"I Love this Approach, But Find It Difficult to Jump in with Two Feet!" Teachers' Perceived Challenges of Employing Critical Literacy

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Abstract

Accompanying myriad definitions of critical literacy is an absence of pedagogical models for implementing critical literacy in teacher education contexts. This action research explores critical literacy with pre-service and in-service teachers in teacher education courses offered in the United States. The primary data sources include online weekly discussions on course readings in the TESOL methods courses I taught in Hawaii and Kansas. First, I propose the working definition of critical literacy in the study (Luke, 2012) and then present course participants' perceived challenges of employing critical literacy in their current and future classrooms. Findings reveal that despite the differences in the two instructional contexts, both groups recognized that the current standards-based, test-driven educational environment would be the major obstacle for enacting critical literacy in their classroom. In addition, the lack of understanding of critical literacy was addressed by both groups of teachers. I also discuss my struggle and dilemma as a critical teacher educator. Finally, this article concludes with suggestions for introducing critical literacy in teacher education contexts.

Keywords: critical literacy, action research, reflexivity, teacher education, narratives, TESOL

1. Motivation for the Study

The action research project that I describe in this article stems from my interest in employing critical literacy in my teacher education courses in the United States. As a former English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher in secondary schools in Korea, I have always been interested in taking a critical stance on the issues of English language teaching (ELT). I challenged the required textbook with my middle-school students by problematizing the inequity of race, ethnicity, gender, culture, religion, and class represented in it. I did not realize what I was doing back then indeed mirroreda pedagogy of critical literacy until I worked on my Ph.D. degree at an American university where I learned about critical literacy. Since then, I have investigated the pedagogical application of critical literacy in teacher education contexts. While experiencing success, I also encountered some degree of student resistance to critical literacy in my TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages) methods courses. I spent a great amount of time trying to understand the resistance and skepticism toward critical literacy and to figure out how to handle them productively. Thus this action research stems from my own challenges of implementing critical literacy in TESOL teacher education contexts.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Critical Literacy

Literacy has long been viewed as a purely cognitive and linguistic activity, divorced from sociocultural contexts where it is embedded. This skills-oriented approach to literacy considers literacy as a set of static, decontextualized, and discrete skills that can be applied anywhere once it is taught as a prepackaged set. Drawing on a psychological, cognitive framework, it assumes that the literacy taught in schools is the principal literacy that students require and utilize throughout their lives (Carrington & Luke, 1997). In this framework, basic skills, primarily encoding and decoding words, must be mastered first, before other content or skills can be learned. A 'skills' conception of learning literacy concurrently dominates governmental and policy discourses (Curry, 2003) and the assessment of literacy often makes links between perceived lack of educational achievement and low levels of literacy.

In hisseminal work on literacy as social practice, Street (1984) refers to this approach to literacy as an *autonomous model* which postulates that texts have independent meanings and thus can be abstracted from social

contexts. The autonomous model of literacy argues that teaching literacy to 'illiterate' people, urban youth, and marginalized groups will lead to economic development (Street, 2003). The dominant model of literacy framework derived from an autonomous model has been incorporated into educational policy frameworks in many countries (Rassool, 1999). When a student fails to perform, it is suggested to remedy problems that are presumably located within the student.

On the other hand, the underlying assumption of critical literacy is that literacy education should discuss how power is inscribed in our daily lives and explore the issues of control over educational practices, such as curriculum, instruction and assessment (Freebody, 2005; Luke, 2012; Luke & Dooley, 2011). Luke (2012) defines critical literacy as "use of the technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life" (p. 5). Since Freire's (1970/2000) educational projects in Brazil, critical literacy has been developed through poststructuralist, feminist, critical race theory, and critical linguistics (Luke, 2012). Influenced by those critical theories, critical literacy is "an overtly political orientation to teaching and learning and to the cultural, ideological, and sociolinguistic content of the curriculum (Luke, 2012, p. 5). In other words, critical literacy espouses the belief that education should foster social justice by helping students question how language and literacy are influenced by and influence social relations and power around them.

