Operationalizing Critical Literacy in EFL Classrooms in KSA: Possibilities and Challenges

Dr. Abdullah Al Jumiah[1]

[1] English Language & Prep. Year Institute, Royal Commission for Jubail and Yanbu, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Dr. Abdullah Al Jumiah, English Language & Prep. Year Institute, Royal Commission for Jubail and Yanbu, Saudi Arabia. E-mail: jumiah_a@rcjy.edu.sa

Abstract

Using a qualitative research method, this article explores how EFL teachers can operationalize critical literacy (CL) when teaching prescribed textbooks that emphasize functional literacy in EFL classrooms in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). To address this research issue, the action research demonstrated and reflected my experience of using CL in one of my college-level EFL classrooms. The study ends by shedding light on the possibilities and challenges which teachers may need to negotiate and navigate through when implementing CL in EFL classrooms. Data were collected from two primary sources: my teaching reflective journals and classroom observations. The results indicate that students' engagement, autonomy, voice, agency, and critical conscious awareness can be maintained and promoted when CL is enacted in EFL classrooms. In addition, the findings show that the use of CL can empower students and teachers alike to take on new positions and play different roles in EFL classrooms. KSA can equip its learners with the necessary skills to critically engage with language and texts, empowering them to become informed, active participants in an increasingly globalized world.

Keywords: Critical literacy, critical pedagogy, functional literacy, conventional literacy, instrumental literacy, EFL, TEFL, and KSA.

1. Introduction

Textbooks in English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) classrooms have institutionalized power. Teachers and students rarely have the power or even the freedom to choose or develop them (Dendrinos, 1992; Author, 2016; Al-Jumiah, 2016). EFL Textbooks stem their institutional power largely from being perceived as neutral and value-free authentic sources of the language although they control 90% of classroom activities and tasks (Dendrinos, 1992). Classroom activities and tasks that require only one correct answer such as true-false statements, multiple choice items, and gap filling are the most frequent activities in EFL classrooms even though they usually promote functional literacy, offer limited learning possibilities, and encourage passive reading behaviors (Correia, 2006). These activities dominate teaching tasks in EFL classrooms particularly in standard-based and test-driven educational environments where the emphasis on functional reading and writing skills as well as teaching the standardized forms of the language inform the majority of literacy programs (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

CL differs qualitatively from conventional mainstream functional literacy. It views English language teaching (ELT) and English language learning (ELL) as social acts. Attempts to challenge and negotiate the institutionalized power of textbooks using CL have started to flourish in the 1980s (Kuo, 2014). However, it was not till the beginning of the last decade when similar attempts have been observed in contexts where English is not spoken as a native language (Fajardo, 2015). Despite the substantial literature that has addressed the theoretical underpinning and use of CL in first and second language classrooms, the implementation of CL in EFL classrooms is relatively understudied, especially in the Middle East and Arab Gulf countries (Na & Kim, 2003). Accordingly, a few research articles have been published in well-established peer-reviewed academic journals to investigate the use of CL specifically with EFL students (Na & Kim, 2003).

There are various significant reasons why CL has been widely marginalized in the EFL literature. Many ELT educators tend to mistakenly homogenize various ELT teaching disciplines such as English as a first or second language (ESL), English as an additional or international language (EIL), English as a lingua franca (ELF), English for specific purposes (ESP), English for academic purposes (EAP), and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Although these disciplines slightly overlap, they differ qualitatively and quantitatively. For instance, the ideology and practice of "pragmatism" prevail more evidently in EFL contexts compared to other disciplines (Fajardo, 2015). This includes contexts where English language teachers are positioned merely as service providers whose task is to teach functional literacy skills to students only to enable them to meet the academic standards set by the various academic institutions. As a result of such a homogenizing perspective, less attention has been given to the use of CL specifically in EFL contexts as unique teaching environments; they are frequently confused or homogenized with other ELT disciplines.

Many teachers don't use CL in their EFL classrooms because they are either skeptical of or unfamiliar with it and with its potentials (Crookes, 2010). This should not be surprising because teaching and learning are largely conceptualized in EFL teacher-education

programs merely as value-free, linguistic, and cognitive activities, rather than situated social acts. This is partially due to the fact that historically EFL teaching and learning theories were largely informed by research developed with structuralistic, behaviorist, and positivistic orientations (Canagarajah, 2005). Thus, the content of the curricula in these EFL programs usually emphasizes teaching functional literacy and the standardized forms of the language. Likewise, some other teachers avoid using CL in EFL classrooms because they either believe that it is beyond the learners' capacities, or they mistakenly perceive texts as neutral and self-contained products.

