	Low
Jeremy	Sophomore	High intermediate	High
Eileen	Sophomore	Intermediate	Low
Lorna	Freshman	Intermediate	High
Kevin	Freshman	Low intermediate	Average

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The semi-structured interview corresponds with the factors that affected students' perceptions of the CL practice. Among the 6 persons interviewed, almost all of them agreed on the goal of English major courses is to improve students' language proficiency and boost their cross-cultural competence. As interviewee 1 and 4 mentioned in their speech:

Interviewee 1: The most basic goal of studying English major is to master the English language and to be able to communicate with others effectively; secondly, studying English and related fields of knowledge aims to broaden our horizons and develop critical thinking abilities. We also study English and its related disciplines to be able to understand the cultural backgrounds of the countries where English is spoken and to use their English proficiency to support the advancement of global development.

Interviewee 4: The main purpose of the English major is to improve the English reading and writing skills, to enhance the ability to think and discern, to improve intercultural communication skills, to expand the horizons, etc.

Also, in the interview, students elaborate on their distinct attitudes on the supplementary readings assigned by the teachers. For those who appreciate these materials, they believe that those texts are beneficial to their knowledge scope and critical thinking patterns. Meanwhile, some students

complained about those materials being too difficult and time-consuming for them to read. Interviewee 1 and 3 are selected to represent the two perspectives:

Interviewee 1: The supplementary reading materials provided in the course are very rich, and most of the instructors show us different perspectives and ideas on research topics through supplementary materials, which are not only meaningful for discussion but also enhance the breadth and depth of thinking about professional knowledge; the materials are also very diverse in format, with both paper and multimedia materials covered, which can also enhance students' interest and understanding of various aspects of learning supplementary materials.

Interviewee 3: I feel that the supplementary reading materials are a little too long, especially the linguistics materials, which we basically haven't read in the next class. They are a little bit obscure and difficult to understand and are somehow beyond our current level of understanding.

Based on the statistic above, a preliminary conclusion of the factors affecting students' perspectives on CL practices in class are as follows: 1) CL practices' positive impact on thinking ability; 2) Students' interest in relevant materials; 3) Students' language proficiency; 4) Impacts of the CL practices on exams.

## 5. Conclusion

Two key conclusions from the study are presented.

First, English majors at Nankai University generally had a favorable attitude regarding the integration of CL into their classes.

Second, these students' perspectives toward CL practice were influenced by four criteria. Initially, the favorable impact of CL practice on students' thinking abilities helped some students develop positive attitudes about it because they thought it would boost their competence by improving their capacity for cross-cultural communication skills and critical thinking abilities. The second element was the learners' enthusiasm for the additional reading materials. The students' opinions on CL practice hinged on whether they found the supplemental reading resources to be more interesting or difficult to read. Thirdly, participants' language proficiency contributed to their views of CL. Some students with relatively weak academic foundations may find it challenging to read the supplemental reading materials and respond to the important questions in the target language. The tests, which were predominantly seen in two aspects, were the first factor. On the one hand, many students were in favor of CL practice because they believed it might improve their test-taking abilities by increasing their proficiency in the target language. However, several students felt that CL practice was a waste of their precious class time and had little to do with studying for English exams.

There were several limitations in the research that need to be pointed out. The first limitation came from the small number of participants, which might have impacted the external validity of the study. As a small number of and eight interviewees were involved in this study, their attitudes towards the implementation of CL in English majors' course may fall short of representing the whole Chinese universities' English majored students' attitudes. Therefore, the findings of this study couldn't be generalized as common results in all Chinese senior high school English classrooms.

Moreover, the study only concentrated on the courses in one semester. The short duration of the research may not cover all the CL practices that the teachers have applied in the class. Neither the time span of students' exposure to CL classes long enough for them to form a full evaluation on CL practices.

Four implications are concluded from the study. Firstly, the consistency of the curriculum for each field of English majors needs improvement. Students have reported the inconsistency of related courses, for example, the Linguistic classes. Teachers may not communicate effectively enough when teaching the same subject, leading to a gap or duplication of knowledge.



Also, the relationship between the teaching of traditional functional skills (i.e., speaking, listening, writing, reading, etc.) and the praxis of CL should be balanced. Compared to the conventional curriculum for English major students that focuses on language proficiency, our department concentrated more on students' professional literacy in domains of English, namely English Literature, Linguistics, and Cultural Studies. Teachers have provided students with many advanced materials that are on the frontier of the disciplines. As a result, the curriculum of English traditional skills training courses accounts for a relatively small proportion, and students feel that their English language proficiency has not improved. The deficiency of language skills has led to students feeling a bit overwhelmed in the process of improving CL.

Finally, the assessment of English education needs to be perfected. Although the majority of the courses centered on improving critical literacy, are quite in-depth and engaging as the lecturers implement CL practices such as asking questions and supplying students with critical reading texts, the course evaluation is still centered on memorization and does not thoroughly analyze the caliber of the students.

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## Appendix

### Semi-Structured Interview:

1. What do you think is the main purpose of studying English major?
2. How did you think of the supplementary reading materials provided by the instructor in your major class this semester? Why?
3. What do you think of the current issues discussed in your major class this semester? Why?
4. How do you feel about the difficulty of the additional materials or the questions asked by the instructor this semester? Did they have any effect on your way of thinking?
5. Do you think English major courses should be based on teachers teaching ready-made textbook content or on teacher-student interaction to supplement and expand?
6. What do you think is good about our compulsory courses for English major? What may need improvements? Do you have any suggestions?