My belief in critical literacy pedagogy is aligned with Luke's position that critical literacy education should go beyond problematizing the text by "reading the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987) so as to achieve equity and social justice (Shor & Friere, 1987). That is, critical literacy educators not only engage students in challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions behind the text, but they also engage students in the politics of daily life (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Luke, 2012). Therefore, interventions by students, teachers, teacher educators, and scholars should take place to challenge and redress specific conditions of educational inequality and linguistic and cultural marginalization in schools. Due to its context-specific nature, critical literacy has taken many shapes contingent on the context where our personal and professional histories are situated (Luke, 2012). The definition adopted in this study encompasses students' assumed evaluative stances and acting upon these stances as they challenge social injustice in their personal, academic and professional lives. Given this view of critical literacy, it is highly important that students must be allowed to exert their agency in academic discourse communities, rather than blindly subscribing to the dominant academic discourse (Cho, 2014).

2.2 Research Questions

Accompanying myriad definitions of critical literacy is an absence of pedagogical models for implementing critical literacy in teacher education contexts (Hall & Piazza, 2010). Since critical literacy pedagogy does not endorse a pre-packed, formulaic teaching method, teacher educators and teachers alike may find critical literacy daunting, time-consuming and confusing. To this end, I conducted action research on TESOL teachers' perceptions of critical literacy, particularly with regards to challenges and pitfalls of engaging students in critical literacy practices. The following research questions guided my research:

1) What challenges do TESOL teachers think they would encounter in implementing critical literacy in their current and future classrooms?

2) How do I employ critical literacy in TESOL methods courses for pre-service and in-service teachers?

3) What difficulties or challenges do I encounter as an instructor in taking a critical literacy approach to TESOL teacher education?

3. The Research Contexts

This article draws on the data I collected from two instructionalcontexts—one in Hawaii the other in Kansas in the United States. Participants were twentyHawaii in-service teachers who took my online professional development courses via WebCT (Note 1) and forty graduate students at a public university in Kansas. Hawaii teachers were all K-12 current public school teachers in the state of Hawaii whose teaching experience ranged from 2 to 32 years. I was one of the co-instructors who designed and taught the courses sponsored by the Hawaii Department of Education in Fall 2010 and Spring 2011. In Kansas, I taught an on-campusgraduate-level TESOL instructional methods course for both pre-service and in-service teachersin Fall 2011 and Fall 2012. In addition to face-to-face meetings once per week throughout the semester, Kansas students used Blackboard for further discussions on course readings and their teaching/tutoring experiences.

It is important to note that the online discussion through WebCT or Blackboard in my TESOL courses in both Hawaii and Kansas was deeply embedded within the curriculum and structure of the weekly class. Each course participantwas required to post a reflective narrative every week and reply to other students' messages. In order

to provide structure and ensure that contributions were timely, I established a posting deadline (e.g., Sunday midnight) for each discussion topic; however, all topics remained accessible to participants so they could revisit and add to previous discussion postings. My hope was that exposure to a range of diverse viewpoints would assist them in articulatingthe assumptions that underpin conceptions of literacies, reflect on their learning processes, and eventually frame their own epistemologies of ELT practice. Critical literacy was one of the weekly discussion topics, but infused throughout the course through course readings and my comments on weekly online posts. The final project for all courses was an electronic portfolio that encompassed all of their coursework, including language autobiography, in addition to a final reflection on the course.

4. Mode of Inquiry

4.1 Action Research

As mentioned previously, action research was employed to investigate TESOL teachers' perceptions on critical literacy. Action research refers to a form of self-reflective inquiry undertaken by teachers to improve "their own practices, their understanding of the practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out" (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 162). The term "action research" was introduced by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s to denote a pioneering approach to social research. In his seminal paper, "*Action Research and Minority Problems,*" Lewin characterizes action research as a comparative study of the conditions and effects of research leading to social action, using a cyclical process of planning, acting, and reflecting on the result of the action. Lewin was interested in bridging the gap between theory and practice and solving practical problems through the AR action research cycle. In other words, "planning, acting, observing, and reflecting with each of these activities being systematically and self-critically implemented and interrelated" (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 165). In essence, action research engenders a reflexive practice to transform teaching experience into a learning experience. It is what Schön (1983) calls 'reflective practice' which helps a teacher to make new sense of situations of uncertainty or uniqueness that he or she may experience in the classroom. Thus the action research approach adopted in this study made salient the importance of reflective teaching by scrutinizing the underlying assumptions on the way I taught in the teacher education contexts.