From a different perspective, however, the EFL textbooks that are frequently imposed on EFL classrooms are usually accompanied by prepacked extra teaching materials including CDs, lesson plans, and "recipes" of how to teach EFL (Phillipson, 1992; Canagarajah, 1999). These textbooks are usually developed by theorists and publishing agencies in the center, where English is spoken as a native language, such as Oxford, Cambridge, Routledge, and Pearson. These teaching materials are included CL unlikely. The imposition and over-reliance on them not only deskill and subjugate teachers, but they also construct, promote, legitimate, and reproduce their professional dependency. This professional dependency is characterized by a top-down unequal relation of power between the practitioner EFL teachers and the EFL theorists and publishing agencies in the center. The problem is that such over-reliance and dependency are not only internalized, but are also taken-for-granted as commonsense, particularly by many novice EFL teachers who blindly follow and utilize the prepacked teaching materials. Overtime, these teachers are more likely to develop masochistic professional identities that are characterized by "fear of freedom", subordination, submission, and adherence to the institutional power of various EFL textbooks, publishing agencies, and authors in the center (Fromm, 1941; Freire, 1970). EFL teachers with masochistic professional identities intentionally escape their professional freedom literally because they fear it. This happens when they give up reclaiming their professional identities because they are so reluctant to rely on themselves professionally to teach English independently and creatively in the classrooms. Thus, while operationalizing CL is one of the ways through which professional dependency and linguistic imperialism can be negotiated and resisted, many EFL teachers don't capitalize on it purposefully in favor of escaping being free professionally. Instead, they adopt banking educational models, through which they commodify EFL teaching and learning, and objectify themselves and their students (Freire, 1970). In other words, they perceive themselves merely as transmitters of predetermined knowledge that is mistakenly assumed to be neutral and value-free. They also view their students solely as passive recipients or empty objects whose task is limited to internalizing this preselected knowledge.

CL has sociopolitical, emancipatory, and transformative dimensions. It aims to increase individuals' critical conscious awareness to interrogate their existence and relation to the world, and enhance critical reflection and transformative actions. For this reason, some EFL teachers intentionally avoid implementing CL in their classrooms because it is prohibited by the policymakers in the context where they teach. Due to all these factors, the EFL literature still has limited accounts of classroom activities that can facilitate incorporating CL while teaching prescribed textbooks. The dearth in the literature informs and drives the current study that has been developed to fulfill this gap. I approached this study as a CL practitioner and scholar (Freire, 1987; Shannon, 1995).

The research question which guided this study is: how can EFL teachers operationalize CL when teaching prescribed textbooks that emphasize functional literacy in EFL classrooms? In order to address this question, I first explain what CL is. Then, I explain the context of the study and the use of CL in EFL contexts. After that, I discuss my research methodology including the methods of data collection and analysis. Later, I demonstrate and reflect on my own experience of using CL in my EFL classroom while teaching a prescribed textbook. I end the article by discussing the results and shedding light on some of the challenges that EFL teachers may need to negotiate and navigate through when using CL. This study might be of a special interest to progressive EFL educators, policymakers, and textbook developers (Freire, 1987).

1.1 What Is Critical Literacy?

CL is rooted in and informed by the works of the Brazilian educator (Freire, 1970; 1987). There is no unified definition of what CL is or what constitutes it. However, almost all definitions, frameworks, approaches, and models of CL fundamentally emphasize particular aspects. Unlike conventional mainstream literacy theorists, CL advocates view ELT and ELL as situated social practices, rather than merely linguistic and cognitive activities. For them, CL transcends the acts of micro-level encoding and decoding as it considers the macro-level functions of discourse as well as the dialectical relationship between language and power. In this way, CL theorists and educators aim to uncover and interrogate underlying assumptions and ideologies that are inherent in texts. They also consider the ways in which issues of hegemony, oppression, domination, manipulation, and resistance are exercised through language. Thus, CL can be theorized as a form of empowerment as it serves to promote individuals' agency, critical conscious awareness, and language of critique that could ultimately lead to praxis (Freire, 1987; Shannon, 1995).

CL has been conceptualized differently by different scholars (Janks, 2010; Gee, 1996; Freebody & Luke, 1990). However, the CL framework which I drew on conceptually in the current study was Lewison's et al. (2002). Lewison's et al. (2002) identify four dimensions for CL based on their review of the 30-year of its literature. According to them, the first dimension of CL is *"disrupting the commonplace."* This dimension requires individuals to critically interrogate and challenge social norms, commonly held assumptions or what they take-for-granted as commonsense. It also requires them to question what seems to be normal or natural. The second dimension of CL is *"interrogating multiple viewpoints"*. This dimension considers legitimating counter-discourses, narratives, and voices, especially those that are frequently marginalized or silenced. The third dimension of CL is *"focusing on sociopolitical issues."* This dimension encourages individuals to examine the interdependent relationship between language and power, and its role in reproducing, legitimizing, and perpetuating privilege, domination, power, oppression, and marginalization. It also highlights the essential role that language can play

in resistance. The fourth dimension of CL is *"taking action and promoting social justice."* According to the authors, this dimension is the heart of CL. It focuses on the role of literacy in promoting conscious awareness and agency that can lead to praxis, transformative social change, and social justice.

CL and critical thinking differ qualitatively. Critical thinking focuses on logic, comprehension, reasoned analysis, and inferences (Janks, 2010). In contrast, CL aims to uncover and question the social interests and the naturalized assumptions in texts. It also aims to interrogate the ways in which texts function to normalize, legitimate, reproduce, and perpetuate oppression, domination, and hegemony. This is how I have conceptualized CL as a social practice in this study.

1.2 The Context of the Study

The rationale behind conducting this study in an EFL classroom in KSA in particular because the implementation of CL in EFL classrooms in Arab Gulf countries in the Middle East such as KSA is still understudied (Na & Kim, 2003). Very limited number of previous action research, if any, has been published in a well-established peer-reviewed academic journal to investigate the use of CL specifically with EFL students in the Saudi context.

The study took place when I was teaching EFL to first-year college-level students in a preparatory program in the eastern province of KSA. At that time, I had two EFL classrooms, each of which included around 25 students. All the students were Saudis and native speakers of Arabic. The students were between 18–22 years old. The students' proficiency level of English was intermediate; they were placed in B1+ level as per the Common European Framework (CEFR) based on their results in an English language placement test, which they took right after their admission to the college. This was the highest level of English language proficiency in the institute (level number 4). The students were required to pass their English in the preparatory year program in order to continue their 3- or 4-year college degree program. Neither the students nor I as the teacher had any control on choosing the teaching materials and the pacing schedule of the lessons. The textbook that was assigned to my classroom was *Unlock: Reading and writing skills* published by Cambridge University Press in 2014. The textbook was specifically developed for Arab learners. Thus, the textboob has become very popular in the region. At least five other universities and institutes in the country use the same textbook with their preparatory year students.

2. Methodology

In my attempt to explore how EFL teachers can operationalize CL when teaching prescribed textbooks that to highlight the importance of functional literacy in EFL classrooms, I utilized an action research approach (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).The rationale behind adopting action research was to allow me as a teacher-researcher to identify and investigate the issue through being engaged in systematically structured and focused processes including planning, action, observation, and reflection. Specifically, action research enabled me to simultaneously collect and analyze the data via observing and reflecting on my own implementation of CL in my EFL classroom in a circular manner. It also allowed me to adjust and narrow down my next sets of data collection and analysis based on my preliminary findings. Thus, action research empowered me to promote my understanding about my students, their learning, and needs while at the same time capitalize on my self-efficacy and agency. For these reasons, action research was more appropriate for addressing both the purpose of the study and its research questions.

Data were gathered from two primary sources including my classroom observations and my teaching reflective journals that I wrote after each class for further analysis. I used these reflective journals to systematically keep record and analyze significant hunches, observations, emerging findings, and themes.

Data collection and analysis took place simultaneously. During data analysis, my mode of analysis was initially inductive. This was the stage at which I used "open coding" (Merriam, 2009). However, as soon as I started to reach a saturation point, during which no additional significant theme or finding appeared, my mode of analysis started to gradually shift to be deductive. At this stage, I used "axial coding" to establish significant and meaningful relationships among the emerging themes (Merriam, 2009).