4.2 Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data collection took place from Fall 2010 and Spring 2011 from the online Hawaii PD courses and Fall 2011 and Fall 2012 from my Master's methods courses at a public university in Kansas, respectively. The primary data for this study included the weekly online discussion posts from the classes, electronic portfolios, and the field notes I took throughout the semester. Since action research is largely underpinned by reflexivity, I feel that my reflective field notes can be useful in critically reflecting on why I taught the way I did and examining my pedagogical practices anew.

My analysis began as soon as I collected the data, consistent with the protocol for conducting action research. Using content analysis (Hatch, 2002), I coded the datato identify the common themes across teaching contexts. I first identified patterns and themes found in the data set using inductive techniques demonstrated in Strauss and Corbin (1990) for coding. Once coding was completed, I clustered them into categories containing multiple subcategories. Given the nature of action research, the coding process was recursive. The cyclical process of data analysis allowed me to redefine themes and codes and focus on subsequent observation in the class. Among the several themes identified through qualitative data analysis, this article focuses on the findings associated with teachers' perceived challenges and pitfalls in employing critical literacy in their classroom.

5. Findings and Discussion

There are three core themes that represent the challenges perceived by teacher participants in employing critical literacy pedagogy: 1) standards-based and test-driven educational environment; 2) resistance from parents and the community; and 3) lack of understanding of critical literacy. In the following sections, I will discuss each challenge in order, followed by my self-reflection as a teacher educator who constantly seeks to practice critical literacy in teacher education contexts.

5.1 Standards-Based and Test-Driven Educational Environment

The most frequently mentioned concern for teachers in enacting critical literacy was the standards-based and test-driven educational environment. An increased emphasis on measuring teachers' performance with test scores of their students in the United States renders teachers powerless to make autonomous decisions based on the local classroom context (Masuda, 2010). When test scores become the weightiest factor in teacher performance, teachers might have no choice but going to excessive lengths to preparing students for standardized tests (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). This type of 'teaching to the test' can result in the loss of quality instruction time

(Rush & Scherff, 2012). In particular, in-service teachers in Hawaii who were undergoing accountability reformat the time of the study seemed more stressed out about enacting critical literacy practices in the current test-driven educational environment. An elementary teacher from Maui lamented on teachers' pressure derived from the test-driven education reform policies:

My 4th graders have to take the Hawai'i State Assessment, and no matter what anyone says, there's a lot of pressure on the testing grade levels to see the scores go up. It seems that there's a fundamental flaw in our school system when we know what best practices are, but at the same time, how can we escape feeling test driven? I love this approach, but find it difficult to jump in with two feet! (4th grade teacher, Maui)

The teacher critiqued the current school system in which teachers work under tremendous pressure to raise students' test scores, rather than following the best practices she may otherwise chooses to do in her classroom. She believed that the imposition of skills-driven national standards might narrow teaching of the curriculum in schools, limiting the teacher in bridging children's own worlds with that of school literacy. Her conflicting feelings about critical literacy instruction are well-depicted in the last sentence of her post ("I love this approach, but find it difficult to jump in with two feet!"). Another teacher in the Hawaii course added:

I couldn't help but envy the Kindergarten teacher (Vasquez (Note 2)) who didn't seem as hemmed in with state and/or national standards and limited in what she could teach like what we are. I sometimes feel as if a lot of our creativity in lesson planning is unfortunately squelched by the dictates of our standards and time limitations. (Kindergarten teacher, Kauai)

In the above excerpt, even a kindergarten teacher from Kauai echoed thefrustration aboutthe standards while envying the autonomy of a teacher/researcher in one of the course readings who successfully practiced critical literacy in her kindergarten classroom. Similarly, a pre-service teacher from Kansas despaired at teaching the curriculum that is prescribed according to standards:

Although Vasquez's ideas in the chapter "Getting started: Constructing a curriculum audit trail" sounds wonderful, I think a lot of what she suggested is impractical…there are standards that must be taught, and although I know teachers can get adapt lessons to fit the standards, unfortunately more and more schools have curriculum guides that they must use to teach students. (Elementary pre-service teacher, Kansas)