Since the way in which CL is enacted is highly contextualized (Hawkins & Norton, 2009), it was neither my intention nor goal to propose a "one-size-fits-all" prescription of classroom activities that are universally and equally applicable for all EFL classrooms and students. The teaching activities that I used with my students could be modified or even ultimately changed as appropriate. My students were proficient in English, and some of them spent some time abroad in the U.S. studying English. For this reason, the types of questions I included in the tasks were sophisticated in terms of content and grammar. However, teachers working with beginners or linguistically less proficient students, for instance, can modify the content of the activities accordingly. Teachers can work collaboratively *with* their students, rather than *for* them, to appropriate these tasks and activities to best suit their teaching and learning contexts, needs, and goals.

2.1 Moving from Theory to Practice

The teaching activities that I developed to incorporate CL into my EFL classroom were largely informed by how I conceptualized CL. As mentioned above, for me, CL includes the social practice of uncovering and questioning interests and assumptions in texts. I also view it as the act of interrogating the ways in which texts function to normalize, legitimate, reproduce, and perpetuate certain underlying ideologies. My pedagogical goal included helping the students in my class to be critical EFL literate learners who:

- Could read and interpret the texts in the prescribed textbook in more meaningful and engaging ways;
- Have critical conscious awareness of the underlying ideologies that underpin texts.

In order to achieve these goals, I divided the lesson into three interdependent and interrelated stages: pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading. Each one of these stages included some activities that I developed to help the students to read *against* the text, in oppose to read *with* the text (Janks, 2010). I also used "problem posing" more than "problem solving" teaching techniques and pedagogy (Freire, 1987). This helped me as a teacher to make the classroom discussion more student-centered. The students' role was to articulate and generate probing questions about the text rather than merely trying to find or guess the right answers to the authors' or teacher's questions. In this way, the students' voices and perspectives were privileged and capitalized.

How times have changed

The American Dream has been described as 'a dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone'.

This dream became reality for many Americans living in the United States in the 1950s, but are Americans today enjoying the standards of living that their parents and grandparents enjoyed in the post-war years?

After the Second World War, many Americans became richer and their living standards increased as the economy grew. From 1945 to 1973, incomes increased by approximately 3% per year. From the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, incomes rose very slowly, but then they increased sharply for five years between 1995 and 2000. Overall, incomes have been rising by less and less each year and now the annual increase is almost nothing. However, there is more to living standards than income and spending money.

Job security and unemployment also play a role in the standard of living. Nowadays, factories and offices are closing, which makes jobs less secure. Unemployment, too, is higher than it was in the past. The number of people without a job in the 1950s fell to around 2.5%, but now this figure stands at around 9.5%.

Another measure of the standard of living is the health of the population. Life expectancy is an important measurement of the health in a country. Life expectancy has increased from 68 years in 1950 to 78 today, but the USA is now behind Germany and the United Kingdom (80), France (81) and Japan (82).

One reason for this problem with life expectancy in the United States is obesity, because this has an effect on the general health of the population. In the USA, 35% of adults are obese now, compared with 10% in 1950. This increase is due to the availability and consumption of fast food.

Of course, most Americans own more things than in the post-war years. For example, dishwashers, air conditioning, TVs and phones were only for the richer members of society. Now they can be found in most homes. However, some economists would argue that the standard of living cannot be rising if people are becoming less healthy, or if they cannot afford to retire, or if both parents in a family have to work to pay bills. It seems that although we think we have a better standard of living, this may not be the real picture.

Figure 1. A reading text from Unlock 3 (reproduced with permission)

In order to operationalize CL while teaching the prescribed textbook, it was very significant to choose a text "with a very clear ideological loading" (Wallace, 1992). For this reason, I intentionally selected a reading text entitled "How times have changed" because it discussed the concept of *"the American dream"*, a very controversial and ideological topic in the American society. The text was in a unit called "economics", and it included 7 paragraphs (Figure 2).

The lack of having the appropriate knowledge is one of the challenges that may encounter EFL and ESL learners when doing a critical reading of a text that is based on Western knowledge (Nunan, 1989). This cultural demand was true for the students in my class as the vast majority of them were not familiar with the concept of "the American dream." For this reason, I gave the students a pre-lesson homework to do before we started the unit. I asked them to google the term *"the American dream"* and write a short summary about what they thought the American dream was. This was a crucial scaffolding task to establish a situated meaningful practice through introducing the students to the topic to establish and activate their prior knowledge and build on their previous experiences. In the following day, I started the pre-reading stage by giving the students the opportunity to discuss what they found out about the concept of "the American dream." After that, I gave the students a brief lecture about the same concept to contextualize the text and teach them about the sociohistorical and sociopolitical context of the term. Then, I divided the class into groups of five students each to read the text and discuss the following prompts. For the sake of classroom time management, each group was asked to select one of the prompts to focus on and discuss:

- What is the text about?
- What is the purpose of the text? Why was the text written about (to entertain, persuade, inform, explore, explain, etc. …)?
- Who did write the text, and to whom?

In addition, the students were given the opportunity to work in their groups to generate questions about the text. This was a challenging task for most of them at the beginning because they were not accustomed to the *problem posing* teaching pedagogy, in oppose to the *problem solving* method.

EFL learners are more advantaged compared to their L1 counterparts as they usually have more meta-language awareness of some

grammatical aspects such as pronouns, subject, objects, as well as active and passive voices (Wallace, 1992). Thus, in the while-reading stage, I drew on the students' explicit understanding of these grammatical aspects to promote their *"language of critique"* (Shannon, 1995), and to show them how language could function as a form of power. This was achieved through developing questions that encouraged the students to analyze the text at a micro-level to understand how authors usually have to make various choices among different available options at the levels of grammar, voice, modality, tense, vocabulary, style, genre, and readership when they produce texts to serve certain ideological interests. The students' task at this stage was to build on their meta-language awareness of the English language grammar to discuss the following questions in their respective groups before reporting to the whole class:

- What verb tenses were used in the text, and why?
- What modal verbs, pronouns, and connectors did the author select, and why?
- When did the author use the active and passive voices, and why?
- To what extent were the agents in the text explicit or implicit, and why?
- What metaphors and adjectives did the author include in the text? What did these metaphors and adjectives tell about the author's opinions and biases?
- What mood did the author select in the text (e.g. affirmative, imperative, interrogative), and why?
- What visual texts did the author include, and why?
- How could these visual texts be re-designed to challenge the authors' biases?
- To what writing genre does the text belong, and why?

Again, for the sake of classroom time management, each group of students chose 2-3 questions to focus on. These questions drew the students' attention to the ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions of language as described in Halliday's (1975) theory of *Systematic Functional Linguistics*. The last two questions at the while-reading stage served to enhance the students' understanding of how the design of texts including their visual resources were never neutral (Janks, 2010). Addressing these questions was expected to promote the students' *"critical language awareness"* (Fairclough, 1992) to consciously consider how and why authors of texts purposefully and ideologically construct their texts in a particular way among other different available options.

In the post-reading stage, the students were asked to select one of the following questions that focus on analyzing the text at a macro-level to understand the social functions of discourse. The questions in this stage aimed to encourage the students to relate texts to contexts, and interrogate commonly held assumptions or social norms that seemed natural, neutral, and commonsense. Also, these questions served to promote the students' critical conscious awareness of the interrelationship among language, ideology, and social power. In short, these critical questions aimed to enable the students to understand how language and texts are never neutral, but always ideology driven. Addressing the last question in the post-reading stage was significant because it helped the students to understand what it means to read a text from multiple perspectives, a very important dimension of CL:

- Whose voices were empowered by inclusion in the text?
- Whose voices were marginalized by exclusion in the text?
- To what extent and in which way was the author of the text bias?
- What stereotypical representations did the author include in the text?
- How would the text differ if it's written from a different or competing perspective?

3. Results and Discussion

The findings in this study show that four themes have emerged from data analysis: promoting alternative perspectives and interpretations, problematizing reader and writer positions, re-humanizing the EFL classroom, re-defining the role of the teacher, and EFL students' resistance to CL. However, overcoming the structural, cultural, and pedagogical barriers requires concerted efforts from policymakers, educators, and the community. With strategic planning and commitment, critical literacy can become an integral part of EFL education in KSA, transforming students into thoughtful, engaged, and critically aware individuals. The potential for integrating critical literacy into EFL classrooms in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is significant, given the evolving educational landscape and the increasing emphasis on developing students' critical thinking skills. Critical literacy, which involves analyzing and questioning texts to understand power dynamics, ideologies, and biases, can empower students to become more reflective and engaged learners.