As the pre-service teacher pointed out, teachers wield power in their classrooms to make student learning either negative or positive, but teachers, in general, have little control over the standards-based assessment and curriculum (Wood, 2007). In an era of high stakes accountability, now coupled with the Common Core State Standards in the United States, these teacher frustrations and anxieties are understandable as discussed in educational research (e.g., Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Wood, 2007). The challenge is associated with the almost inescapable demands on teachers to mediate both official curriculum and text/literacy/content requirements, and the criteria for critical literacy practices (Lankshear, Peters, & Knobel, 1996). Implementing critical literacy in the classroom, with standards in mind, will always be a tense process because critical literacy operates a sociocultural definition of literacy while standards define literacy proficiency in individual students (Avila & Moore, 2012).

5.2 Resistance from Parents and the Community

The second frequently mentioned challenge for employing critical literacy in the classroom involved parental resistance and disapproval. Interestingly, rather than student resistance often found in the literature (Petrone & Bullard, 2013), TESOL teachers in both contexts seemed more concerned about resistance from parents and the community:

I believe the biggest drawback to critical literacy is the potential for conflict with "at-home values." In the video the instructor brought up a topic that could be seen as passing judgment on certain religious beliefs and then categorized them as positive and/or negative. I think that critical literacy is an important tool, but it requires the teacher to create a balance of creating a critical learning environment without the consequences of conflicting with parents. (ESL college instructor, Master's student, Kansas)

The critical literacy philosophy would not be readily embraced by teachers as most are hesitant to bring up real-world issues because of the fear of parental disapproval and possible repercussions. Some teachers may also feel that they want to shelter their young students from the not-so-nice aspects of our world. (ESL teacher, Master's student, Kansas)

Both Master's students from Kansas expressed trepidation regarding potential responses from parents in enacting critical literacy in the classroom. In particular, the reluctance resulted from parental disapproval is compounded by the fact that teachers might want to filter topics for young children. One Hawaii teacher concurred,

I agree with McDaniel (Note 3) that we as teachers many times avoid certain topics: topics that many students desire to learn about. Personally, I as a teacher "play it safe" and avoid some topics that could potentially get me in trouble with students' parents. (5th grade teacher, Big Island, Hawaii)

Even when students wish to learn about certain topics, teachers might face resistance from parents. These beliefs of the teachers in the study seemed consistent with a socio-cultural interpretation of critical literacy that considers sociopolitical issues that might result in conflicts with parents' values. As the 5th grader teacher from Hawaii declared, teachers might want to "play it safe" by avoiding any thorny issues that might be at odds with parents and the community.

5.3 Lack of Understanding of Critical Literacy

A final common theme across the contexts was related to teachers' lack of understanding of critical literacy. Rather than external constraints (i.e., standards and parental resistance) discussed previously, this was an internal struggle perceived by teachers. In both contexts, teachers had some confusion over the concept of critical literacy, many of whom had little prior knowledge of critical literacy. The term 'critical' is ubiquitous in the educational literature attached to a variety of nouns, such as 'critical theory', 'critical thinking,' 'critical applied linguistics,' 'critical pedagogy,' 'critical discourse analysis,' and 'critical researcher.' For some researchers and policy makers, critical literacy refers to aspects of higher order comprehension, such as reasoning, synthesis, and analysis (Note 4). For example, a call for focus on critical thinking in the Singaporean educational curriculum since the late 1990s has been akin to the "form of lateral thinking" described by entrepreneurs and cognitive scientists, and not in social, political sense (Luke, 2000, p. 450). For others, it encompasses not only the questioning of the dominant ideologies behind texts, but the production of texts that can bring about a social change (e.g., Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

Thus, it is no surprise that the term is often misunderstood and misinterpreted by many teachers. Several teachers remarked on their lack of understanding of critical literacy beforecourse readings and class discussions:

I have to admit that critical literacy as presented in the texts is not what I had in mind when I was thinking of critical literacy. I was thinking more along the lines of critically analyzing the text itself rather than the social justice aspects of the texts. (Master's student, Kansas)

Critical literacy to me before reading this week's readings meant analyzing text by making text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections…After this week's readings, I see critical literacy more as an in-depth look at social issues presented in text and how it relates to our own lives and how it influences us, either positively or negatively. (Kindergarten teacher, Kansas)