These themes and findings will be described and discussed in more details in what follows.

3.1 Promoting Alternative Perspectives and Interpretations

The findings indicate that operationalizing CL in my EFL classroom provided the students with the opportunity to practice *"literacy with an attitude"* (Finn, 1999). That is, it enabled them to reflect on the activities and concepts discussed in the classroom. It also encouraged them to generate more probing questions about these concepts. For example, some of the students chose to write about the American dream and whether it has an equivalent concept in the Saudi context. Other students reflected on how the concept of meritocracy is visualized in the Saudi society and how it is linked to other concepts such as social inequity. In this way, the use of CL in my EFL

classroom helped in providing the students with a safe zone to freely and peacefully discuss their own interpretation of the text. It also allowed them to see how texts can have multiple possible interpretations, and understand how and why some interpretations are privileged over others, which was an enriching and empowering exercise.
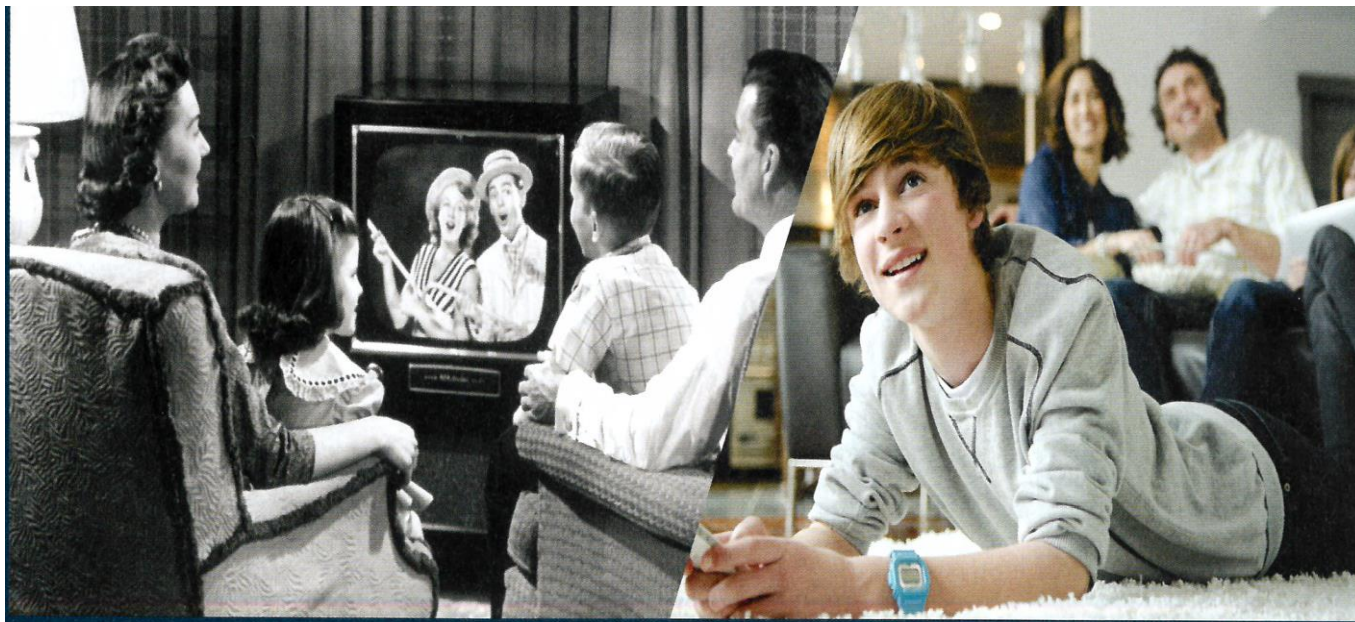
3.2 Problematizing Reader and Writer Positions

Figure 2. A visual image from Unlock 3 (reproduced with permission)