I had an idea that "critical literacy" would be strongly related to critical thinking. However, after reading the readings I realized that it encompasses so much more and goes well far and beyond the sole concept of Critical Thinking. I believe that critical literacy entails an inquisitive and experiential approach to learning. (Former EFL college instructor from Venezuela, Kansas)

In their accounts, teachers'prior understanding of critical literacy seems reduced to critical text analysis. However, this kind of critical practice that focuses itself solely on rational questioning procedures can be separated from the value-laden world for its 'pure' reasoning (Ko, 2013). Yet, there is little recognition that curriculum and instruction necessarily engage particular social, cultural, and political standpoints. However, educators who use the term critical in relation to critical literacy do so to draw attention to issues of representation and normativity, relations of power and ideology, and practices of power imbalance (Luke, 2012). That is, critical literacy entails an explicit sociopolitical agenda for equity and social justice. Teachers came to understand that critical literacy goes beyond teaching critical thinking as problem solving by encouraging students to challenge taken-for-granted meaningsand `truth' about a way of thinking, reading and writing the world.

5.4 My Reflexivity as Teacher Educator

Given the nature of action research approaches employed in this study, reflexivity is highly important in revisiting my own perspectives that are contradictory, fluid, evolving and ultimately bringing out change within the research framework. According to Gergen (2001),

Reflexivity is a looking backwards, but always from another vested position. It is not a panacea that eliminates bias or preferential tellings. Yet it is a helpful move in opening the work to alternative interpretations (p. 45).

Such reflexivity requires continuing modifications to subject positions, both of teachers and students. I was *becoming* to myself as a reflexive and critical teacher educator as a result of teacher participants' questioning of

critical literacy and my subsequent reflexivity. While engaging in a critical literacy practice is worthwhile, the teachers' comments highlight a tension I encounter as I embark down a path as a critical teacher educator. Thus it is important to examine my own assumptions and biases that likely influence my interactions with teachers.

The actualization of critical literacy pedagogy is not without challenge, as reported in a plethora of studies (e.g., Granville, 2003, Iyer, 2007; Kramer-Dahl, 2001; Lin, 2004). Granville (2003) reports the tensions of employing critical literacy pedagogy in her preservice teacher education course in South Africa. Her 'critical reading' materials reflected on South Africa's sociopolitical situations created enormous degree of conflict, hostility, and racial tension between black and white student teachers in the class. Based on her findings, she warns that critical literacy practice can lead to powerful emotions and conflict which can result in resistance to its employment in class. To counter this result, she argues that teachers should create a safe space for optimal emotional and intellectual growth before embarking on a discourse to interrogate the social landscape. In an Asian educational context, Kramer-Dahl (2001) describes her struggle as a college teacher in a course called *Critical Reading and Writing* at a Singaporean university. Although her students seemed to gain critical awareness of academic texts through her course, some students complained that the course was "too stultifying" with too much teacher control and lack of space for their voices and concerns.

As a critical teacher, I, too, encountered quite a few challenges that impinged on the enactment of critical literacy pedagogy in the classroom. There were a number of moments that I struggled to engage teachers in critical literacy practices thereby challenging their opinions, beliefs, and perspectives. More specifically, my dilemma stemmed from my concern with how to balance out my role as a critical teacher/researcher and facilitator. As a facilitator, I listened to course participants, took notes, provided support and empathy, and asked occasional questions to encourage elaboration. I attempted to provide as much as time and space for them to bring up issues surrounding power relations on their own. As a teacher educator, I struggled with issues of control versus freedomin determining how much of the class needed to be pre-planned to ensure efficiency and how much needed to be responsive to the emergent dialogue among students. As with a Taiwanese EFL teacher educator in Ko's (2013) study, I sometimes found it challenging to elicit thoughtful responses from teachers. How to offer my own perspective as a critical pedagogue without imposing my agenda remained a struggle. This coincides with a challenge mentioned by a few teachers in my methods courses:

To use this approach, teachers would need to be very careful not to let their own views influence their questions. It would be all too easy to guide students based on our understanding of the world, rather than having them find answers to their own questions so that they can build their own understanding of the world. (Master's student, Kansas)

My classroom cannot be a soapbox for my set of values no matter how passionate I feel about something.... yet at the same time, we do need to present issues to our students so that they can learn how to make sound decisions. (4th grade teacher, Big Island)

The teachers stated that imposing their agenda to their students would be of concern when promoting critical literacy pedagogy in their classrooms. In a similar vein, it is undeniable that my belief in taking an active, sometimes imposing, role in class discussion derives from critical literacy pedagogy. But at the same time, I also believe that problem-posing and meaning-making should be initiated and generated by teachers themselves. Otherwise, critical educators, as Gore (1992) warns, may run a risk of constituting a regime of truth by imposing their certain values, dispositions, and beliefs on students.