The results in the current study reveal that incorporating CL into my EFL classroom helped the students to be more assertive readers. This specifically occurred when the students critically discussed and questioned the concept of "the American dream", rather than just simply and passively took the knowledge presented in the text for granted. At the same time, incorporating CL into my EFL classroom helped my students to promote and validate their "epistemological curiosity" (Freire, 1974) as well as their "critical sociolinguistic awareness" (Author, 2016, p. 191). In other words, incorporating CL into my EFL classroom encouraged my students to read beyond the text (its literal level) to uncover the hidden messages or ideologies that underpin it, and thoughtfully consider its function at a macro-level. For instance, the introductory sentence in the text was: *"The American Dream has been described as a dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone."* When prompted to think critically about this sentence, the students in my class interrogated the use of the passive voice in the sentence and questioned whose perspective this sentence represented because the agent in the sentence was concealed. Likewise, the topic sentence in the third paragraph in the text was: *"After the Second World War, many Americans became richer and their living standards increased as the economy grew."* When the students read this sentence, they critically questioned what the author exactly meant by the phrase "many Americans", especially that the visual images in the text included only White Americans who seemed to be middle class (Figure 3). Such active engagement and critical interrogation of published texts indicate how the students in my EFL classroom negotiated power relations via positioning themselves as critical evaluators of texts who are equal to textbook publishers and authors (Clark, 1992; Mazdaee & Maftoon, 2012, p. 43).

3.3 Re-humanizing the EFL Classroom

Developing reading and writing tasks from a CL perspective using the problem posing teaching techniques in my classroom encouraged the students to ask further questions and interrogate the content of the text. Thereby, the students were provided with the space to practice literacy as a situated social act to interrogate and negotiate knowledge and commonly held assumptions, rather than being objectified as passive learners whose task was merely to passively internalize predetermined answers and knowledge that they should take-for-granted. They were also provided with the opportunity to be in the position of others to challenge powerful discourses and consider other perspectives, interpretations, counter-discourses, and competing narratives, especially those that have been historically silenced and marginalized. In this way, the use of CL in my EFL classroom made the class more transformative, humanizing, and dialogic.

In above, integrating CL into my EFL classroom served to maintain and maximize the students' critical conscious awareness as active agents who could negotiate and question their relation to the world. This specifically occurred, for instance, when they invested on their *"funds of knowledge"* (Moll et al., 1992) to critically interrogate and reflect on the Saudi dominant ideologies that are equivalent to those found in the American dream such as the achievement ideology, to which they could relate more. This helped me as a teacher not only to better appropriate and accommodate the prescribed text, but also to relate it more to my students' lived experiences and cultures (Ko, 2013a, p. 106).

3.4 Re-defining the Role of the Teacher

Incorporating CL into my EFL classroom required me to redefine my role as a teacher. My task was neither to impose nor uncritically transfer the predetermined knowledge and answers on or to the students. However, I played the role of a facilitator. This had a significant impact on my interaction with the students and my feedback to them. I intentionally avoided using the IRE (initiation, response, and evaluation) model of classroom interaction (Mehan, 1985) to stay away from positioning myself as the ultimate authority in the classroom who could determine what counts as correct or incorrect answers or knowledge. In this way, CL as a pedagogy and taking the role of a facilitator allowed me as a teacher to significantly minimize the students' silence, which many mainstream teacher-centered ELT approaches reproduce and perpetuate. This also allowed me to make my teaching more dialectical in the sense that my students and I worked collectively to equally teach and learn from each other mutually. Not being the ultimate source of power whose knowledge should be unquestioned or uncritically internalized was important in validating and promoting my students' own voice.

3.5 EFL Students' Resistance to CL

The findings in this study indicate that a number of students seemed to resist CL because they perceived it as a change in the tradition of reading, which they visualized as an inappropriate way of responding to a text (Wallace, 1995). This seems to be the case because many of these students come from backgrounds where the authority and power of textbooks are not only institutionalized, but also internalized and unquestioned as textbooks are conceptualized as neutral, authentic, and value-free sources of the language (Dendrinos, 1992; Author, 2016). Thus, some students resisted CL practices because of their previous schooling experiences. These students usually come from standard-based and test-driven educational environments where the "teach and study for the exam" culture isn't only dominant, but is also highly valued (Cho, 2015). As a result, these students usually come to the classroom with the misconception that EFL learning merely includes developing their linguistic competence with a large emphasis on vocabulary and grammar. Changing EFL students' tendency of submission and over deference to textbooks is one of the challenges that EFL teachers might have to deal with when implementing CL. In order to overcome it, however, EFL teachers need to explicitly explain to their students what it means to view language, knowledge, and reality as social constructs. They also need to clarify to them how to perceive English language learning and teaching as situated social practices, rather than merely cognitive and linguistic activities.

4. Conclusion

Considerable debate has taken place over the past decade to discuss whether CL should be incorporated into EFL classrooms (Na & Kim, 2003). The current study demonstrates how teachers in EFL contexts can go beyond teaching conventional mainstream functional literacy skills such as decoding, encoding, and comprehension. EFL classrooms can be empowering social sites where students can be empowered as critical active agents who not only live *in* the world, but also live *with* the world, and who can simultaneously read both the word and world (Freire, 1987).

The tension between language learning and critical engagement is still under debate (Bacon, 2017). On one hand, some researchers are skeptical not only about whether critical engagement and language learning can reinforce each other mutually, but also about whether they could even be introduced to students concurrently. Others, on the other hand, argue that there is no, and even should not be any, hierarchy between language learning and critical engagement (Bacon, 2017). Resolving such tension, balancing language learning and critical engagement, and deciding when to introduce CL to EFL learners remain some of the challenges that teachers need to negotiate and navigate through. This becomes more salient nowadays as enhancing functional literacy and promoting students' measurable language skills inform many EFL programs around the globe, especially where English is considered as a linguistic capital.

It is essential to emphasize that neither CL nor mainstream instrumental or functional literacy should be practiced at the expense of the other. Both are fundamentally important for the students. Thus, students in EFL programs need to have access to the powerful discourses and skills, especially those that are highly valued and rewarded in the job market. At the same time, they need to learn how to critically interrogate and negotiate texts. This should also include the multimodal texts that become so prevalent in the current digital and technologically-driven 21st century (Kress, 2000). Unless EFL teachers maintain this crucial balance, their students may experience the risk of either being left behind and ghettoized, or marginalized and disempowered. For this reason, it is important for EFL educators to balance their teaching between CL and the teaching of the basic language skills. This is an ethical requirement that EFL practitioners need to consider and fulfil.

Teaching as well as learning are life-long processes. The current study highlights the importance of having EFL teachers and students alike engaged in ongoing reflective practices for further development. As this study demonstrates, I actively involved myself as an EFL practitioner in the practice of reflective teaching via conducting this research in my own classroom. Such engagement is a crucial component of CL and pedagogy. Similar, but not necessarily exactly the same, reflective acts need to be routinely carried out by EFL educators to inform their everyday teaching practices.

There are various potential challenges which teachers could face when implementing CL in EFL classrooms. Some of these challenges may exist as a result of some sociopolitical concerns. That is, some policymakers especially in oppressive teaching contexts may forbid the use of CL in classrooms because it is considered as a "taboo" to discuss critical issues such as social justice, social power, inequity, and race. Overcoming such an administrative obstacle is one of the challenges that EFL teachers may need to negotiate and navigate through when implementing CL. Other challenges that EFL teachers may encounter include resisting their "pedagogic habitus" (Janks, 2010). This includes changing the embodied beliefs, values, and practices which they have taken-for-granted for so long. To overcome

this challenge, teachers need to consciously and routinely incorporate CL into their classroom activities to make it a part of their pedagogic habitus.

Finally, in this study, I focused only on demonstrating and reflecting on my experience of using CL in one of my own college-level EFL classrooms, and the development of my students' CL skills. Issues such as the development of students' linguistic skills while incorporating CL, critical multimodal literacy in EFL contexts, and the use of CL to develop and evaluate testing and assessment practices were beyond the scope of this study. Researchers in future studies could cover these areas to add to the accumulative work that has already been initiated in the field.

Bio:

Dr. Abdullah Al Jumiah is an assistant professor in English Language and Preparatory Year Institute in Royal Commission of Jubail and Yanbu. In 2002, Dr. Al Jumiah finished his Bachelor of Education in English from King Faisal University, Saudi Arabia. In 2006, he received a Fulbright scholarship as a foreign language teaching assistant in USA. In 2008, he finished his MA in comparative world literature from Case Western Reserve University, USA. In 2016, Dr. Al Jumiah completed his PhD in educational linguistics from University of New Mexico, USA. His interdisciplinary research interest includes: TESOL, EFL, Critical Applied Linguistics, Critical Literacy and Pedagogy, Critical Race Theory, CDA, and World English(es).

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