In every single step in this action research project, including writing up this paper, I kept asking myself the following questions: "What does 'the critical' really mean?" "To whom?" "For what purposes?" and "In what contexts?" I started with a premise that we must problematize the taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in academic discourses and practices as a way of bringing about change, rather than blindly subscribing to the dominant norms and discourses inherent in education. However, I soon realized that simply critiquing the status quo in education through a lens of critical theory was not sufficient; rather, there should be spaces for critical production of knowledge through various channels in curriculum and instruction. Perhaps the most important lesson I have learned is that teachers should let students set the pace for how we use texts to examine social issues that are meaningful and relevant to them. Through listening to their stories, we can find the most authentic way to use texts to explore social, cultural, historical, and political issues.

6. Suggestions for Critical Literacy Pedagogy in Teacher Education

Based on my experience exploring critical literacy withpre-service and in-service teachers, I would make two suggestions for implementing critical literacy in teacher education contexts: 1) narratives as a vehicle for listening to personal stories; and 2) multimodal materials as a tool for making sense of power relations.

First, throughout the class discussions, both face-to-face and online, there were myriad examples through the data that support the use of personal narratives in order to construct knowledge and position the self in relation to others. Narrative can be used as a tool for raising critical awareness about the self and the world (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Carter and Doyle (1996) found that "biography, narrative and life history [are] at the center of teaching practice, the study of teachers, and the teacher education process" (p. 120). The first course assignment for both teaching contexts was a language autobiography. Pre-service and in-service teachers wrote about how they learned first language or second language when they were young and then shared their narrative with the rest of the class. This exercise gave them an opportunity to not only reflect on their own language background, but also re-consider their own students' experience with a new language. It is important to draw explicitly on the lived experience of teachers by incorporating narratives, both oral and written, into the curriculum and interactionsince narrativescan help students view their experiences and perspectives as legitimate knowledge. Teacher educators must build in multiple opportunities for pre-service and in-service teachers to reflect not only on their text choices but also on the texts of the conversations they create with students.

Second, course participants had a better understanding of ways to enact critical literacy with the use of multimodal materials, such as film, advertising, video games and TV show clips. I utilized a variety of multimedia materials to make sense of stereotypes and power relations embedded in everyday life. For example, some episodes from an ABC TV show entitled "What would you do?" used as prompts to discuss racial discrimination prevalent in the US society (Note 5). This approach seemed to be effective in linking theory with practice in teacher education and raising consciousness of power imbalance in school and society. Also, I demonstrated how using Disney films helps students observe how seemingly innocent media texts for children promote troubling perspectives on racism and sexism around the world. Teachers were actively engaged in class discussion about how much their own children or students enjoy watching those animated movies and how they can raise critical issues around them. When using the textbook is unavoidable, the teacher can supplement this with authentic language materials, such as English newspaper or magazine articles related to topics that have been covered in class or that have immediate relevance to students' lives, as with Park's (2011) case in a Korean EFL college classroom.

I also employed electronic portfolios for all of my TESOL methods courses as a final course project. My reason for using electronic portfolios is that I see electronic portfolioas a space for reflection and interaction between the self, the worlds, and lived experiences. Before the development ofelectronic portfolios, I asked the following questions, derived from critical literacy approaches (Janks, 1993), regarding several websites on teaching portfolios in order to help teachers better understand the relationships between literacy, digital images, and power:

• What is the purpose of this website? Is it clearly stated and obvious?

• Who is the intended audience for the website? Are the writing style, vocabulary, and tone appropriate for this audience?

• Who is the author of the website? In your judgment, do the author's credentials give him/her authority to write on the subject?

• How is the website organized? Is the information organized logically? Is it easy to navigate? No dead-ends? How would you improve it?

• Do the graphics and icons help to clarify the information presented?

• What (or whose) view of the world are presented as normal by the text and images?

• Why is the text written that way? How else could it have been written?

• What assumptions does the website make about the age, gender, social class, and culture of its readers?

• Who is silenced or heard here?

• Whose interest might best be served by the website?

By modeling a critical literacy approach to multimodal discourses (Kress, 2003), I was hoping that teachers could experientially learn how to use critical literacy in their future classroom. In a similar vein, a great deal of our work together centered on incorporating aspects of "reflection" and "connections." I highlighted the value of critical reflection on learning in teacher education contexts, English language teaching in their schools, and the connections they make between the two areas. As a result, course participants created a "reflection page" to provide justifications for their artifact selection and placement within the portfolio. It was important for them (and for me as the instructor) to articulate the context of the selected artifacts and reflect on growth and

transformation. The predominantly visual nature of the electronic portfolio allows a more complex mix of modes than a print-based research paper. The choice of visual and audio images, in addition to text, corresponds to learner perception of the world whereas a research paper tends to be couched in technical, linear, and 'academic' modes. The multimodal aspects of the electronic portfolio, such as visual images, pictures, clip arts, and audio/video clips serve as a useful tool of self-expression. As such, the electronic portfolio can provide a creative and artful space where it is possible to "play out" the relationships among the narratives.

7. Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how such a goal of employing critical literacy might be constrained by teachers' own orientations toward what it means to adopt a critical literacy stance. Teachers' perceived challenges of enacting critical literacy pedagogy explored in this study has yielded some insights for teaching from a critical perspective and contributed to a greater understanding of critical literacy practices in TESOL teacher education classrooms. The major obstacle to employ critical literacy in public school settings was the standardization of curriculum and the test-driven educational environment. Another concerns addressed by teachers involved parental resistance and confusion over the construct of critical literacy.

Standards will not be likely to overtly endorse critical literacy (Avila & Moore, 2012). Also, critical literacy educators will inevitably encounter unexpected moments that push them out of their comfort zone (Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012). However, teachers should not feel discouraged to engage students in critical literacy practice by utilizingpersonal narratives and multimedia materials as a vehicle for reflective and critical learning. Critical literacy, by definition, entails learner engagement with texts and multiple modes of information (Luke, 2012).

Further, it is important that teacher educators provide teachers with multiple opportunities to brainstorm, plan, and implement critical literacy curriculum (Wolfe, 2010). I have therefore expanded the opportunities in my methods classes for teachers to reconceptualize units that initially might not have been seen as critical. We spendtime thinking through how fairy tales, such as Cinderella, can be seen as a story of gender inequity or how a digital storytelling can function as an opportunity for students to take social action regarding a community issue (Hull & Katz, 2006).

As Comber (2001) argued, "critical literacy needs to be continually redefined in practice" (p. 100). Similarly, Hawkins and Norton (2009) emphasize that, because critical practice is highly contextualized, "the pursuit of a one-size-fits-all model of critical language teacher education is inadequate" (p. 8), so language teacher educators should "reflect on the possibilities and limitations of any given context, and creatively seek enhanced opportunities for language learners through educational and social change" (p. 8). Critical literacy should not be a reductionist response to replace current curricular and assessment mandates. Rather, my belief is that the agency foregrounded in implementing critical literacy on both teachers and teacher educators can allow everyone to counter such de-professionalizing mandates.

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Notes

Note 1. WebCT, as with Blackboard, was a course management system which included discussion boards, announcements, a calendar and live chat.

Note 2. Vasquez (2004) was one of the course readings that contained some concrete pedagogical examples of enacting critical literacy with kindergarten children in the United States.

Note 3. McDaniel, C. (2004). Critical literacy: A questioning stance and the possibility for change. *The Reading Teacher*, *57*(5), 472-481.

Note 4. For example, Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996) refer to critical thinking as "1) developing students' sense of informal logic toward strengthening their reasoning strategies; 2) developing and refining problem-solving skills; 3) developing the ability to look for hidden assumptions and fallacies in arguments" (p.226).

Note 5. Some of the links from the show to discuss racial stereotypes are as follows: (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=plaqunpTzvM) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ABRlWybBqM)

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